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"What is Jewish philosophy? An attempt at a definition based on *Jerusalem* (1783) by Moses Mendelssohn"[1]

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ENG **Abstract:** In this article, we look at the definition of "Jewish philosophy", a concept whose contours remain unclear. Does the term simply refer to the cultural or religious affiliation of the philosophers concerned, or is there something in their philosophy itself that qualifies it as Jewish? To answer this question, we have drawn on the reflections of Eliezer Berkovits, who has defined Jewish philosophy as the incorporation of philosophical concepts and reasoning into a distinct Hebraic framework of thought and tradition. Using Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* as a case study, we refine and extend the concept of incorporation to show that Jewish philosophy is articulated between the universality of philosophical thought and the particularity of Jewish tradition.
Key words: Jewish philosophy; Moses Mendelssohn; Theological-political philosophy; Haskalah; Aufklärung.

Summary: 0- introduction: What is "Jewish Philosophy"?. 1-Presentation of the work. 1.1-The *Vorrede of* the *Vindiciae* Judaeorum. 1.2- Reception of the Preface. 1.3- Presentation of the text. 2- Section one: a treatise on political philosophy. 3- Second part: a treatise on the philosophy of religion. 4- Conclusion.

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Introduction: what is "Jewish philosophy"?

Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) is considered, particularly by historians of philosophy, to be a Jewish philosopher. But what does this mean? Does his religious and cultural affiliation make him, *de facto,* a Jewish philosopher, reducing the qualification to the identity of the author? Or does it refer to a philosophical treatment of Judaism, identified by the presence of a certain number of elements or criteria that can be found in the Judeo-Arab philosophy of Saadia Gaon (882-942), Maimonides (1135/8-1204) or Hasdai Crescas (1340-1412), but also in the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (Science of Judaism) or Emmanuel Levinas (1905-1995)? Another possibility is that it might point to a particular relationship between philosophy of Greek origin and Hebraic thought.

Even before tackling these questions, another problem arises concerning the way in which Mendelssohn himself conceived this relationship. On the one hand, when he wrote philosophy, he wrote in German about problems inherited mainly from Descartes, Hobbes, Dubos, Hume, Leibniz and Wolff, such as sensibility and the limits of knowledge[2] . It was precisely as such that, in 1763, he beat Kant in the contest for the speculative philosophy class at the Berlin academy[3] . On the other hand, when Mendelssohn commented on a text from the Bible or discussed the Law (Torah), he did so in Hebrew, as in the review *Qohelet Musar* ("Moral Preacher")[4].

1 This article is the result of research conducted during my postdoctoral fellowship at the Maimonides Centre for Advanced Studies, University of Hamburg.

2 At the time, he was referred to as the "Socrates of Berlin", as he is in Lessing's correspondence. His great treatise, which made him famous, was a rewriting of Plato's dialogue *Phaedo* (360 BC) on the immorality of the soul. In his day, at least, he was best known as a German-speaking philosopher.

3 Mendelssohn proposes as an essay *On Evidence in the Metaphysical Sciences, and Kant Research on the Evidence of the Principles of Natural Theology and Morals*, in response to the following question: "It is asked whether the truths of metaphysics in general, and, in particular, the first principles of Natural Theology and Morals are susceptible of the same self-evidence as mathematical truths, and, in case they are not susceptible of it, what is the nature of their certainty, to what degree can they attain, and is this degree sufficient for conviction?"

4 This was the first modern Jewish weekly journal, with six issues published between March and May 1755. It covered Biblical thought, Talmudic thought and exegesis. The aim was also to draw a line between philosophical and exegetical thought, based on their methods.

A strict line is drawn between his status as a philosopher and his status as a Jewish thinker. This raises the question of the historiographical description of him as a "Jewish philosopher". But this would be forgetting that, in the Mendelssohnian *corpus*, there is at least one work that challenges this boundary: *Jerusalem, or Religious Power and Judaism* (1783)[5]. By dint of provocation and controversy, Mendelssohn was led to write and publish, in German, a treatise on religious tolerance, the separation of Church and State, freedom of conscience, Judaism and equal rights for Jews. His correspondence already contained such writings, but none of the letters really had the theoretical and philosophical consistency of *Jerusalem*, which is written in the manner of a treatise on political philosophy, articulated with a theological proposition regarding Judaism. Mendelssohn was therefore a thinker with two facets: one, a Jew, who bore the name Moses ben Mendel (the Yiddish version of Menahem, his father's first name), and the other, a philosopher, the "Socrates of Berlin"[6]. In fact, it would be under specific and major circumstances that these two faces would become one.

In the light of Mendelssohn's singularity, the answer to our initial problem requires us to take into account either this delimitation that Mendelssohn wanted–in which case there would be no Jewish philosophy, just a Jew doing philosophy–or his works, which allow us to go beyond this limit, since some of them combine Hebraic thought and philosophy.

As for the second question, that of possible common points between the various Jewish philosophers, it does not take into account, *prima facie*, the heterogeneity of a corpus of "Jewish philosophy"[7]: the common points which unite in the same corpus Saadia Gaon, Spinoza (1632-1677), Franz Rosenzweig (1886-1929), Léo Strauss (1899-1973) and Levinas–to name but a few–are too weak. This leads to the third question, about the possibility of a specific relationship between Jewish thought and philosophy. On this point, the approach of Eliezer Berkovits (1908-1992) seems particularly enlightening. He wrote an article to the question of defining Jewish philosophy, soberly entitled "*What is Jewish philosophy?*" (1961)[8]. In particular, he discusses the case of Shlomo Ibn Gabirol (c. 1021-1050), known under the Latin name of Avicebron and for his main work, *Fons Vitae*, (*The Source of Life* in English, *Mekor Hayyim* in Hebrew)[9]. However, at the end of a precise analysis of one of Ibn Gabirol's propositions, it turns out that his Neo-Platonism is inflected in as many ways as are necessary to make it suitable for Jewish thought[10]. In other words, Jewish philosophy would be the result of incorporating foreign elements, at the cost of reformulating them where necessary, into Jewish thought, the fundamental and inflexible principles of which are: God, Israel or the Torah.

It is the idea of incorporation that we wish to adopt. We speak of incorporation insofar as the theoretical foundation remains Judaism. It is on this foundation that Mendelssohn integrates and adds philosophies that support his theses. In other words, Jewish philosophy is first and foremost a philosophy that blends two types of sources: a specifically Hebraic foundation, and external sources and influences from Greek thought and, later, from Arabic or Christian thought (particularly in the case of Scholasticism). Jewish philosophy can thus be understood in terms of a link between the universal and the particular.

In this paper, we argue that Mendelssohn's philosophy can be described as Jewish because it incorporates the universal into Jewish particularism. His goal was also to prove that Judaism and philosophy are compatible. More precisely, in Jerusalem, their articulation takes the form of a harmonious and non-contradictory integration of the particular elements of Judaism–its Revelation and its rites–with the universal concepts of political philosophy.

1. Presentation of the work

The *Vorrede of* the *Vindiciae* Judaeorum

Published in 1783, *Jerusalem* was written in response to the controversy in which our author found himself after the publication of the *Vorrede* ("Preface") to Marcus Herz's German translation of the *Vindiciae Judaeorum* ("Justice for the Jews", 1656) by Rabbi Menasseh ben Israel (1604-1657)[11] . The text was translated

5 Unless otherwise indicated, this article makes use of Allan Arkush's 1983 translation.

6 Mendelssohn's figure has been the subject of much debate, even within the Jewish community. Some, shortly after the philosopher's death, described him as "the only one of his generations, unique in his nation" and a model for all Jews, claiming that "his life should be our standard, his teaching our light", Isaach Euchel *Toledot Rebeinu he-Hakham Moshe ben Menahem* (quoted by David Sorkin 1996 p. 18). Others, on the contrary, accused Mendelssohn of being a false prophet of assimilation, inviting Jews to leave their status. This is the case, for example, of Peretz Smolenskin, who asserts that "Rabbi ben Manahem advocated love for all mankind, and his family and friends followed him. But what was the result? Because they all converted", in the article "Am Olam", *in Ma'amarim*, quoted by David Sorkin (1996), pp. 18-19.

7 There are many studies in French, including: *La philosphie juive au Moyen Âge* by Colette Sirat (1983), *La philosophie juive* by Maurice-Ruben Hayoun (2012-2023), *La philosophie juive* by Marc Israël (2012); there are also many in English, such as *The Philosophy of Judaism: The History of Jewish Philosophy* by Julius Guttmann (1988), *What is Jewish Philosophy?* By Daniel H. Frank (1997) or *How Judaism Became a religion: An Introduction to Modern Jewish Thought*, by Leora Batnitzky (2011).

8 As much as he has no doubt that Maimonides is a Jewish philosopher, it is more difficult to affirm it for Spinoza, or even for Bergson. This choice stems from a very singular way of associating Jewish thought and philosophical thought.

9 This is one of the few works that can be attributed without too much doubt to Ibn Gabirol. Cf. M.-R. Hayoun, *La philosophie juive*, pp. 120-122. He attributes *the Fons Vitae, the Keter Malkhout* (Royal Crown) and *the Sefer Tiqun Middot ha-Nefesh (Book on the Rectification of the Virtues of the Soul)* to Ibn Gabirol.

10 According to E. Berkovitz (1961), the philosopher thus performs a bold reinterpretation, as emanation was precisely conceived in order to dispense with the need for divine will, which would otherwise undermine the idea of harmony with the Absolute.

11 Menasseh ben Israel, a rabbi from Amsterdam and a contemporary of Spinoza, was a Marrano who fled persecution with his family and settled in Amsterdam around 1610, where he returned to Judaism as part of the Beth Jacob community. Rising through the ranks, he became a *hakham,* the third most important figure when the three Sephardic communities came together in 1639. Irascible and in competition with Rabbi Morteira, he was expelled from the community for a day. He had proposed a different approach to that of his rival, with his attraction to messianic themes and his frequent visits to Gentiles to explain the doctrines

at Mendelssohn's request and published in 1782, shortly after the promulgation of the Edict of Tolerance by Emperor Joseph II of Austria, which lifted the restrictions previously imposed on Jews by the Church[12]. By 1769, Mendelssohn had already devoted himself to defending the civil rights of Jews, pleading on behalf of communities in Germany and Switzerland[13] against campaigns of defamation, discrimination and persecution waged by the Christian authorities. In 1780, he had also collaborated with Christian Dohm (1751-1820) to defend the Jews of Alsace against the hateful campaign to which they were subjected.

In his Preface to the translation of the *Vindiciae Judaeorum*, Mendelssohn delivered a plea similar[14] to that of 1781. He emphatically recalled the precarious condition of Jews in Europe since the Peace of Westphalia (1648), which had confined them to the private practice of their religion. Although their situation was no longer identical to that of the Middle Ages, Jews continued to face persecution in new forms, such as exclusion from the arts and sciences. It is precisely this precariousness that justified the enduring relevance of Menasseh ben Israel's text. Jews, Mendelssohn argued, remained excluded from the scope of 18th-century philosophical and political writings–including those of his friend Christian Wilhelm von Dohm–which called for equal rights in the name of a universal humanism from which Jews were, paradoxically, excluded. Unlike these philosophers, Menasseh ben Israel had explicitly defended the Jewish cause in England, as had Edward Nicholas, who wrote An *Apology for the Honourable Nation of the Jews and All the Sons of Israel* (1648), and John Toland, who published Reasons *for Naturalizing the Jews of Great Britain and Ireland* in 1714. In other words, Mendelssohn intervened publicly as a Jewish thinker to fill a gap within the Enlightenment project itself.

This time, however, while distancing himself from Dohm[15], Mendelssohn relied on a contractualist and autonomist theory to demand equal rights for the Jews. He advocated for equal rights for Jews, but this equality took the form of a right to difference. In other words, he did not call for an equality that would assimilate Jews into Prussian society to the extent that they could risk losing their identity. On the contrary, he argued for the recognition of Jews in their distinct otherness, and for the possibility of forming a shared society without erasing that difference. In terms of rights, Mendelssohn settled the issue in a radical and radically innovative way, by stripping religion of any coercive force over individuals. Religion has no rights and, by extension, no contract. This also meant that religious institutions cannot exclude one of their members if he expressed a contrary or subversive opinion. The text ended with an address to his fellow Jews[16] as much as an appeal for religious tolerance[17].

2. Reception of the Preface

Although Mendelssohn's liberalism was praised by his readers, some found it difficult to associate such comments with his Jewishness. Moreover, by his own admission, his position was not widely shared by many of his fellow Jews. Mendelssohn's distinctive position drew criticism, particularly from August Friedrich Cranz (1737-1801) who, anonymously, published the same year *Das Forschung nach Licht und Recht [in einem Schreiben an Herrn Moses Mendelssohn auf Veranlassung seiner merkwürdige Vorrede zu Menasseh Ben Israel]*[18], followed by an afterword by the chaplain Daniel Ernst Mörschel (1751-1798), in which he asked Mendelssohn, against a background of accusations of deism, to clarify what he meant by revelation. The controversy followed on from the one with Lavater[19], since it involved judging Mendelssohn's Jewishness on

and beliefs of Judaism to them. A renowned bookseller and printer, he published Bibles, prayer books in Hebrew and Spanish, an edition of the Mishna and numerous treatises. He also wrote the *Conciliador* (1651), in which he attempted to reconcile the apparent inconsistencies of Scripture, and *The Hope of Israel* (1651), which caused a sensation among Messianic Jews and even Christian millenarians. It was, moreover, in application of his messianism that he travelled to England in 1655, accompanied by his son Samuel, to plead with Cromwell for the return of the Jews to this country from which they had been excluded since 1290, since he believed that the diaspora of the Jews would come to an end if they resided among all the nations.

12 Mendelssohn rather saw it as a means of encouraging Jews to convert, under the guise of liberalism, as the aim was not to emancipate the Jews, but rather to call for their assimilation.

13 Altona (1769), Schwerin (1772), Switzerland (1775), Warsaw (1775), Königsberg (1777) and Dresden (1777).

14 M. R. Hayoun also points out that this introduction is also an opportunity for Mendelssohn to give some autobiographical details of an author who, publicly, is not very forthcoming about his life.
He also translated Mendelssohn's introduction, which appeared in French in the reprint of Solomon's autobiography (2012), from which he gives an edifying extract in *La philosophie juive* (2023).

15 Dohm, in *On the Civil Improvement of the Jews* (1781-3), recognised the legal power of the Church, and in particular its power to exclude members.
For more details on Dohm's thinking, see Hayoun (1997).

16 The appeal for tolerance in *Jerusalem* ends with an address to the Germans.

17 The attacks on Dohm, who wished to make the synagogue the equal of the Church by reaffirming its right to exclude members, can be found at the end of the introduction. On the contrary, for Mendelssohn, "no category of ecclesiastics is sufficiently enlightened for such a prerogative to be granted to them without danger" (quoted by Hayoun, 1997, p. 41).

18 In English: *The Search for Light and Right in a Letter Addressed to Mr. Moses Mendelssohn on the Occasion of His Curious Preface to Menasseh Ben Israel*.

19 During the summer of 1769, the pastor Johann Caspar Lavater (1741–1801) took advantage of the partial translation of the *Palingénesie philosophique* by the Swiss naturalist and philosopher Charles Bonnet (1720–1793) to urge Moses Mendelssohn to convert to Christianity, invoking a millenarian perspective and using as a pretext the fact that Mendelssohn had expressed no hostility toward the figure of Christ. This was the famous "golden bridge" that Lavater offered to Mendelssohn. Mendelssohn was profoundly shocked by such a proposition. In an initial draft of his response, he expressed his dismay in the following terms: "My estrangement from the Christian religion has not yet diminished, and as long as God allows me the use of my reason, it cannot diminish. [...] I have expressed my deep respect for its founder. Yes, but with this caveat: if Jesus of Nazareth had not wished to be more than a virtuous man. Why did Mr. Lavater omit this caveat?" With the consent of the rabbinical authorities, Mendelssohn eventually published his reply in 1770 under the title *Letter to the Reverend Lavater of Zurich*. In this work, he expressed his distaste for public polemics and openly stated what those who knew him already understood: "Thus, I could, in silence, walk my path without being compelled to justify my convictions to the world. I will not deny that there are human additions and abuses in

the basis of presuppositions made by outsiders who were sometimes hostile to Judaism, while once again offering him a "golden bridge" to convert to Christianity. What was new about Cranz's criticisms, however, was that they were based on the theological-political level, reaffirming the authority of the Church. Indeed, as a man of the Enlightenment, his aim was not merely to satisfy a millenarian belief, but above all to highlight the inconsistency of the "Berlin Socrates'" position regarding Judaism. In caricaturing Mendelssohn and his defence of the Jewish cause, he saw in it rather the expression of an enlightened form of Christianity. In other words, for Cranz, religious freedom and tolerance were fundamentally incompatible with Judaism. He grounded this claim in his reading of the Hebrew Bible and in his involvement in the case of Samuel Marcus, in which Marcus had been excommunicated by the rabbi of Altona. Furthermore, referring to the controversy with Lavater, he accused Mendelssohn of speaking in disguised terms when invoking the "religion of his fathers" without clarifying what this expression refers to – since it could just as well denote Judaism as Christianity. Suspecting him of deliberately maintaining this ambiguity, Cranz demanded that Mendelssohn came forward and explained himself. Mörschel, in turn, accused Mendelssohn of rejecting revelation and distorting the religion of his fathers. He echoed the accusations previously made by Lavater, drawing in particular on the latter's preface, in order to cast doubt on Mendelssohn's religious affiliation–whether to Judaism, to Christianity, or perhaps to neither.

The contextualisation surrounding Jerusalem provides clues as to why the boundary between Mendelssohn's philosophical and Hebrew works became less clearly delineated, even if only occasionally. When it came to defending himself as a fully legitimate philosopher–without being Christian, or without abandoning his religion or his coreligionists–Mendelssohn had no choice but to bring these two usually distinct domains into dialogue within his thought. We will now proceed to examine *Jerusalem* in a non-exhaustive manner, in order to demonstrate how and why it constitutes an incorporation of the universal into Jewish particularism.

3. Presentation of the text

Forced to justify and defend himself, Mendelssohn wrote a first version of *Jerusalem*, with a particularly polemical tone[20]. In the final version, Mendelssohn modified his plan and abandoned the polemical tone of his first version to retain only a speculative tone[21], as he explained in a letter to Herz Gomberg dated June 14, 1783. The final work is as follows:

I. First section: on the relationship between Church and State.
II. Second section: on Judaism as a religion of revealed law, in conformity with reason in every aspect. It ends with a call for tolerance.

We are now dealing with a philosophical work resolving a theological-political problem[22]. On the one hand, he endeavoured to divide up the responsibilities of religion and politics. On the other hand, he attempted to define Judaism philosophically, using concepts such as eternal and historical truths. We think that Mendelssohn also wanted to show that there was indeed an agreement between Judaism and philosophy, so that the latter was not the prerogative of Hellenists, Latinists and Christians. This agreement involves the incorporation of philosophy into Judaism, which we will illustrate at various points in the text.

Section one: a treatise on political philosophy

The first section of *Jerusalem* develops a theory of the separation of religion and politics based on their definition as two of the three moral instances[23] identified by Mendelssohn. To do so, Mendelssohn draws on various sources: the theories of Grotius (1583-1645) and Pufendorf (1632-1694), in addition to Canz's *Disciplinae morales omnes*, concerning the division of powers between the prince and the Church. To explain

my religion that greatly obscure its brilliance. What friend of truth would pride himself on having found a religion free of all human error? [...] But I am just as unquestionably assured of the essentials of my religion as you or Mr. Bonnet can be of yours. [...] I wished to refute the contemptuous opinion often held about a Jew through virtue, not through pamphlets. My religion, my philosophy, and my status as a citizen furnish me with the best arguments for avoiding any religious controversy and for addressing, in public writings, only those truths that should be equally meaningful to all religions." [my trans.]. The controversy ended with a public apology from Lavater and an embarrassed response from Bonnet.

Johann David Michaelis (1717-1791), for his part, rejected equal rights, claiming that Jews were five times more likely to steal than Germans and that it would be absurd to grant the same rights to a people who claimed to be foreign.

Basically, all those who criticise Mendelssohn's text claim to know better than he does what Judaism is, while refusing to make any progress in terms of rights and tolerance.

20 A. Altmann 1973.

21 "*Jerusalem* is a small book of a peculiar kind, about which I would very much like to know your opinion. What is certain is that its quality is such that neither the orthodox nor the heterodox of both nations could hope to achieve. At every step, according to my usual bad habit, I seek a speculative subject to which I might cling, and I let fall the club from my hands", *JubA*13, 112-113. [my trans.]

Herz Homberg (1749-1841) was a Jewish educationalist who helped translate the *Torah*. With him, Mendelssohn also returned to the problems encountered by the country's Jewish communities, particularly with regard to the so-called tolerance put forward by the authorities (cf. M.-R. Hayoun, *op. cit.*, p. 298).

22 For a more detailed study of the work, we refer in particular to: Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn. A Biographical Study*, The University of Alabama Press, 1973; David Sorkin, *Moses Mendelssohn. Un penseur juif à l'ère des Lumières*, Coll. Présence du judaïsme, Paris, Albin Michel, 1996; Maurice-Ruben Hayoun, *Moses Mendelssohn,* coll. «Que sais-je», Paris, PUF, 1997 & *La philosophie juive*, pp. 294-308; Dominique Bourel, *Moses Mendelssohn. La naissance du judaïsme moderne*, Paris, Gallimard, 2004.

23 The third instance is freedom of conscience, which is often denigrated or even absent, and which must be defended.

the basis of this separation, he discusses the theses of other predecessors, including Bellarmine, Hobbes[24], Locke, Spinoza and Rousseau; he also quotes the rabbis of the Talmud. In so doing, Mendelssohn places his work in the wake of those of the theorists and philosophers of the modern state, with the exception that Hebrew sources ensure the validity of what is philosophically asserted.

To better understand the way in which Mendelssohn incorporates Western philosophy, let us look, for example, at his treatment of Locke's *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (1689/1690/1692). Here, the State is defined as "*a society of men who unite for the purpose of collectively promoting their temporal welfare*"[25], justifying the fact that the State must in no way concern itself with the opinions of its fellow citizens. However, Mendelssohn prefers a more porous separation, in which the Church is, as it were, and from a socio-political point of view, complementary to the State. According to Mendelssohn's commentary, Locke's strict separation means that society is concerned only with the temporal, and religion with the eternal, without any interaction between the two concerns being possible. The objection to strict separation could be rephrased as follows: since concern for the eternal outweighs that for the temporal, the State, though distinct, would be subject to the Church, which is an obstacle to tolerance. So, Locke's strict separation is laudable in principle, but problematic in practice. Mendelssohn continues:

> At bottom, man will never partake of eternity; his eternality is merely an incessant temporality. His temporality never ends; it is, therefore, an essential part of his permanency and inseparable from it. One confuses ideas if one opposes his temporal welfare to his eternal felicity. And this confusion of ideas is not without practical consequences. It shifts the borders of the sphere in which man can act in accordance with his capacities, and strains his powers beyond the goal which Providence has so wisely set for him. [...] It is necessary for man to be reminded constantly that with this life all does not end for him; that there stands before him an endless future, for which his life here below is a preparation, just as in all of creation every present is a preparation for the future. This life, say the rabbis, is a vestibule in which one must comport oneself in the manner in which one wishes to appear in the inner chamber. But you must also beware of establishing any further opposition between this life and the future, and of leading men to think that their true welfare in this life is not one and the same as their eternal felicity in the future; that it is one thing to care for their temporal, and another to care for their eternal well-being, and it is possible to preserve one while neglecting the other.[26]

The concepts are consistent with the theological truth taken from the *Pirqei avot* ("Chapters of the Fathers"), 4.16[27] : the world here below (*olam ha-ze*) must be a preparation for the world to come (*olam ha-ba*). For Mendelssohn, there is a continuity between the eternal and the temporal in theological terms that must be translated into political terms. Moreover, it is on a Mishnaic basis that Mendelssohn conceives of the human being as having two types of relationship in this world: one with God, which is a matter of religion; and one with other human beings, which is governed by the authority of the State[28] . This dual relationship could also find its basis in *Avot*, 4.12[29] , in which the rabbis affirm a dual obedience, to the master, which may refer to the State, and to the Eternal, which may refer to the Church: "The state gives orders and coerces, religion teaches and persuades. The state prescribes *laws*, religion *commandments*. The state has *physical power* and uses it when necessary; the power of religion is *love* and *beneficence*"[30]. The two institutions, although distinct, work together for the happiness of human beings, which is why a strict separation would not be desirable in view of the ultimate goal of human happiness[31].

Thus, we already argue that, in the formation of his political philosophy, Mendelssohn incorporated his readings of the theorists of the State, from Hobbes to Locke, into Jewish thought. We speak of "incorporation" because the theoretical foundation remains Judaism. It is upon this foundation that Mendelssohn integrates,

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24 Take, for example, Hobbes' treatment of the state of nature. In *Leviathan,* he explains that the social contract puts an end to the state of nature, an amoral moment of war between all against all. But Mendelssohn rejects the idea that the state of nature is devoid of all morality, just as he rejects the idea that the contract alone can solve everything. Instead, Mendelssohn forged a contractualist theory of the state in which he posited that such a contract can only be valid if it is preceded by a moral duty on the part of the contracting parties. In other words, humans in the state of nature are already moral when they willingly consent to the social contract: "But if contracts are to remain valid, man must by nature, without contracts and agreements, lack the moral ability to act against a compact into which he has voluntarily entered; that is, he must not be permitted to do so, even if he can; he must not have the moral faculty, even though he may have the physical." (p. 36).
Mendelssohn also takes up Hobbes' and Spinoza's inclusion of the religious in the State's sphere of interest: the Church is presented as a support for the State, to ensure education (Hobbes) or to guarantee obedience (Spinoza).

25 Quoted in our edition of *Jerusalem* edition, p. 37 [in italics in the text].

26 *Jerusalem,* p. 39.

27 *Avot* 4:16, commentary on *Avot* 16: "Rabbi Jacob said This world is like a vestibule before to the World-to-Come; prepare yourself in this vestibule to enter the banquet hall." [my trans.].

28 *Jerusalem*, pp. 42-45.

29 This is the commentary on *Avot* 12: "Rabbi Elazar son of Shamua said: Let the honour of your disciple be as dear to you as your own, and the honour of your companion as dear as the fear of your master, and the fear of your master as dear as the fear of heaven." In his commentary, Rabbi Yona concludes that "And the Mishnah refers jointly to the fear of the master and the fear of heaven, for the fear of the master is the foundation of the fear of heaven, since the master teaches his disciple the Torah and the fear of the Lord. In return, he who loves the Torah also loves the wise, and he who fears the word of the Lord also discovers the fear of heaven in the one who teaches him and leads him along the right path. This is why we are talking about the fear of a teacher", (2015) pp. 194-6. [my trans.].

30 *Jerusalem*, p. 45.

31 Mendelssohn proposes an original conception of the human being in the state of nature. Unlike the human being in the Hobbesian or Rousseauist state of nature, the Mendelssohnian human being in the state of nature is deeply rooted in society, while already being moral, because he already possesses imperfect rights and duties. Such a natural conception of the human being can be explained by recourse to the figure of the patriarchs, especially Noah and Abraham, who already had ties with God.

by adding to it, philosophies that serve to support his theses. In other words, Hebrew sources provide the matrix for the articulation between the political and the religious. Mendelssohn does indeed incorporate philosophical notions into Hebraic thought, even though the subject matter is not specific to Judaism. We have here a first indication of how *Jerusalem* can be said to be a work of Jewish philosophy, according to the definition we adopted in the introduction.

The first part of *Jerusalem* continues with a legal explanation of the difference between the Church and the State, insofar as both have rights that are different by nature. The State has perfect, i.e. absolute, rights, giving it the right to coerce and to establish contractual relations with and between human beings. In contrast, the Church has imperfect, i.e. non-absolute, rights[32]. The effect of this distinction is that "the State prescribes *laws*, religion *commandments*"[33]. However, the imperfect rights of the Church are based on a conception of belief and religious action derived from the Jewish tradition, for Mendelssohn states that: "[religion] knows no act without conviction, no work without spirit, no conformity in deed without conformity in the mind. Religious actions without religious thoughts are mere puppetry, not a service to God"[34]. Such a conception of religion is based on Maimonides' definition of belief in the *Guide for the Perplexed* I, 50: "There can be belief only when there has been conception; for belief consists in admitting as true what has been conceived [and believing] that it is out of the mind as it was conceived in the mind"[35]. Here again, when it comes to treating the two moral instances in legal terms, Mendelssohn does so according to a framework of thought that stems from his Hebrew tradition.

To present in detail what it is about, he returns to a legal-philosophical vocabulary and allows himself a speculative exposition, in which we learn, for example, that one of the inalienable rights is freedom of thought.[36] . Consequently–and this is important for defending tolerance–any constraint or coercion can only be exercised over actions, not convictions or feelings. There is no point in forcing people to believe in something, as this is a contradiction in terms. What's more, the Church has no power of coercion. In fact, it emerges from this presentation–and this is an original feature of our author's work–that coercion is no longer based on authority, but on the contract itself. The argument invoked is original in that it seeks to contractualise the right to coercion. In other words, any constraint exercised by the State originates from the contract concluded with its citizens. It is this very originality that enables Mendelssohn to reject, on legal and contractual grounds, any form of coercion on the part of the Church.

In Mendelssohn's political theory, therefore, there are two institutions: (1) the State, which holds absolute rights and can, by virtue of these rights, enter into a contract with individuals; (2) the Church, which holds non-absolute rights and, by virtue of these rights, cannot enter into a contract. It goes without saying that, in doing so, Mendelssohn theologically and politically delegitimises centuries of oppression and persecution inflicted by the Christian churches, supported by a legal foundation that, because it is also philosophical, aspires to be universal. For Mendelssohn, only the State can conclude a contract[37] with individuals. Therefore, as the Church cannot conclude such contracts, it does not have the right of coercion. This line of argument enables him to defend the fundamental right to hold one's own convictions, in other words, freedom of opinion and belief, when he argues that "the right to our own convictions is inalienable, and cannot pass from person to person; for it neither gives nor takes away any claim to property, goods and liberty"[38]. At the end of the section[39], after a more measured but ever-present charge against Christianity, he repeats his gesture, stating that freedom of opinion and belief is an inalienable right, as far as the Church and the State are concerned.

To conclude the first part of Jerusalem, we summarise as follows: Mendelssohn's political theory consists in defending a contractualist conception of the modern State, grounded in a state of nature that is already moral and, on a contract, concluded over matters concerning relations between fellow citizens. In such a state, the political and the religious are separated by virtue of their nature and distinct rights, without being strictly segregated. It was on the basis of such a theory that Mendelssohn, in a second part, responded to the critics by proposing his own definition of Judaism, in line with reason and opening up the possibility of civil equality for all.

As for the use of Hebrew sources, their mere presence is not sufficient to claim that his political philosophy is that of a Jewish thinker. Nevertheless, their presence is neither incidental nor insignificant. Hebrew sources are not merely juxtaposed with philosophical ones; rather, the latter are subsumed into the former. This involves employing the plasticity of concepts–reshaping their contours–to advance a theological-political theory consistent with the teachings of the Torah, the Sages, and the Rabbis.

Hence, without asserting that philosophy is subordinate to Judaism, we can argue that Mendelssohn presents Judaism as the framework within which philosophy may operate. In this first part, he thus demonstrates their compatibility: Judaism furnishes the ground upon which philosophy can unfold.

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32 This distinction can be found in the law manuals of the time, but also in a fragment by Mendelssohn from 1781 soberly entitled "Perfect and imperfect rights and duties".
33 *Jerusalem*, p. 45.
34 *Jerusalem*, p. 44.
35 Maimonides, (2012), p. 217, [my trans.].
36 Mendelssohn *Jerusalem*: "Hence, neither church nor state has a right to subject men's principles and convictions to any coercion whatsoever.", p. 70.
37 The mechanism for concluding a contract is explained using the example of Cajus and Sempronius, *Jerusalem*, pp. 55-56.
38 *Jerusalem*, p. 61.
39 "Hence, neither church nor state has a right to subject men's principles and convictions to any coercion whatsoever. Neither church nor state is authorized to connect privileges and rights, claims on persons and title to things, with principles and convictions, and to weaken through outside interference the influence of the power of truth upon the cognitive faculty." (*Jerusalem*, p. 70).

Now that the theological and political foundations have been established, Mendelssohn can defend his conception of Judaism against that of his detractors, while advocating equality and tolerance. This second part, distinct in its purpose, builds on the demonstrations of the first and offers Mendelssohn the opportunity to formulate his philosophical definition of Judaism, one that integrates specifically philosophical elements to demonstrate the compatibility of Judaism with philosophy and German society.

Second part: a treatise on the philosophy of religion

Mendelssohn places the second part in the wake of the first, for he reaffirms, from the very first lines, that "all ecclesiastical coercion will be unlawful, all external power in religious matters will be violent usurpation"[40]. From then on, it was on this legal basis and the separation of Church and State, to which he now added his definition of Judaism, that Mendelssohn can plead his case for religious tolerance and equal rights for the Jews of Prussia. Here, it was above all the author of *Das Forschung nach Licht und Recht*[41] and "Herr Mörschel" who were explicitly targeted. Although he acknowledged that their vision of Judaism was shared by many of his "coreeligionists"[42], Mendelssohn admitted that he could not agree to a definition of his religion that was opposed to reason. In other words, Mendelssohn asserts that everything that comes from revelation is compatible with reason. This thesis is reflected in his definition of Judaism, the one that informs his commentaries (including the *Bi'ur*) and his translation of the Pentateuch.

Mendelssohn responded to all the criticism he received by giving his definition of Judaism publicly for the first time in German:

> It is true that *I recognize no eternal truths other than those that are not merely comprehensible to human reason but can also be demonstrated and verified by human powers.* Yet Mr. Morschel is misled by an incorrect conception of Judaism when he supposes that I cannot maintain this without departing from the religion of my fathers. On the contrary, I consider this an essential point of the Jewish religion and believe that this doctrine constitutes a characteristic difference between it and the Christian one. To say it briefly: I believe that Judaism knows of no revealed religion in the sense in which Christians understand this term. The Israelites possess a *divine* legislation—laws, commandments, ordinances, rules of life, instruction in the will of God as to how they should conduct themselves in order to attain temporal and eternal felicity. Propositions and prescriptions of this kind were revealed to them by Moses in a miraculous and supernatural manner, but no doctrinal opinions, no saving truths, no universal propositions of reason. These the Eternal reveals to us and to all other men, at all times, through *nature* and *thing*, but never through *word* and *script*.[43]

From this quotation we can see, first of all, that Judaism is made up of two types of truth[44] and revealed legislation. On the one hand, eternal truths are not the subject of any revelation. They can be known by natural light (reason) and are not the privilege of the Israelites. They are often considered to be Mendelssohn's version of Leibnizian "reasoning truths". They ensure the universality of religion and constitute, as it were, the natural basis of religion. On the other hand, Judaism contains historical truths which have been the subject of revelation. These relate to the history and origins of Israel. Their truth lies in the authority of Moses and his testimonies. They are sometimes supported by miracles, rare and unique, which derive their truth only from the authority of the testimony given to them. Historical truths could be the Mendelssohnian counterpart of Leibnizian "truths of fact". Based on this interpretation, Mendelssohn's definition of Judaism incorporates Leibnizian concepts to account for his own regime of truth.

However, another possible interpretation draws on a different philosophical source–not Leibnizian, but rooted in medieval Judeo-Arabic philosophy, the very tradition Mendelssohn sought to revive through his work. It is less a matter of distancing Leibniz's influence than of proposing another interpretative approach, another possible incorporation within this definition of Judaism that is so central to Mendelssohn's work. Thus, we believe, from our point of view, that their source could lie in Judah ha-Levi's *Kuzari* (1140): in paragraph 67 of the first part, the Khazar king asks the rabbi to demonstrate the eternity of Creation. The rabbi replies as follows:

> As for the problem of the eternity of the world, it is difficult to resolve, and the arguments in favour of the two theses are balanced. It is the tradition handed down by Adam, Noah and Moses, based on prophecy, which is more credible than the logical argumentation that has made the doctrine of creation prevail.[45] .

The rabbi's response insists on the fact that no intellectual proof can be given of the origin of the world. This is in opposition to the philosophical discourse, which is mainly Aristotelian, denoting a scepticism[46] towards

40 *Jerusalem,* p. 78.
41 See *above*.
42 *Jerusalem*, p. 85.
43 *Jerusalem,* pp. 89-90.
44 *Jerusalem*, pp. 90-93.
45 Judas Hallevi (1994), [my trans.].
Judah Hallevi (1095-1141) was a twelfth-century Jewish poet and thinker. In the *Kuzari*, he defends his Jewish faith against philosophy, Christianity and Islam. He sought to highlight the uniqueness of Judaism. He depicts the king of the Khazars who, after a dream, questions a philosopher, a Christian, a Muslim and a rabbi to find out which works are pleasing to God. Convinced by the arguments of the latter, he converts to Judaism and continues to learn from the rabbi.
46 Ehud Krinis (2020): in this book, the author demonstrates Judah Hallevi's fideistic sceptical stance.

this philosophy in favour of a fideism that is nonetheless based on a theory of knowledge stemming from the Judeo-Arabic tradition. According to Saadia Gaon and Ibn Paquda, there are three sources of knowledge: the senses, the intellect and tradition (transmission, by testimony). Revelation and miracles belong to the third source of knowledge. Tradition is defined as historical knowledge based on testimony, the credibility of which depends on the witnesses who recount it. This is not to say that Mendelssohn defends a fideist theory of Judaism, especially since, unlike the rabbi questioned by the Khazar king, he does not reject philosophy, quite the contrary. Despite the irreducible differences between Mendelssohn and Judah Hallevi, the treatment of "historical truths" in *Jerusalem* could be seen as a borrowing of what is said about tradition in the *Kuzari*.

Mendelssohn's definition of Judaism therefore blends elements from philosophy–eternal truths–with elements specific to Hebrew tradition–historical truths–thereby ensuring that the universal and the particular meet. Judaism, as defined by Mendelssohn, therefore combines two types of knowledge: 1) knowledge through the intellect, which enables us to know eternal truths; 2) testimony, which enables us to know historical truths. Such an articulation of the universal and the particular would be specific to Judaism (and by extension to any religion based on eternal truths), so that what is historical concerns only the Children of Israel, while what comes from reason is accessible to everyone.

Accordingly, as a revealed legislation, Judaism is composed of laws, precepts, and rules of life that concern only the Jewish people. This legislative and regulatory corpus is founded upon the covenant that God made with Abraham. Mendelssohn justifies this claim by quoting and then paraphrasing the theophany found in *Shemot* 20:2, in order to demonstrate that it is a historical truth pertaining solely to the Jewish people and their history:

> And now the divine voice proclaimed: "*I am the Eternal, your God, who brought you out of the land of Mizrayim, who delivered you from bondage, etc*!" A historical truth, on which this people's legislation was to be founded, as well as laws, was to be revealed here—commandments and ordinances, not eternal religious truths. "I am the Eternal, your God, who made a covenant with your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and swore to make of their seed a nation of my own. The time for the fulfilment of this promise has finally come. To this end, I redeemed you from Egyptian slavery with unheard-of miracles and signs. I am your Redeemer, your Sovereign and King; I also make a covenant with you, and give you laws by which you are to live and become a happy nation in the land that I shall give you." All these are historical truths which, by their very nature, rest on historical evidence, *must* be verified by authority, and *can* be confirmed by miracles.[47]

Mendelssohn also returns to a specific feature of Judaism, to dispel any suspicion of proselytism that would prevent it from coexisting with Christians: Jewish people, who are the chosen people (*'am segulla*), have received laws from God that open the way to eternal happiness. But this path to salvation is not exclusive. For our author, there are other paths leading to happiness: these paths are accessible by means of eternal truths, which are not the prerogative of any religion in particular[48] . The whole covenant is thus historicised, so that Gentiles who adhere to natural religion (the laws of Noah) are not excluded from eternal happiness, which they can access through natural religion. There is therefore no need to seek to convert anyone.

Jerusalem also formulates in theological-political terms what its author had already asserted in a letter of 22 July 1771, addressed to Elkan Herz[49], in which Mendelssohn argued in a polemical tone that Judaism had added commandments to natural religion, whereas Christianity had added dogmas, which in turn contradicted reason. In other words, if the universal and the particular can meet in Judaism, it is thanks to the absence of dogmas, and to the cohabitation of eternal and historical truths that do not contradict each other. To his detractors, Mendelssohn can therefore refer their criticisms to a Christian conception of Judaism that has little to do with the way Jews themselves think about their religion. In *Jerusalem,* Mendelssohn returns to the absence of dogma in Judaism. Following on from what he developed in the first section, he reaffirms that belief cannot be forced. The Church cannot, nor religion itself. Therefore, all dogma is null and void. Mendelssohn then goes on to support the idea that there are no articles of faith in ancient Judaism because these dogma-like articles only appeared through philosophical discourse. Here, he takes direct aim at the thirteen principles of Maimonides, who actually formulates them in a discourse that is more closely related to a philosophical discourse than to a biblical commentary. Against these thirteen principles, Mendelssohn opposes the three things or principles of Joseph Albo (1380-1444): God, Providence, Torah. However, such a statement does not place him on the side of the heretics vis-à-vis Maimonides. Otherwise, just because Joseph Albo recognises three principles where Maimonides recognises thirteen does not mean that one of them can be accused of heresy. Consequently, these three things or these thirteen principles cannot be held as dogmas[50]. Thus, against the criticisms of Cranz and Mörschel, since nothing in Judaism can contradict

47 *Jerusalem*, p. 98.
48 *Jerusalem*, p. 97.
49 "Positive and negative commandments, rewards and punishments: all these apply only to acts, positive and negative, which are decided by man and determined by our conceptions of good and evil. On the other hand, faith and doubt, acceptance or rejection are not subject to our desire but depend, on the contrary, on our knowledge or ignorance of the truth." *JubA*20.2, pp. 212-213. [my trans.].
50 Cf. A. Altman, 1973.
It is customary to say that the Shema is something like the "creed" of the Jewish faith. Although such a statement remains approximate, it highlights a position similar to that adopted by Joseph Albo, but also by Mendelssohn and many others, for whom the Jewish faith is summed up in these words from *Devarim*, 6.4: "Listen Israel, the Lord is our G-d, the Lord is One".

reason, quite the contrary, there is no reason to deny Mendelssohn philosophical authority even though he remains a Jew.

Armed with his arguments[51], Mendelssohn is finally able to openly demand total tolerance for his people in a philosophical essay. In the words of Isaak Iselin (1728-1782), who reviewed it in *Traüme eines Menschenfreundes*, vol.2:

> [...] what is called religious tolerance is not a grace but a duty of government. It could not be put more clearly than this: when one or more religions are introduced into his State, a wise and judicious ruler does not allow himself to attack their rights for the best of his rights. Every church, every meeting whose purpose is worship, is a society towards which the sovereign owes protection and justice. To deny them this, even for the sake of the best of religions, is against the spirit of true happiness. The followers of all religions are equal in regard to civil rights except those whose opinions are against the principles of human and civil duty.[52]

In *Jerusalem,* the call for tolerance is addressed to the Prussians: "Show us ways and provide us with the means of becoming better men and better fellow inhabitants and permit us to be partners in enjoying the rights of humanity as far as time and circumstances permit"[53]. Then, to the leaders, he asks:

> Monarchs of the earth! [...] If you listen to them, your most precious treasure, the freedom to think, is gone! In the name of happiness and yours, the reunion of confessions is not tolerance *Toleranz*. It is radically opposed to true tolerance *Duldung*. In the name of our happiness and yours, may your powerful prestige not give way to transforming any eternal truth, without which civil happiness cannot subsist, into a law; any religious opinion indifferent to the State, into the law of the land! Stick to human action [...] and let us think and speak, as our father bequeathed them to us as an inalienable inheritance, gave them to us as an immutable right [...].[54]

His entire defence of tolerance (*Duldung*) thus rests on the preceding argumentation, both with regard to the separation of Church and State and to the definition of Judaism.

Mendelssohn defends tolerance by drawing on both Hebrew and European philosophical sources. This defence is grounded in a separation of powers between the political and the religious, as demonstrated in the first part. In the second part, he develops his own philosophical conception of Judaism to show that nothing in Judaism contradicts rational thought. Thus, we argue that, by doing so, Mendelssohn effectively creates Jewish philosophy, that is, a philosophy that articulates Jewish particularism with philosophical universalism, through the process of incorporation.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, we would first like to point out that *Jerusalem* contains a wide range of subjects: the author addresses the question of *jus circa sacra*, the separation of religion and politics, tolerance, and Judaism as revealed legislation in accordance with reason. There are also discussions with various authors, including Maimonides, Hobbes, Spinoza, Bellarmine and Locke. It could therefore be said that the work lies at the intersection between a text on political philosophy and one on Jewish thought, because it deals with the definition of Judaism using rational reasoning and defends tolerance on political and legal grounds. However, we would argue that Mendelssohn does more than place himself at an intersection: he renews, in the modern era, the meeting of Judaism and philosophy by incorporating philosophical concepts and reasoning into a Hebraic thought and tradition of his own. In so doing, he follows in the wake of the revival of the Judeo-Arabic rationalist tradition, that of Saadia Gaon, Maimonides and Hasdai Crescas. According to this tradition, the Torah retains primacy. Revelation assigns clear limits to theoretical knowledge, which implies in particular that the raison d'être of its commandments remains inaccessible to reason. Philosophy therefore appears alongside the Torah, to enable a clear and logical expression of theological questions that concern not only the Children of Israel, but all humanity[55]. Consequently, the agreement between Scripture and philosophy stems from the fact that the latter unfolds within the limits defined by the former.

In *Jerusalem*, then, we are dealing with a text of Jewish philosophy as we defined it in the introduction. Let us recall it here: Jewish philosophy proposes the articulation between the universal of philosophical thought

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51 Once he had demonstrated that Judaism, from a theological point of view, could coexist with other religions thanks to the truths it had in common with natural, i.e. universal, religion, and to its absence of proselytism, Mendelssohn then launched into a defence of ceremonial laws (*Zeremonialgesetze* would translate the Hebrew *huqqim*), in order to show that nothing in Judaism could prevent its members from enjoying the same rights as Christians. Indeed, the habits and customs of Judaism were often used as a pretext to discriminate against them on the grounds that they could not adapt to European societies. Mendelssohn first explains that the purpose of these laws is to protect monotheism, and this has been the case since ancient Judaism. But above all, their purpose is to encourage virtuous actions, mainly because they only concern action and dictate precepts only to the will. Finally, these laws, derived from oral tradition and therefore living, ensure that the images will not lose their value as signs. In other words, the sole purpose of the rites is to prevent idolatry. For Mendelssohn, these were the intentions of the legislator: "Religious and moral teachings were to be connected with men's everyday activities. The law, to be sure, did not impel them to engage in reflection; it prescribed only actions, only doing and not doing. The great maxim of this constitution seems to have been: *Men must be impelled to perform actions and only induced to engage in reflection"* (p. 161).

52 Quoted as a note in *Jerusalem,* pp. 78-79.

53 *Jerusalem*, p. 135.

54 *Jerusalem*, p. 187.

55 In particular, David Sorkin shows how Wolff's philosophy, which was influential in Mendelssohn's philosophy, is incorporated in such a way that it does not exceed the limits set by the Torah. See: David Sorkin (1996).

and the particular of Jewish thought. This articulation is achieved, as stated in the introduction, through incorporation, since it is philosophy that is incorporated into Judaism, not the other way around. This attempt at definition, using Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* as a case study, thus seeks to provide a definition of Jewish philosophy based on the texts themselves rather than on the identity of their authors. Ultimately, this reveals a nuanced synthesis in which universal reason and particular Jewish tradition merge without disappearing.

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