

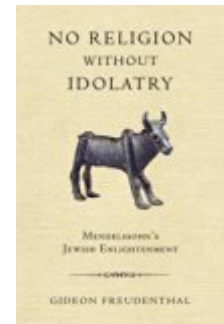


Gideon Freudenthal. *No Religion without idolatry: Mendelssohn's Jewish Enlightenment*. Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012. xi + 332 pp. \$40.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-268-02890-9.

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Enlightened Religion

The Enlightenment is not customarily thought to have been overly kind to religion, and especially to Judaism. No less a figure than Immanuel Kant can in the same breath praise Christianity's gradual dismissal of doctrinal impediments to *apertura* in favor of moral practice and indicate that Judaism must simply die out as a religion, given its inextricability from ceremonial laws—that while all religion is vexed, Judaism's vexations are fatal.[1] Moses Mendelssohn however, as Gideon Freudenthal's excellent new study makes plain, strove for another possibility, an enlightened Judaism. Throughout the book, Mendelssohn emerges as an antidote of sorts to the Enlightenment's repudiation of religion, yet he is also a child of the Enlightenment, sharing with it an epistemological skepticism regarding flights of metaphysical and theological fancy while insisting on the primacy of religious practice and its moral ramifications.

Freudenthal focuses his account of Mendelssohn's religious thought on his "semiotics," that is, the interpretation and the value of religious signs and symbols. While Freudenthal understands Mendelssohn's semiotic analyses to be "an integral part of his general philosophy," it is the application of semiotics to idolatry that constitutes the recurring theme of Mendelssohn's religious thought, and therewith of Freudenthal's book (p. 3). In brief, religious idolatry is the enemy of Enlightenment values; idolatry consists in mistaking human conventions for "real symbols"; and Judaism contains an antidote to idolatry in the ceremonial laws that represent a

"living script" of symbolic, meaningful yet transient acts. Freudenthal's emphasis on Mendelssohn's semiotics, his claim that it constitutes Mendelssohn's "unique contribution," is novel; Alexander Altmann, for one, dismisses it (p. 12). Novel, too, is Freudenthal's attempt to clear Mendelssohn of the charge that he was but a popularizer of the regnant Leibnizian-Wolffian metaphysics. Rather, it is Freudenthal's goal to show that Mendelssohn was an original and coherent thinker by focusing on three key aspects of his thought: a doctrine of common sense or sound reason; a cautiously applied metaphysics, intended to sustain but not supercede moral and political practice; and a doctrine of semiotics. In an effort to show the value and uniqueness of Mendelssohn's thought, Freudenthal contrasts it throughout the book with that of Solomon Maimon, whose Kantian-inspired demand for abstemious rationality differs markedly from Mendelssohn's desire to preserve Jewish practice and Jewish community. For Freudenthal, Maimon and Mendelssohn represent two fundamental alternatives within the Enlightenment for understanding religion in general and Judaism in particular.

The book contains nine chapters. The first chapter is an elaboration of Mendelssohn's "general philosophy of common sense" and his metaphysical skepticism, paying special attention to the way that Mendelssohn's views on language supported this skepticism and underscored the primacy of common sense and sound reason (p. 16). Here, Freudenthal gives the lie to the conventional view

that Mendelssohn was a strict Wolffian rationalist; common sense suffices to reveal basic and necessary truths concerning philosophy in general, but also natural theology and practical philosophy. In addition, Freudenthal introduces a contrast between Mendelssohn's and Maimon's thought, to demonstrate the former's broader sense of reason, one that involved not merely logical and demonstrable truths, but practical ones as well.

The second chapter explores Maimon in greater depth in order to deepen the reader's sense of the alternative that he posed to Mendelssohn. Freudenthal's goal is to shape Maimon's skeptical epistemology, which cuts a path between Mendelssohn on the one hand and Kant on the other. In this way, Freudenthal is in a position to explain Maimon's "rationalist philosophy of language," an account of language inspired by Maimon's understanding of Maimonides' rejection of figurative and metaphorical speech in favor of reason and precision (p. 71). Indeed, Freudenthal judges that for Maimon, philosophy comprised "a universal doctrine of language" (p. 74). In this way, Freudenthal challenges Mendelssohn with a rival account: semiotics versus an abstemiously anti-metaphorical approach to language.

The third chapter returns to Mendelssohn to consider in more detail his philosophy of religion, in particular, Mendelssohn's distinction between natural religion—common to all, and consisting in simple, self-evident truths—and revealed religion, based on tradition and authority. The former is available to common sense; but common sense also embraces "the views accepted by common people in a certain society at a certain time" (p. 80). While the latter enjoys a different "epistemological status" than natural religion, given its dependence on historical truths inaccessible to personal experience; but it too depends in essential ways on the convictions of a community. Freudenthal wishes in this chapter to exorcise the view that Mendelssohn's thought is inconsistent, by showing, first, that Mendelssohn's religious thought is entirely compatible with his epistemology; and second, that his philosophy of religion allows pluralism to be compatible with the belief in Judaism as the true religion.

The fourth chapter returns to the theme of language—Freudenthal's touchstone for explaining the unity of Mendelssohn's thought, by taking up his account of the biblical "language of action," a language involving, in addition to words, "gestures, mimickry, etc." (p. 18). A language of action is therewith a primordial language from which spoken language proceeds; it is to written

language what natural religion is to revealed religion. In the course of this analysis, Freudenthal points out that Mendelssohn was in essential agreement with Judah Halevi and with Enlightenment thinkers, for example, Étienne Boonot de Condillac, concerning the "primordial language" of gesture. Most important, though, Freudenthal wishes to indicate that Jewish ceremonial law belongs to the language of action; it strengthens the intelligibility of written language by linking word and gesture. Together, word and gesture, text and ceremonial observance, "guarantee the proper understanding of revelation" (p. 104). This point proves crucial to the theme of the fifth chapter, idolatry.

Chapter 5, the central chapter in the book, turns on a comparison of Jewish and Egyptian idolatry. Freudenthal's main point is to show that the ceremonial law contains a vestigial language of action that forestalls idolatry owing to the transient nature of ceremonies. The permanence of religious objects, by contrast, invites idolatry. The logic of this judgment is rooted in Mendelssohn's semiotics, and especially in the distinctions between natural religion and revelation, spoken language and text, adumbrated in chapter 4. In the course of this chapter, Freudenthal offers an interesting account of the sin of the golden calf, an iconic instance of Jewish idolatry, roughly following William Warburton's account of the connection between hieroglyphs, Hebrew script, and Egyptian astral magic. His main point, though, is to undermine (appealing to Nachmanides) any "indexical connection" between "the holy essence" and a revered object (p. 134).

Chapter 6 expands on the account of ceremonial law introduced in the previous chapter: Jewish ceremonial law that Freudenthal labels a "transitory hieroglyphics" (p. 135). Freudenthal's main goal here is to emphasize the inextricability of ritual observance from the simple truths of natural religion. In so arguing, Freudenthal seeks to inure Mendelssohn against the charge that he has bleached Judaism of ritual observance; without it there is no religion, since belief must be represented in ways that encourage community. In this respect, Freudenthal also wishes to defend the view that Judaism—in his view and in Mendelssohn's—is among all religions especially suited to these tasks. Mendelssohn, in short, was no mere deist.

The final three chapters consider, in turn, idolatry in modern Judaism, the possibility of an enlightened Judaism, and the conclusions one can draw from the preceding analyses. In the first instance, Freudenthal recapitulates many of the semiotic principles at work in the preceding chapters in light of the permanence of reli-

religious artifacts in contemporary Judaism. What is especially interesting in this chapter though is Freudenthal's discovery of basic agreement between Mendelssohn and Maimon on the symbolism of Kaballah; in brief, Freudenthal wishes to emphasize (against Alexander Altmann) Mendelssohn's rejection of "real symbols." Equally interesting is Freudenthal's discussion of Mendelssohn's political thought and his comparison of theocracy to idolatry—a view of Mendelssohn that places him between Thomas Hobbes and his Jewish opponents (for example, August Friedrich Cranz). As well, it sharply distinguishes Mendelssohn's attitude toward the Mosaic kingdom from the Catholic understanding of church-state relations: Mendelssohn becomes, in effect, a "Jewish Luther" (p. 179). This conclusion, in turn, leads to a consideration of a "philosophy of enlightened Judaism," which Freudenthal approaches again by means of a comparison of Mendelssohn and Maimon (p. 185). Among his themes is the political role of religion in general and of Judaism in particular; Judaism's susceptibility to the Enlightenment; critique of Christianity (which he approaches in light of Ernst Cassirer); and the religious implications of aesthetic perfection. By raising these issues in light of the differences between Mendelssohn and Maimon, Freudenthal concludes with two fundamental alternatives: "Common sense, aesthetics, and community on the one hand and strict logic and rationality and autonomy on the other hand," a choice that Freudenthal admits "cannot itself be adjudicated" (p. 223).

Overall, the book presents a surprising Mendelssohn: in effect, a rather unorthodox defender of Jewish orthodoxy. Especially welcome is Freudenthal's sustained reflection on Maimon, an interesting and challenging figure in his own right, deserving of more attention than he usually receives. Owing to the comparison with Maimon, Mendelssohn emerges as an original thinker—not a purveyor of popular Enlightenment, but a rigorous philosopher undertaking the challenge of squaring Enlightenment principles with Judaism and with religion in general. In so doing, Freudenthal calls into question a popular view of Mendelssohn's work: that his account of Judaism undermines Judaism by suborning Jewish ritual in an effort to stem the tendency toward idolatry and religious fanaticism. Especially interesting and provoca-

tive in this regard is Freudenthal's claim that semiotics is the core of Mendelssohn's thought, metaphysical and epistemological, political and religious. This claim could be challenged by a different account: that the treatment of Judaism in *Jerusalem* (1783) is engined by political considerations more indebted to Baruch Spinoza's *Tractatus* (1677) than to metaphysics. A fuller account of Mendelssohn's relationship to Spinoza, in short, would be welcome. Another issue in the book, of course, made especially salient by the presence of Maimon in Freudenthal's argument, is an invocation of Maimonides himself: one of the questions that Freudenthal's study poses concerns his legacy in the respective writings of Mendelssohn and Maimon. They become, by the close of the book, different ways of living out Maimonides' teaching: Mendelssohn emphasizing issues of communal practice and political life, Maimon cleaving strictly to what we might label as Maimonides' apophantic theology of metaphor. Both in short are heirs to Maimonides' own attempts to stem the tendency of religion toward idolatry. But this is not to say that Freudenthal's book is restricted to Jewish themes. Given his attempt to show the coherence of Mendelssohn's thought, Freudenthal clearly grounds the religious issues in a philosophical treatment of language and knowledge that, again, recalls Maimonides' own turn toward Aristotle in his Account of the Beginning and his Account of the Chariot. In short, the book involves the reader thoughtfully in one of the deepest of all questions, the quarrel between Athens and Jerusalem. Freudenthal convincingly argues that Mendelssohn's engagement with that quarrel is significant and compelling.

In all, Freudenthal's book is highly to be recommended. Its scholarship is impressive, the writing lucid and engaging. It represents an important and original contribution to our understanding of Mendelssohn, complementing the work of Altmann, Allan Arkush, and others. It has returned this reviewer to Mendelssohn's writings with fresh eyes and new questions.

Note

[1]. Immanuel Kant, "Der Streit der Fakultäten," in *Werke* (Berlin: De Greuter, 1968), 53.

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