



Connecting the Covenants: Judaism and the Search for Christian Identity in Eighteenth-Century England (Jewish Culture and Contexts)

By David B. Ruderman

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Connecting the Covenants focuses on two separate but entwined stories, the first centering around the colorful character of Moses Marcus. The English-born son of wealthy parents and the grandson of the famous autobiographical author Glikl of Hameln, Marcus was a prominent Jew educated in the Ashkenazic yeshivah at Hamburg. On New Year's Day, 1723, Marcus was baptized as a Christian, later publishing a justification of his conversion and a vindication of his newly discovered faith in a small book in London. A trophy convert, he was promoted by figures at the highest levels of the Anglican Church as a cultural mediator between Judaism and Christianity. His modest successes in the world of the elite clerical establishment were followed, however, by conspicuous failures, both intellectual and material.

The second story that David Ruderman tells emerges against the background of Marcus's professional decline. In the end, the prize convert proved to be a theologian of limited ability, far outstripped in sophistication and openness to rabbinic learning by a circle of Enlightenment Protestant scholars. It was not the Jew who had abjured Judaism who was willing or able to apply the Mishnah and Talmud to Christian exegesis, but figures such as William Whiston, Anthony Collins, William Wotton, and the Dutch scholar William Surenhusius who seized upon the ways to connect the covenants.

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Editorial Review

Review

"*Connecting the Covenants* uses previously untapped archival sources and little-studied printed books to explore an important episode in the early eighteenth century 'battle of the books.' It sheds light on the famous debate between Ancients and Moderns as well as the status of the Bible in early Enlightenment thought. At the same time, Ruderman uncovers a fascinating episode in the history of European Jewry and Jewish-Christian intellectual relations. *Connecting the Covenants* is compelling as both narrative and history."—Matt Goldish, The Ohio State University

About the Author

David B. Ruderman is Joseph Meyerhoff Professor of Modern Jewish History and Ella Darivoff Director of the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the author of many books including *Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery in Early Modern Europe* and *Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key: Anglo-Jewry's Construction of Modern Jewish Thought*, winner of the Koret Jewish Book Award in History.

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Introduction:

The subject of this book lies at the interstices of Jewish and Christian history during the first decades of the eighteenth century. I attempt to reconstruct a fascinating moment in the reevaluation of postbiblical Judaism among a circle of Christian writers, many of them clerics, primarily living in England. Historians of Christianity have treated this subject only tangentially and cursorily while it has generally been ignored or passed over in silence by those who study Jewish history. As an historian whose primary interest is Jewish culture, I hope to recover its significance for Jewish as well as for Christian history.

The history of Jewish civilization in this era has been told and retold around certain prominent themes, often as discrete trajectories disconnected from each other. Recent scholarship has underscored the prolonged sense of crisis within the Jewish community precipitated by the messianic movement of Shabbetai Zevi in the late seventeenth century and the heresies that emerged in its path throughout the eighteenth century, on the one hand, as well as the shock waves generated by Benedict Spinoza's assault on Judaism and Christianity within the community of former conversos in Amsterdam and beyond, on the other hand. Some have pointed to a perceived diminution of interest in Jewish culture and literature among Christian scholars by the beginning of the eighteenth century, that was replaced by a more critical and hostile posture towards Judaism. Still others have focused on the concentration of large numbers of Jews living in Poland-Lithuania and in the Ottoman Empire and their relative isolation from cultural developments within Western European civilization as a whole.

Most recently, several Jewish historians have underscored the importance of the cultural aspirations of a small group of Jewish intellectuals primarily living in central Europe at the beginning of the eighteenth century, even labeling them as early *maskilim*. In using this term to distinguish them from advocates of the later political and pedagogic movement known as the *Haskalah* appearing at the end of the century, they hope to locate the actual origins of the Jewish enlightenment in Western and Eastern Europe. Rather than

actually clarifying this loosely knit group's relationship to later enlightenment trends, they have primarily reinforced, to my mind, the sense of cultural ambiguity this murky period presents Jewish historians and the need to see it more clearly in its own terms rather than as a mere prelude to later more definable cultural movements.

The subject of this book is quite different from all of these intellectual agendas. I wish to understand more clearly the preoccupation of certain Christian thinkers with Judaism as a critical religious and cultural factor and its ramifications for both the history of Judaism and Christianity and their on-going relations. Their discourses about Judaism took place in England and in English for the most part, although similar discussions can be located in Holland and elsewhere on the continent in the first half of the eighteenth century. To a great extent, they represented a direct continuation of discussions of Judaism that had taken place among several prominent seventeenth-century scholars, although, as we shall argue, their more forceful emphasis and the language and context in which they emerged were different. In a manner not unlike the previous century, these extended conversations in which Judaism, its ancient history and classic texts, played so central a role, rarely involved Jewish interlocutors. When Christian thinkers required the expertise of Jewish languages and literature, they sometimes consulted former Jews or relied increasingly on a growing number of Christian scholars who had superficially or even thoroughly mastered Jewish texts. Jews accordingly remained on the margins of this activity, although never totally ignored by Christian contemporaries nor totally oblivious to the discussions and the numerous publications about their own history and cultural legacy that featured so prominently within the larger public discourse of their society. Paradoxically, Christians often preferred to engage with Jewish ideas and texts rather than with actual Jews themselves.

My focus is on two separate stories that ultimately are interconnected. The first is about a colorful character known as Moses Marcus, a prominent young Jewish man baptized in the Anglican Church on New Year's Day, 1723. Marcus was also known by the Hebrew name of Moses ben Mordechai Hamburger, the son of highly affluent parents and the grandson of the famous autobiographical author Glikl of Hameln. His high profile immediately caught my attention among the biographies of other similar converts of his era. Marcus was surely no ordinary candidate for Church membership and undoubtedly represented a prize of some consequence to the missionaries who had succeeded in convincing him to repudiate his grandmother's legacy. Marcus subsequently published a justification of his conversion and a strong vindication of his newly discovered faith in a small English book published in London in 1724. It was later enlarged and edited in a Dutch translation and published in Holland.

Reading Marcus's book from cover to cover convinced me that this modest undertaking constituted more than a conventional narrative of a convert's dismissal of his ancestral faith and an emotional embrace of Christianity. It represented, to my knowledge, the first contemporary critical response to a much weightier volume composed by David Nieto, the dominant Jewish intellectual of London in the early eighteenth century and the rabbi of the Bevis Marks synagogue. Nieto had written an extensive and learned defense of the rabbis and the oral law in a work called *Ha-Kuzari ha-Sheni, hu Mateh Dan*, published in London in 1714. I had previously studied Nieto and his famous work for an earlier book of mine where I suggested how Nieto had absorbed much of the theological and scientific ambiance of his immediate surroundings and used this knowledge in defense of the Jewish tradition. That Marcus had dared to challenge directly this vaunted spokesman of traditional Judaism suggested a greater significance to Marcus's work than I had initially surmised.

Was the apparent disagreement between a famous sephardic rabbi and a youthful neophyte from London recently educated in the ashkenazic yeshivah of Hamburg ultimately part of a larger story worth telling? Nieto's spirited justification of the rabbis and the sanctity of the oral law have usually been linked to a larger rabbinic defense of traditional Judaism and its leadership emerging in the late seventeenth-century and

continuing well throughout the eighteenth. As we have mentioned, rabbinic authority was felt to be in "crisis" because of the well publicized assaults against its sanctity and legitimacy from such renegades as Uriel da Costa and Benedict Spinoza, because of the growing indifference to religious norms and practices on the part of a larger community of conversos in Amsterdam, Hamburg, and London, and because of the radical Sabbateans who had renounced the rabbinic establishment and its control over Jewish life in the name of their reputed messianic redeemer.

Marcus's critique of Nieto's work, however, bears none of the markings of Spinozism, Crypto-Judaism, or Sabbatianism; it is framed in an entirely different context. On the surface, it appears to be nothing more than a conventional Christian rejection of rabbinic Judaism, offering the rival claim that the true biblical religion sprouted from Christian soil, as reflected in the teachings of the New Testament and the Church Fathers, and not from that of the Pharisees and rabbis and their allegedly stringent legal interpretations. But Marcus's essay represents more than the standard trope of Christian polemics against rabbinic Judaism. It offers, I believe, a window into a more complex and fascinating moment in the history of the two faiths, in their relations with each other, and into the role that theological discussion, informed especially by the knowledge of ancient religious history and texts, played in the public political, social, and cultural spheres of English society in the early decades of the eighteenth century. In using Marcus as my entry point, I think I have located a rich subject of a Jew who became a Christian, inhabited the liminal space of a convert betwixt and between the two faith-communities, and who attempted to build a solid reputation and achieve some modicum of material success in Christian high society as a kind of expert on Judaism and Hebraic learning. Most importantly, Marcus referred by name to many of his numerous associates and contacts, some of whom represented the actual religious and cultural elites of London society. In identifying his network of social and professional connections, some superficial and some more meaningful, in examining their own writings on Judaism and Christianity, and in exploring the points of agreement that connect them and the sharp disagreement that separate them, I hope to reconstruct a more significant conversation about Judaism and Christianity, their intertwined histories, and the contemporary strivings of Christians for relevance in a changing cultural and social world.

Marcus's modest successes in a world of the elite clerical establishment in London were followed, however, by conspicuous failures, both intellectual and material. His hopes to be accepted by the Christian intellectual community as a prominent expert in Judaism were ultimately dashed due to Marcus's own social and scholarly limitations and by the unimaginative ways in which he presented his former ancestral faith to his new coreligionists. The Christian theologians with whom he sought to ingratiate himself had a wider and more penetrating vision of post-biblical Judaism than he could ever have perceived. His mere textual competency in both biblical and rabbinic studies never allowed him to grasp fully what his Christian associates were ultimately gleaned from their rich exposure to Jewish texts. He remained torn and divided between the faith of his parents and that of his newly adopted Church, never capable of discovering the means to reconcile the two. To the extent his later life is known, he appears to have died a broken and defeated man; the severe decline of his economic status precisely mirrored his diminishing value to Christian scholars as a so-called expert on Judaism. While he attempted to defend the integrity of biblical Judaism and Jews in his writings, he could not free himself simultaneously from criticizing rabbinic Judaism, its exegesis, its praxis, its oral law, and especially its claims to speak the divine truth independent of the rival claims of Christianity. In the final analysis, Marcus was outstripped and superseded by the very same coterie of Christian intellectuals he assumed would become his grateful pupils in mastering Judaism.

My second story thus emerges against the background of Marcus's professional decline and ultimate failure as a cultural mediator between Judaism and Christianity. As a narrow textual specialist, Marcus was hardly a creative thinker capable of understanding more profoundly how the two religious traditions actually might cohere and speak meaningfully to each other. The latter task was assumed by a group of Christian theologians, some of whom Marcus had even personally encountered. Their aspirations in studying Judaism

surely transcended Marcus's competency and vision. They sought ambitiously to master the entire corpus of rabbinic Judaism, to imbibe the exegetical methodology of the rabbis, to appreciate the historical context of postbiblical Judaism for understanding the birth of Christianity, and even to acknowledge the spiritual essence of the religion the rabbis had shaped. Responding creatively to the acute challenges then offered by historicism, philology and antiquarian scholarship, forcing them to reassess and revalidate the present in terms of an increasingly confusing and slippery past, they found the study of rabbinic Judaism a critical resource in fortifying their own Christian identities.

In following Marcus's path from the yeshivah world of Hamburg to an elite society of English theologians and church leaders in London, but then turning from him to the larger concerns of this latter group, I think I have found a novel way of illuminating a highly significant but relatively neglected chapter in the long and complex history of the Jewish-Christian encounter. Although the initial protagonist of my story is a Jew who opted out of Judaism, the story I hope to relate clearly transcends his personal odyssey and his confused identity between Judaism and Christianity. Ultimately, the most important story of this book is the second one: the creative uses of Judaism by Christian writers who dramatically surpassed this mediating figure in their more sustained search to reconcile the two faiths in a moment of crisis for both.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, Jewish and Christian religious leaders faced a common predicament: the need to justify their contemporary faiths in the light of new scholarly discoveries of philologists and historians that not only clouded their respective origins but obfuscated and confused the seemingly self-evident connections between the biblical foundation of their religions and their later transformations into Judaism and Christianity. As Justin Champion has so eloquently argued, politicians, clerics, and laity alike in this era assumed that cultural authority was based on scholarly discourse. This meant, in the context of the protracted skirmishes among high and low clergy, Latitudinarians, Socinians, and deists, that biblical and patristic scholarship along with knowledge of ancient history and philology were all crucial instruments for the ideological justification of clerical as well as civil authority. This was a significant moment in the history of ideas, where historical scholarship had assumed so formidable a role in shaping public opinion. It was also a critical period in the study of religion since it was increasingly assumed that religions also had a history, humanly conceived and humanly generated, and that they were only understandable when they defined themselves in historical terms. The ultimate impact of this explosion of new scholarly studies, new textual editions, the discovery of new sources, both real and contrived, was to create an uncertainty about origins which ultimately led to a lack of clarity and indeterminacy about the present. The new historical criticism ultimately muddied the waters of the past. The bedrock of Christianity, the fulfillment of the Old Testament in the New, the previously impervious boundaries between Judaism and Christianity, between canonical and apocryphal, and between orthodox and heretical, had all been called into question. Historical scholarship could rethink all previous assumptions rendering precarious what Champion called "the cultural keystone of order."

It is in the context of the cultural crisis so well interpreted by Champion that I wish to place this work. A renewed interest in Judaism emerged in these clerical circles at the same time they were entangled in and confounded by ideological conflicts fueled by the bewildering advances of historical and philological scholarship. It was inevitable that the study of ancient Christian origins would lead ultimately to a rethinking of Jewish origins as well, and that the disdain and indifference that had characterized centuries of Christian attitudes towards post-biblical Judaism were in need of reevaluation. In feverishly scouring the past to locate and appropriate new resources for understanding what the "primitive church" actually was, Christian scholars eventually were obliged to confront the literature and culture of the rabbis as well. In the end, Moses Marcus never rose to the challenge of "connecting the covenants" between the Old and the New Testament, on the one hand, and between the written and oral law, on the other, that is, of connecting the two strands of his own religious identity. It was left to the Christian elite community he had hoped to serve who responded more profoundly and creatively to this new challenge.

The book opens with a consideration of a strong disagreement in print that emerged several years before Marcus had published his initial work. There is no actual evidence that the two protagonists actually knew each other or were even aware of each other's writing. Nevertheless, when one reads their publications side by side, both published in London within a span of two years, one might surmise that had the two sat in the same room together, they would have certainly engaged in heated debate. I refer to the famous English history of ancient Judaism and early Christianity of Humphrey Prideaux, entitled appropriately *The Old and New Testament Connected*, whose first volume appeared in London in 1716, and David Nieto's aforementioned defense of rabbinic Judaism published in Hebrew and Spanish in the same city in 1714. While legitimating the "connections" between Hebraic scripture and early Christianity, Prideaux had simultaneously negated the claims of the rabbis that their Judaism faithfully reflected the biblical faith at all. On the contrary, Prideaux claimed, the rabbinic legacy was a human-made fabrication bearing little resemblance to its biblical counterpart and representing a distortion of its guiding principles fully represented, in contrast, by Anglican Christianity.

Nieto's elegant defense of rabbinic Judaism rested on the assumption that such accusations, insinuating that the rabbis had created a new law of their own making, were utterly false. On the contrary, he argued, the divine law was impenetrable without the clarifications and specifications of the rabbinic exegetes. The conflicting postures of these two authors' publications, addressed to different audiences and in different languages, surely set the stage for the direct challenge posed to Nieto by Moses Marcus in his own conversionary tract written a few years later. In the context of the well-publicized presentations of the rabbi and the Christian bishop, Moses Marcus's own arguments, mirroring those of Prideaux, make sense as an accurate reflection of contemporary Christian sentiment about rabbinic Judaism and as a justification of the publication of his book by his Christian sponsors in the first place.

Chapter Two considers the circumstances which led Moses Marcus to embrace the Anglican Church. His early years first revolved around the complex experiences of his father, named Marcus Moses, the latter's rise to affluence and power in London, his bitter disagreement with the chief rabbi [Aaron Hart, also known as Uri Phoebus], his "excommunication" and long-term "exile" in India as a successful diamond merchant. I speculate on the circumstances of Moses's conversion both in Hamburg and London, his special relationship with his learned Anglican mentor David Wilkins, house chaplain to the Archbishop of Canterbury, and his growing ambivalence about living as a Christian while maintaining strong family and intellectual links with Jewish culture that he apparently could never fully disown. This ambivalence is especially prominent in his seemingly contradictory action of suing his own father in an attempt to retain the material support he had apparently relinquished through his conversion, while at the same time, apparently reclaiming his former Jewish identity during the extended period of the court proceedings. That a Jewish family dispute could figure so prominently in the protracted proceedings of a civil court also suggests the well publicized nature of this entire affair.

In Chapter Three, I continue to trace Moses Marcus' career as a convert, particularly his efforts to showcase his expertise on Jewish matters before Christian clergy who apparently valued this knowledge. Reconstructing this career is made feasible by the discovery of a begging letter he wrote to Lord Hans Sloane in the 1730s in which he specifically mentioned his manifold writings, both printed and in manuscript, and his long list of patrons, a virtual road map of the social and professional networks he created with church leaders, theologians and writers. The letter, along with his other correspondence and writings on Judaism, allow us to construct a full blown portrait of his rise to limited fame, albeit accompanied by professional instability and eventual economic failure. Marcus was ultimately a conflicted man who openly attacked the foundations of the oral law while, at the same time, functioned as a conduit, even an advocate for the fair and accurate presentation of Judaism to Christians. His conversion was accordingly never final nor complete; his life and writing reveal how consistent and sincere he remained in his ambivalence, lingering between his former and his present faith.

Whatever name Marcus attained in the elite world of Christian clerics came through the brief pamphlet he penned defending the integrity of Dr. Daniel Waterland, the foremost orthodox Anglican theologian of his day, against his learned and unconventional critic Conyers Middleton. The remainder of the chapter looks closely at Marcus's relationship to Waterland and to his associate Zachary Pierce, contextualizing his modest publication in defense of biblical circumcision within the larger struggle between the orthodox Anglican camp and its more radical critics.

Chapter Four addresses Marcus's more ambitious project of translating from Latin into English the work of the German biblical scholar Johann Gottlob Carpzov. In this latter work, Marcus again identified himself with the traditionalist camp, attacking a recent controversial book of William Whiston, Newtonian scientist, historian, and theologian. Whiston's attempt to locate a literal "scientific" correlation between the prophecies of the Old Testament with references in the New had obliged him to conclude that the traditional Masoretic Hebrew text of the Bible had been corrupted by the Jews. This position was personally repugnant to Marcus and subsequently, he came to defend the integrity of the Hebrew Bible through his translation and annotation of Carpzov's weighty critique.

Marcus' effort in presenting Carpzov to an English reading audience connected him personally to a much larger controversy surrounding Whiston's intellectual project. This was precipitated by an even more caustic critique of Whiston by the well-known free thinker Anthony Collins. In comparing Collins' critique of Whiston with that of Carpzov and Marcus, one can easily detect how the terms of the debate over how one reads the New Testament in relationship to the Old were radically changing. Collins vigorously attacked Whiston's "Newtonian" solution of connecting the Old and the New Testaments and his emphatic claim that a literal correspondence between the two testaments was possible. Collins insisted accordingly that the only way to read the New Testament was in a figurative, metaphorical manner, most often associated with that of Jewish exegetes. He further argued that the most efficacious way to understand the appropriate context, language, and style of the New Testament was through a solid grounding in rabbinic hermeneutics. This he had learned from reading the journal of the Huguenot author and editor Michel de la Roche and his careful summary of the methods of the Dutch scholar William Surenhusius, the editor and translator of the recent Latin edition of the *Mishnah* with its medieval commentaries. Most interpreters of Collins' demolition of Whiston's argument present him as insincere and disingenuous. How ironic it must have appeared that only the rabbis might save the Christians from the seemingly impossible bind of not comprehending properly their sacred scriptures! In offering to save Christianity through the agency of rabbinic exegesis, he was cynically destroying the very foundation of the traditional Christian faith.

Collins' clever rebuttal of Whiston, his creative use of La Roche and through him, Surenhusius, require a fresh reading along with some of the numerous responses which Collins himself provoked among Christian intellectuals. This is the subject of Chapter Five. Should the approach of Surenhusius in utilizing the rabbis to understand Christianity be dismissed out of hand as the musings of an eccentric scholar, or did he in fact have an impact and a following in England itself? Whether or not Collins was sincere in what he wrote about Surenhusius, the latter was indeed taken seriously by several of his contemporaries who increasingly were becoming convinced that the rabbinic tradition was useful in explicating Christianity. A Christian scholar could only longer ignore this body of literature at the risk of inadequately understanding the foundations of his own faith.

The primary exponent of the methods of Surenhusius in England was the well known defender of modern wisdom over that of the ancients, William Wotton. His Hebraic studies, and in particular his justification of the use of the *Mishnah* for understanding ancient Christianity is the subject of Chapter Six. Wotton not only asserted his commitment to rabbinic learning as a Christian in a long essay, but actually translated several parts of the *Mishnah* into English with extensive commentary. In this he was aided and supported by the well-known Cambridge professor of Islamic history, Simon Ockley, who wrote a favorable endorsement of

Wotton's project that was printed in the work itself. Another of his collaborators was David Wilkins, the chaplain of William Wake, the archbishop of Canterbury, and coincidentally the primary mentor of Moses Marcus who had guided him to the baptismal font of the Anglican Church in the first place. But despite the indirect connection between Marcus and Wotton through Wilkins, the gulf separating the convert from this learned Christian exegete and his friends is strikingly apparent. Wotton, following Surenhusius and his disciples, understood the rabbis in a manner notably dissimilar from that of Marcus.

In the conclusion, I point out how this reconstruction of Marcus's life and writing and his mediating role among Jews and Christian theologians provides an opening to a novel world of Christian engagement with Judaism in the early eighteenth century, a world that Marcus himself never fully entered nor comprehended. Marcus, like most Christians in early modern Europe, still remained locked in the theological language of the traditional Jewish-Christian debate, attempting to validate his newly adopted religious identity by invalidating the other, specifically the exposition of David Nieto to which he offered his counterargument. Yet against the backdrop of a new explosion in historical scholarship and textual philology, upsetting and complicating conventional assessments of the Christian past, a new approach was emerging, one unimagined and unanticipated by either Moses Marcus, or Humphrey Prideaux, or David Nieto himself. Christians such as William Surenhusius and William Wotton had become acutely aware of the critical importance of rabbinic culture for penetrating the obscure origins of Christianity. Overcoming long-felt inhibitions about seriously engaging with Judaism and its normative texts, while drawing inspiration from a small circle of gifted researchers of the seventeenth-century who had preceded them, they came to appreciate more than ever a culture and literature from which the overwhelming majority of Christians had distanced itself. What was at stake for them was more than merely satisfying their scholarly and antiquarian interests. They were convinced they were retrieving a vital part of themselves in this quest to unearth the Jewish past. And their bold declarations vindicating their carefully conceived positions, written increasingly in English, were noticed and received favorably by a wider community of theologians, church leaders, and educated laypersons than ever before. In their bewildering world of competing theological and political claims emanating from a fractured Christian community at war with itself, one might perhaps discern in such modest efforts of self-discovery a more tolerant, a more nuanced, and a more appreciative attitude towards Judaism as a cultural factor, if not of actual Jews themselves.

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