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THE FREETHINKER, THE JEWS,  
AND THE MISSIONARIES:  
GEORGE HOUSTON AND  
THE MYSTERY OF *ISRAEL VINDICATED*

by

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On November 29, 1820 a remarkable book was published in the city of New York. The author called himself "An Israelite" and his book *Israel Vindicated*. As the subtitle explained, the work was "a refutation of the calumnies propagated respecting the Jewish nation; in which the objects and views of the American Society for Ameliorating the Condition of the Jews are investigated." The original subtitle, preserved in deposit records, contained eight additional words—"and reasons assigned for rejecting the Christian religion." But these words were dropped from the book's title page before publication. Someone presumably had second thoughts.<sup>1</sup>

NOTE: I am grateful to Professor Alexander Altmann for his comments on an earlier draft of this paper, and to the National Foundation for Jewish Culture and the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture for their generous support of my research.

1. *Israel Vindicated; Being a Refutation of the Calumnies Propagated Respecting the Jewish Nation in which the Objects and Views of the American Society for Ameliorating the Condition of the Jews are Investigated* (New York, 1820). A London edition was published in 1823. I am grateful to Mr. William Matheson of the Library of Congress for providing me with a copy of the deposit records for this volume.

Even with its muted subtitle, *Israel Vindicated* remained a vigorous polemical work. The first American anti-Christian polemic by "An Israelite,"<sup>2</sup> it continued to attract notice throughout most of the nineteenth century. In 1863, Rabbi Isaac Mayer Wise sought information about *Israel Vindicated's* author and family. He thought that such an illustrious personage "ought to have a place in the history of American Judaism."<sup>3</sup> But nobody had any information. Today, *Israel Vindicated* and its author have still not received the attention they deserve.

## I

Christian efforts to convert American Jews date back to the earliest years of the Jewish community in America. Individually, usually on their own initiative, churchmen and laymen approached Jews, argued with them, and begged them to immerse in the baptismal font. Organized missions to the Jews developed only much later, influenced by the growth of European Jewish missions, especially the London Jews' Society, and America's own frenzied religious revival, the Second Great Awakening. In 1816, following the end of the 1812 war with England, two missions to the Jews were formed: The Female Society of Boston and the Vicinity for Promoting Christianity among the Jews, and the American Society for Evangelizing the Jews. The latter organization, renamed the American Society for Meliorating the Condition of the Jews (ASMCJ), obtained a New York State charter in 1820.<sup>4</sup>

2. An earlier work by a Christian responded to missionary Joseph S. C. F. Frey's tour of America, *Tobit's Letters to Levy; or a Reply to the Narrative of Joseph Samuel C. F. Frey. Submitted to the Consideration of Christians of Every Denomination Whether He is What He Describes Himself to Be, A Converter of Jews* (New York, 1816). The unidentified Tobit supported Christian teachings, but opposed active missions. Several other polemical works were imported: David Levi, *Letters to Dr. Priestly* (New York, 1794); idem, *A Defense of the Old Testament* (New York, 1797; Philadelphia, 1798); Jacob Nikelsburger, *Koul Jacob in Defense of the Jewish Religion* (New York, 1816; Boston, 1817) and *Letters of Moses Mendelsohn [sic] to Deacon Lavater* (New York, 1821). For other polemical works, see A. S. W. Rosenbach, *An American Jewish Bibliography* (New York, 1926) and its supplements.

3. *American Israelite* 10 (1863): 77.

4. Charles L. Chaney, *The Birth of Missions in America* (New York, 1976); David Max Eichhorn, *Evangelizing the American Jew* (New York, 1978); Max Eisen, "Christian Missions to the Jews in North America and Great Britain," *Jewish Social Studies* 10 (1948): 31-66; Marshall Sklare, "The Conversion of the Jews," *Commentary* 56 (Sept., 1973): 44-53; A. E. Thompson, *A Century of Jewish Missions* (Chicago, 1902); Louis Meyer, "Hebrew Christian

America's small Jewish community—about 3,000 strong—felt threatened by the American Society for Meliorating the Condition of the Jews. The society claimed only to be interested in "Jews as do already profess the Christian religion, or are desirous to receive Christian instruction." But Jews believed that the real object was "the conversion of our nation to the Christian faith." Since Secretary of State John Quincy Adams was vice-president of the ASMCJ, John Jay's son Peter was its treasurer, and many distinguished churchmen and businessmen served as directors, Jewish concern can easily be understood.<sup>5</sup>

*Israel Vindicated* was the first public Jewish reaction to the missionaries. Ostensibly, the 110 page volume consisted of thirty-two letters from Nathan Joseph in New York to his friend, Jacob Isaacs, in Philadelphia. In fact, both names were fictitious and the letters served merely as a literary conceit. The real aims of *Israel Vindicated* were to investigate the "objects and views" of the ASMCJ, and to refute the Christian religion.

*Israel Vindicated* charged the ASMCJ with misrepresenting both Judaism and itself. It attacked the smug self-righteousness of missionaries, and ridiculed the presumption that Jews were "in a degraded and uncultivated state." It termed evangelization "contrary to the true spirit and meaning of the constitution." It then tried to prove that evangelization, not amelioration was the ASMCJ's true aim. Confronting its adversary directly, *Israel Vindicated* printed excerpts from ASMCJ writings, and the complete list of the society's officers and directors. It called missionaries "youths . . . of a low origin and of indolent habits . . . enemies of labour and the pursuit of an honest calling." It confidently predicted that "in due season" all the missionizers would "be scattered abroad . . . and driven as chaff before the wind."<sup>6</sup>

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Brotherhood Unions and Alliances of the Past and Present," *Minutes of the First Hebrew Christian Conference of the United States—July 28–30, 1903* (New York, 1903), pp. 16–31; Jacob R. Marcus, *The Colonial American Jew* (Detroit, 1970), pp. 935–47; Lee M. Friedman, "The American Society for Meliorating the Condition of the Jews and Joseph S. C. F. Frey," *Early American Jews* (Cambridge, Mass., 1934), pp. 96–112; Lorman Ratner, "Conversion of the Jews and Pre-Civil War Reform," *American Quarterly* 13 (1961): 43–54; and S. Joshua Kohn, "Mordecai Manuel Noah's Ararat Colony and the Missionaries," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 55 (1965): 163–98 detail the American situation. Harold J. Abrahams, "The Priestly-Levi Debate," *Transactions of the Unitarian Historical Society in London* 12 (1961): 1–19; and Harvey W. Meirovich, "Ashkenazic Reactions to the Conversionists, 1800–1850" (forthcoming) show parallel developments in England. I am grateful to Rabbi Meirovich for providing me with a copy of this article.

5. *Israel Vindicated*, pp. 4–5.

6. *Ibid.*, pp. vi, v, 91, 95.

The idea that missions violated the constitution and were thus unconstitutional marked a new departure in Jewish anti-Christian polemics. Never before had Jews argued (or been able to argue) that national law—the first amendment's freedom of religion clause—supported their claims. But this was the only new argument in *Israel Vindicated*. Otherwise, "An Israelite followed Moses Mendelssohn and Richard Price (he cited neither) in demanding pluralism rather than mere tolerance: "If any man tells me that he will *tolerate* my opinions, this implies that he claims the power of *restraining* them. Hence the origin of *persecution*, which is only the offspring or child of *toleration*." He called for all to have the right to think, and insisted that men "never can be made to think alike."<sup>7</sup>

"An Israelite" realized that even tolerance had not been extended to Jews by all the states. He lamented that constitutional principles "which all the states had recognized" were "so easily invaded by *particular* states." He pointed out that Maryland and Massachusetts still demanded religious tests from all those who desired to hold public office. Implicitly, he suggested that missions were not the only stain on America's fabric of freedom. Yet, instead of calling on non-Jews to rectify matters, he called on his fellow Jews to "rouse from the lethargy into which our nation has been so long plunged." He realized that Jews, rather than Christians, were the most likely readers of anti-Christian polemics. Exploiting the opportunity, he encouraged his "brethren" to vindicate themselves, to defend their just rights, and to expose the "vile machinations" of their "enemies."<sup>8</sup>

Attacks on the ASMCJ and its missionaries took up the opening and closing chapters of *Israel Vindicated*. The remaining chapters, some seventy-five percent of the book, contained a fiery anti-Christian polemic. Fully exploiting his "right to think," the author of *Israel Vindicated* heaped scorn on Christian intolerance. He then proceeded to reexamine "Nazarene" accounts of Jesus and the apostles. Using extrabiblical sources and a critical methodology, he denied that Jesus was the messiah and ridiculed the story

7. Ibid., pp. 100–1. For other examples of the constitutional argument, see "Of the House of Israel's" letter in *Evening Post* (March 15, 1829); *Occident* 3 (1845): 42; 5 (1847): 499; and Isaac Leiser, *The Claims of the Jews to an Equality of Rights* (Philadelphia, 1841), pp. 4, 11, 14. On toleration, see Alexander Altmann, "The Philosophical Roots of Moses Mendelssohn's Plea for Emancipation," *Jewish Social Studies* 36 (1974): 200–2; and more generally *Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. "Toleration."

8. *Israel Vindicated*, pp. 99, 110; cf. Stanley F. Chyet, "The Political Rights of the Jews in the United States: 1776–1840," *American Jewish Archives* 10 (1958): 14–75; and Edward Eitches, "Maryland's Jew Bill," *American Jewish Historical Quarterly* 60 (1971): 258–79.

of the resurrection. He even wondered aloud whether "the person called Jesus of Nazareth really existed." This last question led "An Israelite" into a long analysis of the Gospels, one which predictably ended with the verdict "that the gospels and other books of the Nazarenes have been forged and fabricated," besides containing "principles subversive of the true character of the Deity, and of the happiness of man."<sup>9</sup>

The remaining chapters of *Israel Vindicated* consist of a lengthy, discursive response to a conversionist lecture on the Jews delivered by the ASMCJ's president, Elias Boudinot. "An Israelite" impatiently rebutted Boudinot's proof texts and attacked the allegorical method of interpretation which the eighty year old former statesman allegedly adopted. He belittled Boudinot's claims regarding Christianity's higher level of morality, and tried to refute the ASMCJ leader's christological interpretation of history. Finally, he advised missionaries to put their own house in order. He pointed up the many divisive conflicts within Christendom, and the sorry record of persecutions which the church had still to overcome. He concluded that "the efforts of the Nazarenes to spread their faith . . . must fail."<sup>10</sup>

Although *Israel Vindicated* was written by "An Israelite," and claimed to speak for the Jewish people, it was not based on traditional Jewish sources. Later American Jewish polemics heavily relied on the works of Isaac Orobio de Castro and Isaac Troki. "An Israelite," however, hardly knew of these works; indeed, he lamented "that there were so few works extant of Jewish writers in which they assigned their reasons for rejecting the Messiah of the Christians."<sup>11</sup> *Israel Vindicated* was rather based on the works of deists and freethinkers. Through its pages marched the words of John Toland, Anthony Collins, and Paul Henri Thiry baron d'Holbach.

The author of *Israel Vindicated* recognized that some of his sources were inappropriate for a Jewish polemic. In one case he apologized for his copious quotations from *Ecce Homo; or a Critical Inquiry into the History*

9. *Israel Vindicated*, pp. 29, 38, 41.

10. *Israel Vindicated*, p. 110.

11. *Israel Vindicated*, p. 2. On p. 20, "Rabbi Orobio" is quoted, but only second hand. Later works, especially Benjamin Dias Fernandes, *A Series of Letters on the Evidences of Christianity* (Philadelphia, 1859) and Selig Newman, *The Challenge Accepted; A Dialogue Between A Jew and A Christian: The Former Answering a Challenge Thrown Out by the Latter Respecting the Accomplishment of the Prophecies of the Advent of Jesus* (New York, 1850), were more heavily based on traditional Jewish polemics. For a convenient survey of disputation literature with an extensive bibliography, see Frank E. Talmage, *Disputation and Dialogue: Readings in the Jewish-Christian Encounter* (New York, 1975).

of *Jesus Christ*, an adaptation of Holbach's anti-religious tract which will be further discussed below: "Although *Ecce Homo*, dear Isaacs, is levelled as much against our nation, and our law as against the Nazarenes, and, on that account cannot be respected by a descendant of Abraham; yet, as it contains many pertinent remarks, which, independent of all religious distinctions, cannot but be acceptable to every inquirer after truth, I have hitherto made extracts from it when I considered them illustrative of the point under discussion; a practice to which I shall adhere until I have closed this correspondence."<sup>12</sup>

"An Israelite" was not, however, always so cautious. On one occasion, he described how the Pharisees "adopted a thousand ridiculous traditions, and a mode of explaining the sacred text which subverted the literal meaning, and substituted in its place a mystical or allegorical sense." He strongly advocated the Sadduceean mode of interpretation, "the literal meaning of the words." He paid no heed to the antitalmudic implications of his remarks. For him, as for the early American Jewish community in general, the Talmud was a closed book.<sup>13</sup> Such knowledge of Judaism as "An Israelite" exhibited came from English language sources, many of them not written by Jews at all. "An Israelite" invoked the works of deists and free-thinkers partly because there were no other suitable works available.

## II

Although advertisements for *Israel Vindicated* appeared in New York newspapers as early as December, the work attracted little notice until "Moralist" attacked it in the New York *Commercial Advertiser* of February 28, 1821. "There is nothing to excite alarm . . . in the publication of infidel or Jewish opinions, if there be a reasonable presumption that the object is to discover truth," "Moralist" averred. The trouble, he thought, was that "An

12. *Israel Vindicated*, p. 52. See below, sec. III.

13. *Israel Vindicated*, p. 12. For Mordecai Noah's view of the Talmud as an excrescence filled with "many crudities," see *New York Enquirer for the Country* (June 15, 1827). In the *Occident* 3 (1845): 34, Noah wrote: "Shut the Talmud and open the Bible." Isaac Harby's views on "rabbinic interpretations" are reprinted in Joseph L. Blau and Salo W. Baron, eds., *The Jews of the United States 1790-1840: A Documentary History* (New York, 1963), p. 564. The reigning Christian view is expressed in the influential *North American Review* 60 (1845): 354, 357, 359, 364. Isaac Mayer Wise describes the ignorance of Jewish sources which he found among American Jews in the 1840s in his *Reminiscences* (Cincinnati, 1901), pp. 23-24.

Israelite" did not "thoroughly understand the christian religion." From ignorance or malice he therefore "shamefully insulted" the Christian community as a whole. "Moralist" hoped that the anonymous author would be "distinctly pointed out to public scorn and contempt."<sup>14</sup>

Abraham Collins, the publisher of *Israel Vindicated*, entered the fray to defend his author. Writing in the *New York Post* (the *Commercial Advertiser* refused him space), Collins insisted that he had acted to protect himself and Israel "from the mischief arising from false and malicious reports." Instead of "scorn and contempt," he asked for "justice" and "fairness." He urged Christians to read both sides of the question, and challenged his opponents to prove him wrong: "If I am wrong, prove me to be so, calmly, coolly and completely, and not by scourging."<sup>15</sup>

"Moralist" and Collins agreed on the basic right of an American to publish works offensive to the majority of citizens. Though they disagreed over what constituted an appropriate response to such material, they both implied that the proper governmental response was silence. Neither man even considered the possibility that "blasphemous" works should be censored. In the eyes of many Americans, however, Christianity (Protestantism), morality and public order were inextricably intertwined. One of these three great pillars could not be attacked without mortally endangering the other two. "Moral Jews" could be recognized without threatening this closed system. Americans merely dubbed them "good Christians," and held them up as examples for their brethren to imitate. Rather than invalidating the Christian-moral-order link, Jewish "good Christians" thus actually reinforced it. An attack on Christianity, on the other hand, did threaten morality and well-being. In the view of many Americans, the perpetrator of such an attack deserved to be punished.<sup>16</sup>

"Merited punishment" was precisely what the *Commercial Advertiser*

14. *National Advocate* (December 30, 1820); *Commercial Advertiser* (February 28, 1821), reprinted in *New York Spectator* (March 2, 1821).

15. *New York Evening Post* (March 10, 1821); *Columbian* (March 8, 1821).

16. Robert Handy, *A Christian America: Protestant Hopes and Historical Realities* (New York, 1974), pp. 30-42; John W. Pratt, *Religion, Politics and Diversity: The Church-State Theme in New York History* (Ithaca, 1967), pp. 121-157. Gotthold Ephraim Lessing's famous line, "What makes me for you a Christian, makes yourself for me a Jew," *Nathan the Wise*, trans. Bayard Q. Morgan [New York, 1955], act iv, scene 7, thus had radical implications. This is not surprising considering Lessing's deistic views. More commonly, Jews were pleased to be known as "good Christians." Mordecai Noah once actually used this term about himself (Mordecai Noah to William Seward [February 4, 1841], Historical Society of Pennsylvania).

demanded for Abraham Collins. Though it admitted that he was not the author of *Israel Vindicated*, it thought that as publisher of "one of the most infamous publications that ever disgraced a moral and religious nation," he ought to take the blame. New York jurists still debated whether blasphemy was or was not punishable under common law. No one had actually been convicted of the crime since 1811. But if legal grounds did not suffice to convict Abraham Collins—"if the blasphemer and infidel are allowed to scatter their poison through the country"—then the *Commercial Advertiser* believed that the laws should be amended.<sup>17</sup>

The *Commercial Advertiser* carefully distinguished Abraham Collins and "An Israelite" from all other Jews. First, it questioned whether "An Israelite" was an Israelite at all. As we shall see, its doubts were well founded. Then it took pains to point out that "the most intelligent and respectable Jews" of its acquaintance had "absolutely disclaimed" *Israel Vindicated*. Instead, they acknowledged "the excellence" of the Christian "system of morals" and had only praise for Jesus' "distinguished talents and eloquence." In short, the *Commercial Advertiser* identified "intelligent and respectable Jews" as those who recognized the virtues of Christianity. On the other hand, the Jew who published an anti-Christian tract was a blasphemer who merited imprisonment.

Abraham Collins escaped indictment. The debate over *Israel Vindicated* soon gave way to more important issues. But the volume surfaced again in November 1822. This time, instead of being a Jewish weapon against Christian missions, it served as a Christian weapon against the specter of rising Jewish power.

For the first time in the history of New York, a Jew, Mordecai M. Noah, was running for the post of sheriff. His opponent was a Christian, a director of the ASMCJ. Noah's religion became a major issue in the campaign.<sup>18</sup> On election day, the *Evening Post* headlined its column with the words "*Israel Vindicated*." It then embarked on a description—complete with long quotations—of "An Israelite's" work: "the most daring, impious and indecent attack upon the christian religion that has ever yet appeared." Of course, the

17. *Commercial Advertiser* (March 13, 1821) reprinted in *New York Spectator* (March 16, 1821); Pratt, *Religion, Politics and Diversity*, pp. 137–38.

18. Jonathan D. Sarna, "Mordecai M. Noah: Jacksonian Politician and American Jewish Communal Leader—A Biographical Study" (Ph.D. diss., Yale University, 1979), pp. 91–97. Earlier studies of Noah include, Isaac Goldberg, *Major Noah* (Philadelphia, 1938) and Robert Gordis, "Mordecai Manuel Noah: A Centenary Evaluation," *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 41 (1951): 1–25.

*Post* in no way connected Noah to the volume's "profane and impious doctrines." But it did warn Jews in general not to "abuse" the "privileges" that New York accorded them: "Let them refrain from open and outrageous attacks upon the religious faith of this community; let them not seek to rob the wretched of their last and only comfort, in the hour of sickness, indigence, and every affliction which flesh is heir to; let them not ruthlessly tear away that prop which alone supports them when every other hope fails; deprive them not of that consolation which the doctrines that have been taught from their infancy afford, which they have never once thought of doubting, and which are calculated to smooth their farewell pillow. This is a wanton species of cruelty, which no society, who duly regards the welfare of its members, can ever tolerate." The *Post* let its readers draw their own conclusions.<sup>19</sup>

Mordecai Noah correctly pointed out that the *Post* attack was aimed at "pushing on religious prejudices."<sup>20</sup> Whether or not these prejudices actually caused his subsequent election defeat cannot be known. But the implications of the *Post* attack went far beyond the election. Jews learned that as a minority group they faced dangers in attacking the majority that the majority did not face in attacking them. Effective Jewish polemics could be wrenched out of context and luridly displayed. By uniting the Jewish community and strengthening it internally, Jews jeopardized their relations with Christian neighbors. Polemical "vindications" frustrated Christian hopes for rapid Jewish conversion. They emphasized Jews' cohesiveness and alien status. Many early Americans, like many proemancipation Europeans, wanted Jews to assimilate completely. They viewed aliens as potential subversives—and threatened to treat them accordingly.

American Jews continued to grapple with the missionary problem for many years. Some elements of the community advocated silence. They dealt with Christians on a daily basis and feared to offend them. Defenders of the faith, on the other hand, demanded vigorous responses: "not to defend Judaism would be considered a tacit acknowledgement that it was indefensible, or at least that we thought so."<sup>21</sup> For a time, Isaac Leeser, minister of Philadelphia's Mikve Israel synagogue and later editor of the *Occident*, sought a middle ground. Heavily influenced by Moses Mendelssohn's disinclination to enter into religious controversy," he called for "equality of

19. *Evening Post* (November 5, 1822).

20. *National Advocate* (November 6, 1822).

21. *The Jew* (ed. Solomon Jackson, 1823–25), p. vii.

rights," and endeavored to explain Judaism in order to disabuse Christians "of any unfounded suspicions they might be induced to adopt concerning us." Leeser knew about *Israel Vindicated*, and once briefly quoted it in a footnote. But he generally lamented the strong language of early polemicists and called for "gentler tones." Much to his disappointment, his calls for tolerance did not scare missionaries away.<sup>22</sup>

Isaac Mayer Wise, the father of American Reform Judaism and editor of the *American Israelite*, had no patience with Leeser's gentle strategy. Because of upbringing and temperament, his attitude toward Christianity was far more militant. He described his antimissionary stance as that of "a malicious, biting pugnacious, challenging and mocking monster of the pen." Not surprisingly, he took considerable interest in *Israel Vindicated*. In late 1863, Wise reprinted sections from *Israel Vindicated* in the *Israelite*. He later defended the work against the strenuous objections of Cincinnati's *Western Christian Advocate*. As far as Wise was concerned, "An Israelite's" letters were "remarkable epistles." He only lamented that so little was known concerning their authorship.<sup>23</sup>

### III

Today, little more has been revealed about the authorship of *Israel Vindicated*. In the absence of other information, most of those who have noticed the book at all have concluded, as Isaac Mayer Wise concluded, that "Abraham Collins is named as publisher and proprietor of the copyright and it appears that Abraham Collins was also the author."<sup>24</sup> Collins was a

22. Mendelssohn, "Letter to Lavater," in Alfred Jospe, *Jerusalem and Other Jewish Writings* (New York, 1969), p. 114; Leeser, *Claims of the Jews*, p. 4; idem, "Preface" to Dias Fernandes, *Letters on the Evidences of Christianity*, p. iii. Leeser mentioned *Israel Vindicated* in his *Jews and the Mosaic Law* (Philadelphia, 1834), p. 241; cf. below n. 29. More generally, see Maxine Seller, "Isaac Leeser: A Jewish Christian Dialogue in Ante-Bellum Philadelphia," *Pennsylvania History* 35 (1968): 231-42.

23. Wise, *Reminiscences*, p. 272; *American Israelite* 3 (1857): 370; 10 (1863): 77, 284, 300, 332; 17 (May 12, 1871), p. 8; James G. Heller, *Isaac M. Wise. His Life Work and Thought* (New York, 1965), pp. 142-44, 170, 652-57; Albert H. Friedlander, ed., "The World of My Books, by Isaac Mayer Wise," in Jacob R. Marcus, *Critical Studies in American Jewish History* (Cincinnati, 1971), 1: 173-75.

24. *American Israelite* 17 (May 12, 1871), p. 8. See also Hyman Grinstein, *The Rise of the Jewish Community in New York 1654-1860* (Philadelphia, 1945), pp. 385, 585; Blau and Baron, *Documentary History*, p. 758.

New York Jewish printer who played an active role in the Hebrew Benevolent Society. As we have seen, he defended *Israel Vindicated* when it was attacked by the *New York Commercial Advertiser*. But had Collins written the bulk of this work, he would surely have called himself author. In fact, when registering the book he called himself merely "proprietor." Furthermore, Collins independently produced a different anti-Christian polemic, *The Voice of Israel, Being a Review of Two Sermons Preached in the City of New York, by the Rev. Mr. Spring, and the Rev. P. N. Strong. Also An Examination of the Principles and Effects of the Christian Religion* (1823). The *Voice of Israel* diverges so markedly from *Israel Vindicated* that the two books could not have been written by the same author.<sup>25</sup> Collins may have supplied information to "An Israelite." Indeed, the real author admitted that he "lately acquired the knowledge of some facts" which altered his earlier views.<sup>26</sup> But if Collins helped "An Israelite," he did not sympathize with his freethought doctrines. In his own tract, he paid substantially less attention to works such as *Ecce Homo*.

The Library of Congress, as well as a variety of other authorities, attributes *Israel Vindicated* to George Houston. This attribution is almost certainly based on the New York Public Library's copy of the work. A manuscript note on the title page of that volume reads: "No Israelite, but George Houston."<sup>27</sup> Unfortunately, this ascription creates more problems than it solves. Who was George Houston? Why would he have written *Israel Vindicated*? Why, as a non-Jew, would he have called himself "An Israelite"? These questions have never been answered.

George Houston (? -1840?) was a minor American journalist, and one of America's leading, but unrecognized, freethinkers. Born in Britain, he associated himself with London deists, helped to edit William Cobbett's *Political Register*, and published a modified translation of Holbach's *Histoire critique de Jésus-Christ*. This appeared in Edinburgh in 1799 under the title

25. Meager information on Collins may be found in Grinstein, *New York*, pp. 385, 552 and Blau and Baron, *Documentary History*, p. 758. Collins's *Voice of Israel* is a piece of unrecorded Judaica Americana found in Yale University's Sterling Library. Abraham Collins also wrote the introduction to the American edition of John Oxlee, *Three Letters Humbly Submitted to the Consideration of his Grace the Most Reverend the Lord Archbishop of Canterbury . . .* (Philadelphia, 1843). It is not certain whether this Collins is identical with the Collins of *Israel Vindicated*.

26. *Israel Vindicated*, p. 97.

27. *Catalogue of the Astor Library* (Cambridge, Mass., 1887), p. 1814; Samuel Halkett and John Laing, *Dictionary of Anonymous and Pseudonymous English Literature* (New York, 1971 [1926-34]), 3: 178.

*Ecce homo! or, A critical inquiry into the history of Jesus Christ; being a rational analysis of the Gospels.* In 1813, Houston republished his translation in London, an action which led to his conviction on charges of blasphemy. After paying a 200 pound fine and serving time in Newgate prison, he left England for the United States, charges of scandal swirling around him. From 1817, when he arrived in America, until his death, Houston engaged in journalism, freelance writing and freethought. When Mordecai Noah was appointed sheriff in 1821, Houston became assistant editor of the *National Advocate*, Noah's newspaper. He lost the job, presumably after Noah lost the shrievalty election, and later assisted on various other newspapers, most notably the *New York Herald*. On his own, he published the highly praised weekly, the *Minerva* (1822-25); several volumes entitled *National Tales* (1825); and the *Correspondent* (1827-29), an important freethought newspaper. He also participated in several highly publicized debates on the merits of Christianity. Houston had a son, George, who became a journalist. His deaf-mute daughter, Janet, attended the Philadelphia Asylum for the Deaf and Dumb—an innovative school directed by David G. Seixas, the son of Shearith Israel's famous minister, Gershom Seixas. According to the *Beacon* of January 25, 1840, Houston "died in North Carolina where he had journeyed to edit a paper for his son."<sup>28</sup>

George Houston clearly had various ties with the Jewish community. But this hardly demonstrates that he authored *Israel Vindicated*. More substantial evidence on this point is provided by *Ecce Homo*. No American edition of this work appeared in print until 1827. Houston's banned 1813 English edition may have circulated in New York, but this is not likely. Yet, the author of *Israel Vindicated* had a copy in front of him when he wrote.

28. The only secondary account of Houston that I know of is the brief account in Albert Post, *Popular Freethought in America 1825-50* (New York, 1943), pp. 44-48, 78, 90, 92, 122, 181. I have pieced together a more complete sketch based on the following: *London Times* (November 15, 1814); *New York Evening Post* (July 10, 14, 1817; January 30, 1821); *Columbian* (January 31, February 3, 1821); *National Advocate* (April 25, 1822; January 15, 1823); S. B. H. Judah, *Gotham and the Gothamites* (New York, 1823), pp. x, xii, 75-76; *Evening Post* (February 3, 1823; October 3, 1823; November 11, 1823; May 28, 1824); George Houston to Edward Holden (October 15, 1824), Miscellaneous Manuscripts, New York Historical Society; *New York National Advocate* (November 28, 1825); *New York Herald* (November 19, 1835; January 14, 1836; October 10, 1836); *Evening Star* (November 13, 14, 1837); *New York Herald* (November 14, 1837); *New York Weekly Herald* (June 13, 1840), p. 212; John Neal, *American Writers: A Series of Papers Contributed to Blackwoods Magazine*, ed. by F. L. Pattee (Durham, 1937), p. 118; Oliver Carlson, *James Gordon Bennett: The Man Who Made News* (New York, 1942), pp. 121-24; and Morris U. Schappes, ed., *A Documentary History of the Jews in the United States 1654-1875* (New York, 1971), pp. 605, 614.

The only copy known to have existed belonged to George Houston himself.<sup>29</sup>

A further link between Houston and *Israel Vindicated* may be found in Houston's *Correspondent*. In an article on "Judaism versus Christianity," one "Levi" quotes entire sections both from *Israel Vindicated* and from *Ecce Homo* without any attribution.<sup>30</sup> Again, this is circumstantial evidence and proves nothing save plagiarism, but it is highly suggestive nonetheless.

Contemporary comments also hint at links between Houston and *Israel Vindicated*. The *Commercial Advertiser*, in describing the work, wrote: "It purports to have been written by 'An Israelite'; but we have strong reasons to believe—nay we are warranted in asserting—that *it was not written by an Israelite*." Mordecai Noah declared absolutely that "the author is a Christian; and though his religious feelings may be a little warped, he is a man of . . . honour and morality." The best proof of all, however, comes from the pen of Isaac Leeser. In an overlooked article in London's *Voice of Jacob*, Leeser wrote: "The Society for the Conversion of Jews . . . flourished awhile before my arrival in this country. About that time it was attacked . . . by a person named Houston, and a Jew, Abraham Collins."<sup>31</sup>

#### IV

It seems unlikely that philosemitic fervor motivated George Houston to take up the cudgels on behalf of the Jewish people. Both his *Correspondent* and his *Ecce Homo* contained anti-Jewish material. Besides, Houston was far too poor to compose books for purely altruistic reasons. And if he had been altruistic, he would have signed his name and kept his original anti-Christian subtitle.

In all probability, leading Jews paid Houston to write *Israel Vindicated*. They realized that he was highly qualified to counter missionary arguments. They also realized that if Houston's courageous "vindication" backfired,

29. *Israel Vindicated*, pp. 19, 23, 30, 33, 35, 36, 52, 53, 55, 80 contain the more important quotations from *Ecce Homo*.

30. *Correspondent* 4 (1828): 375–79; cf. *Israel Vindicated*, pp. 33–34, 81. A different "Levi" letter from *Correspondent* 3 (1827): 18, 19 is reprinted in Blau and Baron, *Documentary History*, pp. 771–73.

31. *Commercial Advertiser* (March 13, 1821) reprinted in *New York Spectator* (March 16, 1821); *National Advocate* (November 6, 1822); *Voice of Jacob* (May 27, 1842), p. 143.

they could always claim with perfect honesty that *Israel Vindicated* was written by a Christian. It is nevertheless interesting that Jews were prepared to make common cause with a freethinker—a man with as much contempt for Jewish beliefs as for Christian ones.<sup>32</sup> Probably, American Jews were motivated by the same impulse that motivated Jews and other minority groups in previous eras: self-interest. In the Middle Ages, persecuted Jews occasionally allied themselves with a variety of Christian heretics—notwithstanding their often fanatical ideologies. Eighteenth century Jews made similar unofficial alliances with deists, although, in many cases, deists too harbored fierce anti-Jewish hatreds.<sup>33</sup> The fact that American Jews momentarily united with a freethinker should thus not occasion much surprise. Adversity makes strange bedfellows.

Even if in their battle against missionaries, American Jews sought and accepted help from various persecuted and stigmatized groups, they generally preferred to identify with the prestigious and powerful Protestant establishment. They tried to conform; they yearned for acceptance; they hesitated to jeopardize their social positions. Yet, they refused to be coerced, and generally speaking, they continued to remain Jews. When threatened, most reacted strongly and with the best ammunition available—regardless of whether or not this deprived them of Christian esteem. In 1820, the best ammunition available was *Israel Vindicated*. Later, the community had far more effective weapons at its disposal.

32. At least one Jew, C. C. C. Cohen, prominently identified himself as a freethinker. See Schappes, *Documentary History*, pp. 187–94.

33. David Berger, "Christian Heresy and Jewish Polemic in the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries," *Harvard Theological Review* 68 (1975): 287–303; Daniel J. Lasker, *Jewish Philosophical Polemics Against Christianity in the Middle Ages* (New York, 1978), pp. 164–65; Isaac Barzilay, "The Treatment of the Jewish Religion in the Literature of the Berlin Haskalah," *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* 24 (1955): 39–68, esp. 49–50; Moshe Pelli, "The Impact of Deism on the Hebrew Literature of the Enlightenment in Germany," *Journal of Jewish Studies* 24 (1973): 127–46, also found in *18th Century Studies* 6 (1972): 25–59; and Shmuel Ettinger, "Jews and Judaism in the Eyes of British Deists in the Eighteenth Century," *Zion* 29 (1964): 182–207.