

WHEN Jews WERE Bible Experts

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There was a time, in the 19th century, when Jews in this country were sought out for their supposedly special, almost mystical, knowledge of the Bible, a knowledge that non-Jews who did not have the same direct lineal relationship to the People of the Book and the language they used could not claim. Jews enjoyed a special status: They were "Bible experts."

As early as the 12th century in Europe, Christian biblical scholars made a special point of consulting Jews. In the ensuing centuries a select group of learned Christians became what are known as Christian Hebraists: They studied Hebrew, read the biblical text in the original, gained some acquaintance with Jewish interpretive tradition, and were recognized in their day as Hebraic scholars. Many of them at one time or another studied with Jews, or at least with former Jews. The *Encyclopedia Judaica* lists more than 700 of these Christian Hebraists; they played a central role in passing on the idea that Jews jealously guarded the Hebrew scriptures and were custodians of authentic traditions concerning the meaning of biblical texts.

Pious Protestants brought traditions of Christian Hebraism with them to the New World. The Pilgrims who landed at Plymouth and the Puritans who came to Boston both carried Hebrew books—Bibles and grammars. Plymouth's second governor, William Bradford, continued to practice his Hebrew skills into old age.

Ezra Stiles, an 18th-century New England minister who became President of Yale, best exemplified this Christian Hebraist tradition. While living in Newport, Rhode Island, he befriended and studied with a visiting emissary from Hebron named Hahan (the Sephardic equivalent of rabbi) Haim Carigal, whose imposing picture (with a long black

beard) Stiles later hung at Yale. Stiles treated Carigal as if he were a repository of ancient wisdom concerning the Bible and Jewish tradition.

During the 19th century this same pattern of Protestant respect for Jewish learning repeated itself on a larger scale, consistent with the growing Jewish presence in America. (Between 1800 and 1860 the American Jewish population ballooned from about 2,000 to about 150,000.)

In the early 19th century, a scholarly immigrant named Jonathan (Jonas) Horwitz, who had the foresight to bring Hebrew type with him in his luggage, wanted to publish a Hebrew Bible here, a much needed task considering that in 1812, by one estimate, fewer than a dozen Hebrew Bibles were available for purchase in the whole United States. Twelve Christian clergymen quickly endorsed Horwitz's plan. Horwitz prepared a prospectus, but threats of competition from the firm of Whiting and Watson in New York and others apparently gave him second thoughts. So he turned his attention instead to medicine and transferred his rights to Thomas Dobson, who, in 1814, published the Dobson Bible, the first independently produced edition of the Hebrew Bible in the United States.

An even more ambitious project—an interlinear Hebrew-English Bible—was proposed by another American Jew, Solomon Jackson. The plan was soon endorsed by the Episcopal Bishop of New York, John Henry Hobart, as well as by other leading Protestant clergymen. One of the recommendations specifically cited the fact that the "author and editor belong to the literal family of Abraham"—implying that Jackson, as a Jew, had a certain biological advantage in undertaking this project. Biology in this case was not destiny, however: The volume never appeared.

Americans also looked to Jews to use their expertise to defend the Bible

against "infidels." The English lay leader David Levi, for example, produced a widely read response to Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason*. Thomas Jefferson wrote of Levi: "[He] avails himself all his advantage over his adversaries by his superior knowledge of the Hebrew, speaking in the very language of divine communication, while they can only fumble on with conflicting and disputed translations."

In 1829 a story in the *Richmond Constitutional Whig* described Jews this way:

When we see one of these people, and remember that we have been told by good authority, that he is an exact copy of the Jew who worshipped in the Second Temple two thousand years ago—that his physiognomy and religious opinions—that the usages and customs of his tribe are still the same, we feel that profound respect which antiquity inspires.

The more common view, taught to generations of schoolchildren by one of McGuffey's readers, described the Jews as "the keepers of the Old Testament."

Jews also played a special role as "consultants" in the American temperance movement. During the 1830s, per capita consumption of liquor (which had reached extraordinarily high levels in the early 19th century) declined markedly in America as more and more citizens voluntarily signed temperance pledges. Reform did not come fast enough for anti-liquor crusaders, however, and by 1840 many came to advocate "total temperance" (teetotalism) and a "dry America." Temperance leaders, who formerly had confined themselves to attacking the baleful effects of "spiritous liquors," lashed out against beer and wine as well. They also entered the political arena by seeking to impose legal restrictions on liquor. State prohibition laws multiplied in the 1850s.

Religion played a significant role in the temperance movement. Religious

language permeated its tracts; ministers and prominent church laymen dominated its leadership; and several denominations, notably the Methodists, openly aligned themselves with its stated aims.

As temperance advocates broadened their attack to include wine, this posed a problem. Wine, after all, was praised in the Bible. It was featured prominently in such New Testament episodes as the marriage



at Cana, where Jesus turned water into wine for the wedding guests (John 2:1-11), and the Last Supper, where Jesus tells the apostles to drink wine "for this is my blood of the covenant," (Matthew 26:27-29). Wine was also used by most churchmen in communion services. Attacking it was not the same as attacking the use of distilled liquor. Even writers in the religious press charged that the "Total Abstinence doctrine" stood "opposed to the teachings of the Saviour."

To counter this charge, supporters of abstinence sought to prove that wine, when written about approvingly in the Bible, meant unfermented wine, or grape juice. The dubious credibility of this scholarly effort aside, the reformers obvi-

ously felt they required the cloak of biblical sanction to give an aura of divine legitimacy to their campaigns. To condemn what the Bible permitted (or vice versa) would have been unthinkable, for it would be tantamount to saying that the Bible was a less than perfect guide to human actions. This stimulated new research into the "biblical view" of wine and temperance.

It should come as no surprise that American Jews found themselves drawn into these debates—owing to their reputed expertise in scriptural matters. Temperance advocates turned first to an "expert" named Mordecai M. Noah, the best known American Jew of his day—journalist, politician, diplomat, playwright—best remembered for his abortive plan to found a Jewish colony named Ararat on Grand Island, New York, in 1825. He was asked a deceptively simple question: What kind of wine did Jews use at the "Feast of Passover"? Passover was of course the "feast" that Jesus was thought to have been celebrating during the Last Supper, so the answer—assuming, as so many Evangelical Christians did, that contemporary Jewish practices reflected ancient ones—could simultaneously shed light on two issues: first, the meaning of wine in the Pentateuch; and second, the kind of wine used at the Passover seder celebrated by Jesus with his disciples.

Noah's answer, as published by temperance supporters, is surprising and at first perplexing:

Unfermented liquor, or wine free from alcoholic substances was only used, in those times, as it is used at the present day: at the Passover; the wine over which the blessing is said; the wine, probably, used at the Last Supper; and the wine that should be used at the communion table.

Supporters of "total temperance" were delighted by this news and they

continued on page 80

Bible Experts

continued from page 55

gave it wide publicity. A Jewish expert seemed to validate their claim that wine in the Bible meant unfermented wine.

The reason Noah believed that unfermented wine was used in ancient times at Passover was probably that American Jews of his day used unfermented raisin wine on Passover, a custom that lasted until kosher Passover wine became available in this country in the 1870s. And in fact his original remarks, as I learned by going through his newspapers, related only to Passover. At the beginning of his analysis he had observed, quite correctly, that throughout the Bible "patriarchs, legislators, kings, priests, and generals all partook of [wine]....It is the abuse of wine, not its use that is complained of." But temperance supporters simply ignored this.

Moreover, Noah's "testimony" did not go unchallenged. Temperance moderates, seeking to refute his remarks (as published), followed the strategy of their opponents and likewise sought evidence from Jewish "experts." An unnamed New York rabbi (or reader), probably Samuel Isaacs, revealed that English Jews *did* use fermented wine on Passover, not raisin wine.

Another temperance moderate, an American Christian missionary in the Middle East named Daniel Ladd, reported that he had "made diligent inquiries of Jews and others in this country...whether they know of any such practice, and the result is that no one ever heard of it, except that very poor Jews in Europe, who on account of their poverty cannot obtain wine, do sometimes make such a decoction."

Rabbis into the 20th century continued to be asked their views on the question of whether wine in the Bible was fermented or not. A whole range of Jewish answers exist, but my favorite comes from a late 19th-century Reform rabbi named Gustav Gottheil of Temple Emanu-El in New York: "The rabbi of today is asked time and again to declare the law of God in this particular matter....The Pharisee of old must decide for the Christian of today, whether he may drink fermented wine or not."

Ultimately, of course, neither biblical

precedent nor Jewish practice made any difference. The 18th amendment banning the manufacture, sale or transportation of intoxicating liquors was adopted in 1919. Thanks in part to Jews, however, the legislation did carry an exemption permitting *sacramental* use of alcohol.

Today, it would be hard to imagine most Jews posing as "Bible experts." Living among gentiles and often ignorant of their own traditions, Jews have also largely lost their mystique as the People of the Book—or worse, if the mystique remains, they too often fail to live up to the billing.

Meanwhile, those who do study the Bible realize that it rarely speaks in a single voice—in fact, according to tradition, it speaks in 70 voices at once. As refracted through generations of rabbinic interpreters, the Hebrew Bible does convey a great deal of wisdom, often pertinent to contemporary issues. But we cannot rely, as too many in the temperance debate did, on one voice alone. We need to listen to all 70. ♣