Loving Is Believing: Solomon Schechter and the Bible

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Abstract
This paper grew out of the author’s presentation, “On the Pedagogy of Bible in the Thought of Solomon Schechter”, which be presented at the 2005 conference on Teaching Bible sponsored by the Mandel Center. Here, the author describes and analyzes Schechter’s attitudes and writings regarding the Bible, shedding light on his journey from the yeshiva to the academy. It highlights Schechter’s attempt to find a “third way” between traditionalists’ rejection of biblical criticism and the scientific study of the Bible that was often dominated by anti-Semitic practitioners. The paper surfaces and explores Schechter’s approach to questions that are simultaneously philosophically important and practically relevant for teachers of Bible in liberal Jewish educational settings.

“Die Bibel ist dem neuren Juden abhanden gekommen — sie müssen sie wieder haben”

A little more than a year after Solomon Schechter’s passing in New York in November 1915, his widow Mathilde wrote James Frazer, the noted anthropologist, who had been Schechter’s close friend and colleague at the University of Cambridge. The two men frequently used to walk together, and Frazer often asked Schechter for information about the origins and history of Jewish customs, in the course of their discussions about Jewish texts and religion generally. Mathilde mentioned several projects Schechter had been working on at the time of his death, including the planning of two essays: one assessing a mystic, the other treating a skeptic. How fitting, for in Mathilde’s words “it is characteristic how he loved them both.”

Schechter lived most of his life navigating between those two poles, that of the pietist who loved God and the Jewish tradition, and the modern analytical thinker, skeptic and scholar. He embodied each tendency, temperamentally and intellectually. Much of his life revolved around the relationship of

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2Mathilde Schechter to James Fraser, January 1917, James Fraser Papers, Trinity College Library Add. Ms b. 37.
those two aspects. His life’s great project took on the problem each posed for the other. From this struggle he hoped to create a vision of Jewish culture and community that would unify Jews across time, space, and ideology, to create a cultural critical mass capable of serving as a counterpoint to the Fin-de-Siecle nation-state and its cultural power. For all of the twists and turns in Schechter’s life story, this quest for unity, both intrinsic to the Jewish people, and extrinsic in its approach to the larger world, animated virtually everything he thought and did.

It is in the context of this approach that we should think about Schechter and the Bible. He wasn’t a biblicist, nor a Biblical critic, but operated as a critic of the critics. He used that stance to articulate his conceptualization of the Bible, its modern critics, and above all his construction of a reading of Jewish history that emphasized mythic notions such as “Catholic Israel” and “tradition.” Such terms may help us unlock the key to his thought and activities, and in turn help us see another vantage point in the shifting landscape of late 19th- and early 20th-century Jewish cultural life, an age when many thinkers engaged the realm “between Science and Religion.”

The Bible preoccupied Schechter, as a core text of Jewish and Christian culture, in a time when science, capitalism, and modern politics challenged the place of scripture in a world of new societies and states. Schechter’s life journey, from Romanian hasid to modern Judaica scholar to American religious leader, brought him face to face with modernity, a force that he took seriously even as he tried to bring his love for Jewish tradition with him. To pull off that trick he needed to understand his own mind regarding the status of the holiest of books.

This paper concerns itself with Schechter’s attitude towards the Bible, both from a historical-philosophical and practical perspective. His life unfolded in three more or less discrete stages, regarding the Bible. From the world of tradition, he encountered haskalah and Wissenschaft des Judentums, each of which at least theoretically accepted the critical study of the Bible. He then took on the mantle of Jewish public intellectual and Cambridge don, leading him on the one hand to defend Judaism even as he drew closer to Bible critics and their efforts. Finally, he became a religious institutional leader, responsible in his eyes for the training of rabbis and the communities they aspired to build and to lead. In each phase the problem of the Bible confronted him—mirroring his internal struggles and the challenges facing Jewry.

Schechter understood enough about himself to recognize his warring elements—piety and skepticism. He loved Judaism—its history, wisdom, and culture—and refused to reduce it to a philosophical essence or to historical questions like whether or not God wrote the Torah and revealed it at Sinai. His Judaism incorporated and transcended the Bible, much as it had always been for his heroes, the sages.

But he also circled warily around his skepticism. He accepted the findings of higher criticism regarding prophetic and wisdom texts of the Bible, and probably for the Torah too—and thus feared

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a litmus test that reduced authentic Jewish faith to a belief in torah m’Sinai. He also abstained from biblical scholarship because he mistrusted and abhorred many of the scholars and thinkers who tended to practice it; he viewed that province as largely anti-Jewish. This included in his estimation Christians like the great Wellhausen, and Reform rabbis and scholars like Kaufman Kohler.

Instead of emerging orthodoxies or liberalisms, Schechter sought a third way into and out of modernity, one of love and advocacy for a history and faith about which his commitments trumped his scientific certitudes. This emotional and existential path guided him as he moved from being a scholar in the UK to leader of JTS in America. This made the Bible a political book for Schechter, a text in the culture wars that raged between Jews and their enemies, and between different camps of Jews who bet their lives on starkly opposing visions of what Judaism was or should become.

I. TOWARD ENLIGHTENMENT
Schechter confronted biblical criticism when he left Romania for Vienna in the mid-1870s. Leaving a failed marriage and a time of personal drift, he went to the seat of the Hapsburgs probably to flee small-town Romania and to study Judaism in the new way, that of Wissenschaft des Judentums, the scientific study of Judaism.

He found an intellectual and spiritual home at the Vienna Bet HaMidrash, founded in 1862 as an institution dedicated to the modern scientific study of Judaism. The school’s faculty consisted of some of the preeminent minds working in the modern study of Judaism. Like Schechter, these heterodox teachers were émigrés from other parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire and from smaller, traditionalist Jewish communities. The historian of halakhah Isaac Hirsch Weiss, who loved Schechter and treated him like a son, himself wrestled with the implications of historicism for rabbinic tradition. Meir Friedmann, a midrash scholar, and Adolf Jellinek, a prominent Viennese rabbi who embodied the city’s distinctive conservative brand of liberalism, who worked in mystical texts, both showed Schechter how free thinking and a broad commitment to Jewish tradition could coexist. At the same time he matriculated as well at the University of Vienna, where he sampled modern approaches to history and classics.4

Little of Schechter’s work there remains, save a couple of essays he wrote. One of them, a lecture on the intellectual freedom of Maimonides, gives us clues as to what he thought about Jewish history and how he used texts and history to make larger arguments. He maintained that Maimonides, like any good rabbi, employed different tools for different purposes and contexts. As a codifier, he tended toward stricter views; as a posek answering real people with pressing questions, he tried to find leniencies.

In this Schechter sought the obvious modern parallel: orthodox Jews needed to be mindful of the power of the liberal freedoms including that of free thinking; liberal Jews needed to stay connected to Jewish tradition. The essay tells us a lot about Schechter. Like an op-ed columnist, he used his-

tory to make contemporary arguments, and he thought of history as not merely past but also present. Scholarship should connect Jews to their past, not create distance between subject and object via dispassionate science.

Schechter moved to Berlin in 1879 to continue his Jewish and university education. He chose to study Judaics at the Hochschule, a liberal school of scientific learning, founded by Abraham Geiger, rather than the orthodox but modern academy founded by Esriel Hildesheimer. For students at the latter like David Zvi Hoffman, critical methodologies for rabbinic study posed enough challenges; the Torah remained off-limits. Geiger’s school maintained a more open stance regarding the universal application of such approaches.6

Central European Jewry under the impress of Kant and Hegel responded by creating philosophies of Judaism, justifying ideas about law, authority, and practice. Belief now became subject to a litmus test of one’s progressivism or of one’s traditionalist fidelity. In practice, a spectrum emerged. Traditionalist Orthodox thinkers like S. R. Hirsch denounced all critics and criticism of canonical texts, biblical or rabbinic, as counter to belief in the eternal truth of Sinaitic revelation not just of ethics but also of law. Reformers like Geiger de-coupled Sinai from law, preserving its ethical core while sloughing off its historically normative character.

Camps grew, expressing these subtle but significant differences. Hirsch affirmed modernity but not its corrosive impact on the reading of classical texts. Hildesheimer and Hoffman read rabbinic texts critically—not so with the Bible. Reformers applied criticism to any and all texts, legitimizing their attempt to create a post-halakhic Judaism.

At Berlin University things proved more challenging. Wellhausen authored his Geschichte Israels in 1878 featuring the documentary hypothesis, positing a multiplicity of authors and dates for the composition of the Bible. This higher source criticism carried historical and normative implications. Moral and prophetic (and universalistic) texts came first as encoded in the J and E strands. The latter D and P sources brought with them a narrower legalism. Pauline critiques of biblical Judaism as arid letter versus a Christian ethos of love in effect received scholarly support as the Israelite imprint of D and P was identified. This narrative inevitably raises the question: What motivated the bible critics—history and science, or contemporary concerns, be they religion or culture? Stating that Judaism in its post-exilic form became primarily legal implies no inevitable normative judgment, unless the author seeks to make one. In Wellhausen’s case, it appears that he differentiated between what might be dismissed as modern anti-Semitism and religiously based (in his case Protestant) diagnoses of Israel’s character and history.6

At the university, Schechter encountered the problem of anti-Judaism cum anti-Semitism. In those years, Berlin University witnessed anti-Semitic student fraternity activities, and the Treitschke af-

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fair in which the noted German scholar argued that Jews remained a separate nation that could not successfully integrate into the new German nation-state and people.

In Berlin, Schechter studied the Bible critically, taking a university course with the Protestant orientalist and theologian August Dillmann. A friend and colleague and one-time schoolmate of Wellhausen, Dillmann took a moderate stance as a scholar and as a current observer. He spoke out against recrudescence anti-Judaism, when along with other theologians he gave testimony against the popular revival of the blood libel charge as unwarranted from the study of Jewish texts. Regarding biblical criticism, he eschewed Wellhausen’s stark periodization scheme of radical breaks (and his letter nomenclature), in favor of a gradual evolution of Israelite religion of B (Elohist, 9th cent.), P (Priestly, 9th cent.), C (Yahwist, 8th cent.), and D (Deuteronomist, 7th cent.) This gave greater antiquity to the legal dimension of Judaism, and enabled Jews like Schechter to point to a more gradual evolution of Jewish religion.\(^7\)

From an early point, Schechter seemed to seek some unifying goal that tied together various threads: manuscript work, contemporary activism, and historical-theological writing. All three would play a role in the re-presentation of a picture of Judaism for modern Jews as they confronted the reality of the nation-state and its own cultural demands.

By the time he left Berlin for England in 1882, Schechter already displayed his flair for fusing agendas that often characterized Wissenschaft practitioners, at least to some extent. He pursued classical sorts of philological work at the instigation of his teachers, I. Lewy and M. Steinschneider (as well as Friedmann/Weiss/Jellinek of Vienna), while at the same time he took an interest in the current affairs of Jewry, writing an article in the liberal Viennese newspaper denouncing gothic varieties of anti-Semitism then current in folkloristic popular cultural contexts.

Upon arrival in England he set to work at the embarrassment of riches of Judaic manuscripts in both the British Museum and the Bodleian. Shortly thereafter with his patron Claude Montefiore he wrote an essay on the study of the Talmud in the Westminster Review in 1885. There he openly decried the poor state of Jewish historical scholarship and Jewish classical texts, mindful that the previous decades had seen concerted efforts in England and elsewhere to create critical editions of the Greco-Roman classics. In order for Jewish science to hold its head up, he believed, such efforts must happen with Jewish texts too—hence his work on Avot d’Rabbi Natan.\(^8\)

Yet at the same time he toiled away at his science, Montefiore continued to urge him to go public, to use his tools as a communicator and scholar to reach out to that larger Victorian middle-brow audience found reading the great periodicals of the day, and the Jewish equivalent, the Anglo-Jewish press. From 1887 on, even when his English barely sufficed, Schechter began to carve out a niche for himself as a public intellectual, delivering biographies, history, theology, and text studies.

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Heroes emerged who showed him what such an evolution entailed. His portraits of two 19th-century scholars, Nahman Krochmal and Leopold Zunz, illustrated his view of Jewish virtues. Both of these giants of Wissenschaft accepted biblical criticism, with Zunz the more radical of the two embracing even Torah criticism, at the same time that they never departed from devotion to Judaism and to the Jewish people.

Krochmal’s work *Moreh Nevukhim ba-Zeman* laid out a Jewish Hegelianism. Rather than history proceeding dialectically and progressively from Judaism to Christianity, Krochmal saw all civilizations save Judaism as subject to the iron law of history—birth, growth, decline, and death. Only Judaism spiraled upward through time. The Second Temple period became in Krochmal’s schema a time of creativity rather than stagnation and declension, filled with “late” biblical texts like the Psalms, thanks to higher criticism. Zunz’s pioneering philological efforts, particularly in liturgy, highlighted an ever-flowing fountain of spiritual energy.

Their work in philosophy, history, and philology saved rather than destroyed Judaism: it focused on the sacred and mysterious process by which Israel endured and even prospered culturally and spiritually. Schechter learned from this a vital lesson: one could see underlying unities and continuities of ideas and ideals even as external forms like texts change. “Verstehen aus dem Ganzen (understanding comes from the whole),” wrote Schlegel. Enlightenment reading and source criticism done narrowly as philology dismantled texts; romantic reading saw reality dynamically and diachronically. The totality of Israel’s history overwhelmed feeble attempts at studying its textual origins. Schechter—via his heroes Krochmal and Zunz—now had the worldview that enabled him to criticize canonical texts even as he loved the total culture they served.9

In that sense, Raymond Williams’ book *Keywords* does right by Schechter, when it lists seriatim the terms “theory” and “tradition.” For Schechter, the former took shape only in his larger conception of the reality and idea of the Jewish “tradition.” Theory may mean a scheme of ideas reflecting the normative impulse, which we usually associate with a strongly held doctrine or ideology; theory may also be an explanatory scheme that involves a systematic understanding of practice.10

Schechter inclined strongly toward the first sense of the term; he held firm views about the history and destiny of the Jewish people and its culture and his ideas typically reflected those larger concerns. Like Krochmal and Zunz and many of the more traditional practitioners of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, he fused his partisan commitment to Jewishness with his modernist interest in the “truth” of the text. The origins and historicity of the text constituted only one dimension of that epistemology.

By fixing on these traditionalist-maskilic sorts of figures, Schechter located himself, philosophically and tactically, between Jewish liberals and the emerging self-styled “orthodox.” Just as the former equated liberality in religion with attunement to progress and modernism, the latter sought

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to impose litmus tests for determining Jewish piety. But Schechter displayed insouciance about the origins of the biblical text. Following Luzzatto, Krochmal and others in an opinion of a paper on the authorship of Ecclesiastes, he opined, “If Solomon had read Ecclesiastes, he would have asked for a dictionary.”

Schechter sought the public realm and role of public intellectual; he soon discovered the price one paid for living in the public eye. His views piqued the curiosity of others, who inevitably tried to peg Schechter as liberal or orthodox. The Berkeley Street synagogue in London proposed adopting the triennial cycle for the reading of the Torah. Schechter defended the change—history supplied proof of the Palestinian practice, so Wissenschaft researches confirmed, why then the contemporary fuss? Surely historical truth outweighed overheated battles over the symbolic valence of ritual change.12

This approach raised the eyebrows of the self-styled defenders of the faith, who saw change not as historically warranted or as organic but simply as deviationist and dangerous.

The matter of finding a career also weighed on his approach to the Bible. Non-Jews, primarily Protestants, dominated faculties of Oriental and/or theological studies. When his friend and student Richard Gottheil informed Schechter of his plans to go into Semitics, Schechter lamented the loss of Gottheil for the rabbinate and for the Jewish people, and the likely frustration of a committed Jew working in a field dominated by anti-Judaic attitudes and approaches.13

II. THE PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL

Thanks to his industry in publishing and teaching and to his growing social circle, and owing to the paucity of learned Jews in England, by this time Schechter was becoming a personage in Anglo-Jewry. He sought and enjoyed having an audience, and increasingly found himself cast as a public intellectual, one who brought his learning to bear on matters of the day as well as on scholarship. He also found an audience among those who might respect him, but also challenge his views if not his learning.

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11The leading Anglo-Jewish newspaper, The Jewish Chronicle, reported thusly about Schechter’s comment to the paper of Dr. Michael Friedlander, principal of Jews’ College, who wrote on “The Age and Authorship of Ecclesiastes.” “Mr. S. Schechter deprecated attaching too much importance to titles. The Apocryphal “Wisdom of Solomon” was not by the wise King. There was no evidence that could be considered historical for the supposition that at any time a canon of the Old Testament was formally fixed as had happened in the case of the New Testament. The expression bakshi could not be quoted as recording a historical event. This very expression "baksha" “they sought,” is employed in other Talmudic contexts whose legendary character is perfectly obvious. We read of the angels who “sought” to sing songs of triumph while the Egyptians were drowning, but they were forbidden to do so. So in Sanhedrin we find it asserted that “they sought” to keep Solomon out of the future world. Yet they never had a Jewish canonization of saints. These statements were added by late writers who in this way expressed their opinions on what might or ought to have happened to certain characters under certain circumstances. In the “Aboth” of R. Nathan the more reliable text contained a less emphatic statement than did the less authentic text. With regard to the style of Ecclesiastes, though it was possible to account for certain forms, the general impression left by the book was that it was of late origin. If Solomon had read Ecclesiastes he would have asked for a dictionary.” See “The Age and Authorship of Ecclesiastes,” The Jewish Chronicle March 5, 1886, p. 11.

12Jewish Chronicle, 8 January 1888.

13Schechter to Richard Gottheil, January 15, 1884; Schechter Archives, JTSA: “I’m told that you made the decision to leave your theological career and instead pursue the position of teaching in Oriental languages. Is this true? What moved you to this decision? I would regret this very much because Oriental languages have enough people who pursue studies with intent and seriousness. Whereas, in the study of religion and Judaism it would be desirable to do something. I have thought very highly of your pure soul for Jewry. Pity on those who’re lost and not forgotten. It is sad that our friends can only accept the right of existence of Jewry from a good or bad emendation of the Bible.”
Emerging Anglo-Jewish orthodoxy challenged him and his view of the Bible. Created in 1888, *The Jewish Standard* viewed itself serving as “The English Organ of Orthodoxy.” Like orthodoxy from the beginning, it practiced partisanship as it denied it: it opposed reform while claiming to speak for true Judaism, not merely for any party within it.

The *Jewish Standard* found much to approve of in Schechter’s thought, especially when contrasted with figures even more problematic. In its review of the inaugural issue of the *Jewish Quarterly Review* in October 1888, it compared Schechter’s essay on “Dogmas in Judaism” favorably with Heinrich Graetz’s entry in the same number, dismissing the latter’s emphasis on Jewish ethics as opposed to religion and “his extraordinary contention that Judaism is consistent with modern rationalism.” Morality and its practice must reflect the Law-giving God and must depend on human awareness of His presence at all times, unlike Graetz’s “collection of fantastic paradoxes.”

Schechter drew a more appreciative review, one that noted his call for recognition of the “province of faith” in any understanding of the religion of Israel. Belief undergirded all forms and secondary ideas in classical Judaism, the idea that “the strong belief in God, and the unshaken confidence that at last this God, the God of Israel, will be the God of the whole world.” Hence the rationality of Torah and its dictates: it bespeaks the desire to follow the dictates of the living God.

Yet this ombudsman for Orthodoxy detected in Schechter’s writing a theological diffidence—he failed to write about *emunah* (faith) with sufficient *emunah*. “Bitachon—trust in the Divine,” the reviewer wrote, “must mean essentially confidence in God’s providential goodness, as opposed merely to the rather pareve English word ‘faith,’ or the belief in unproved facts or theories…. This trust depends indeed on the antecedent hypothesis that God and Providence are realities, but Judaism demands that the existence of these latter should be matters not of faith but of knowledge and reasoned conviction.”

The review refrained from ad hominem questioning of Schechter’s theological position, but Schechter knew the difference between his position and that of the orthodox reading. He never hesitated to argue that culture rested on religion, and religion rested on faith, but he showed considerably more epistemological humility when it came to “knowing” ontological truths. He knew that Jewish texts spoke of the miraculous, but he spent more time lauding the rabbinic sages who explicated those texts than affirming the content of those faith propositions. He was caught: too much in love with tradition to tolerate those who rejected it or failed to learn it; too skeptical to conflate textual reality with lived existence. He believed in history and community, it seemed, as much as in God and Torah, almost as if by doing so he could still the tension he felt between piety and rationalism.

14 *Jewish Quarterly Review. First Notice,* *The Jewish Standard*, 12 October 1888, p. 4.
15 Ibid., p. 4.
16 Ibid.
At the same time, the Orthodox organ took him to task for his intellectual shortcomings. In the aftermath of a lecture he gave in December of 1888 on “Children in Jewish Literature,” an editorial noted his learning and insights. Yet he drew the paper’s criticism for two things: an implicit reliance on a kind of “original intent” view of customs, and inadequate knowledge of Jewish law.

The first strike brought up a central paradox in Schechter’s approach to Jewish life, one that all conservative practitioners of Wissenschaft faced. As a historian, one was duty-bound to take an interest in the origins and development of laws and customs. As conservatives, temperamentally and philosophically, those same practitioners sought to defend the continuity of such practices even as they uncovered problematic histories of them. Upon what ground stood Jewish observance—the flow of time or some higher authority? Forty years before, S. R. Hirsch and his followers asked that of Frankel; now, the newspaper asked Schechter. The editorial admonished Schechter and his scholarly ilk “to avoid ridiculing Jewish customs and tracing their origins to superstition.” Schechter avoided working through this issue, which only made him more suspect in the eyes of the Orthodox. To them, any basis for custom other than the Divine threatened to historicize, relativize, and trivialize practice, thereby rendering it an easy target for reformers.

Thus Schechter navigated between the Scylla of Reform efforts to read history Whiggishly and solely through the prism of ethics, and the Charybdis of Orthodox insistence on anti-historicist dependence on Divine authority for customs as well as laws. Schechter invoked God against reformers who sought to argue for Jewishness as ethics; against forces of reaction, he insisted on appeals to history. Like an earlier conservative practitioner of Wissenschaft, Zecharias Frankel, he built a worldview with these two elements living in some kind of precarious balance. Like Frankel he paid a price, taking criticism from both left and right.¹⁷

He made the case for Judaism above party in response to a controversy surrounding liturgical change. His friend, and later collaborator Rabbi Simeon Singer, had in his synagogue put forth certain prayer reforms, excising some piyyutim and introducing the reading of passages from the English Bible. Singer, a traditionalist who also had received semichah from I.H. Weiss, saw himself as responding to the realities of literacy and illiteracy and the centrality of the English Bible in Anglo-Jewry.

But here Schechter took on a different opponent, namely intolerance masquerading as high-minded “Orthodoxy.” The merits of the case mattered less than fighting the politicization of religion.

But in our days, when everyone is anxious to be labeled as orthodox or reformer, religious matters have become a party question; and ever so many quotations from the Bible, the Talmud, the Shulchan Aruch, and the Responsa would fail to convince the men who call themselves orthodox of the lawfulness of Mr. Singer’s proposal. Indeed I had a good old friend,

¹⁷The Jewish Standard, 28 December 1888, p. 7.
a really observant Jew, who did not feel at all orthodox when he said grace after his dinner. He used to say: “There are as many tzadikim le’hashir as rashaim le’hashir.”

But even a party paper—and this is what I want to point out—owes some justice to the opposition, and ought not to drop the respect due to them…It is easy enough to declare your neighbour a heretic. One has only to cherish a high opinion of himself, to tell all the world what a great pillar of orthodoxy he always was and still is, and to shrug his shoulders at his friend’s notions of Judaism, which cannot be otherwise than heretical as they are not approved of by one’s important self. But it is not at all an easy matter to observe such laws of the Torah as “In righteousness thou shalt judge thy neighbour,” …and hundreds of such commands repeated again and again by the Bible and the Rabbis. These were not accepted in the party programme, or there would be an end to our pillarship.

I, and many like me who do not pretend to belong either to reform or to orthodox parties, could only wish for the truth’s sake that this offensive tone would give way to a quiet and honest discussion of the question. But to denounce and calumniate one of the noblest men in the community may be a fine trick in party politics, but it is not orthodox, and I am sure that it is neither Jewish nor religious.18

Orthodoxy meant not true thought but a political game of negative reference—defining one’s position in opposition to one’s opponents.19 The offending party’s response to Schechter maintained that “it is want of discretion, not want of sincerity” that he found lacking in Singer, that “he is unconsciously with a little matter paving the way for in after years an utter disregard for Judaism.”20

Throughout his life Schechter took little interest in psak or playing the role of the posek; even years later at the Seminary, he avoided serving as rabbi at the Seminary Synagogue in any meaningful legal sense of the term.21 Historical Judaism meant law and its study. Contemporaneously Schechter made of law a divining rod by which he measured the loyalty of Jews to historical Judaism. That explains illiberal Schechter’s disdain for liberal reform.

Yet he and orthodoxy also stood at some distance from one another. He tended to equate historical mutability with halakhic mutability—an increasingly solid black line for orthodoxy. It made it hard for him to take them seriously intellectually even as he respected and identified with their piety. But it became another reason to avoid discussing the Bible—it brought him into faith questions, his answers to which could not reassure those to the right of him.


In that spirit, when Schechter published his groundbreaking *Avot D’Rabbi Natan* in 1887, the first modern scientific critical edition based on manuscripts rather than printed editions, he noted his debt to other researchers. He dedicated the work to his patron, Claude Montefiore, himself a student of the great British classicist, Benjamin Jowett. In his English introduction to ARN, Schechter quoted Jowett’s words in his famous “On the Interpretation of Scriptures” essay that had been a part of the famed Essays and Reviews that set English Protestant circles buzzing upon its publication in 1861, calling for a more liberal, “Broad Church.”22 Harking back to a previous essay on the study of the Talmud, Schechter noted the need to cast light on the darkness of old texts, bringing some order out of chaos, in God-like fashion, akin to the Genesis narrative.

Schechter cast himself as a progressive, advocating education as criticism, allowing the mind to revisit and fix older texts for the purpose of discovering original meanings, so as to lead to a culture at once tied to tradition yet progressive in its ability to grow. Jowett espoused the same point in his essay, believing in critical education of the classics, including the Bible, as the cornerstone of progressive revelation. “The education of the human mind may be traced as clearly from the book of Genesis to the Epistles of St. Paul, as from Homer to Plato and Aristotle.” Substitute for the Greeks and Paul the Talmudic rabbis and their successors and one may discern Schechter’s notion of Jewish history and its role in education. Yet at the same time, Schechter remained the idealist, referring to the great thoughts of antiquity as “thoughts that breathe and words that burn”—Jowett’s phrase summoning the transcendent power of the ancients to move us, the sublime realm that presumably could not be reduced to mere textual criticism.23

In 1890 Schechter assumed the post of Reader in rabbinics at Cambridge. Marginality defined him. He was a Jew, an observant one at that, in an overwhelmingly Protestant context. He taught rabbinics in a place more interested in the Bible. He took theology seriously in a time in which it “belonged” to non-Jews. He lacked a chair or a fellowship in a college, unlike his more prestigious colleagues. Little wonder then that he gravitated to others who occupied similar if not identically anomalous positions. W. Robertson Smith, the great biblicist and holder of the chair in Arabic, came to Cambridge after the Free Church in Aberdeen excommunicated him for his teaching of biblical criticism.24 James G. Frazer, key figure in folklore and anthropology, held a fellowship at Trinity College, but no chair at the University, and too felt himself the outsider.

Both figures operated on the margins of the Christian university because of their anthropological and critical approaches to the study of religion, still a centerpiece of academic culture. Smith, devoted but eclectic Christian though he was, played a crucial role in modern biblical criticism. He in turn influenced Frazer’s work, which advanced the comparative study of religion, raising obvious questions of pagan and Christian connections. Schechter enjoyed good relations with both men, be-

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coming close with Frazer. Smith once asked Schechter why Jewish scholars lacked competence in Hebrew grammar, to which Schechter replied, “You Christians know Hebrew grammar. We know Hebrew. I think that we need not be dissatisfied with the division.”

By 1890, biblical criticism reigned triumphant, migrating from its German home to England and America, capturing Bible study in universities still committed to theologically informed and directed teaching. Jews shared this text with their Christian brethren; it provided the opportunity to find common ground—although that typically involved professions of universalism on the Jewish side, and the Church triumphant from the Christian vantage point.

In 1891, Schechter reviewed Crawford Toy’s *Judaism and Christianity*. Toy, holder of a chair in Bible at Harvard (one that W.R. Smith had declined), drew Schechter’s praise in his review for Toy’s positive appraisal of law in the history of religion and in the Levitical context specifically. As Schechter put it concerning the typical Protestant position, “The general idea seems to be that, as the doctrine of the resurrection of Christ must be loosely interpreted in a spiritual sense, it must logically have been preceded by a universal spiritual death, and the germs of the disease which brought this death about are to be sought for in the law. Hence the strained efforts to discover in the law the source of all religious evil,—cant, hypocrisy, formalism, externalism, transcendentalism, and as many ‘isms’ more of bad reputation.”

Schechter’s approbation of the law and Toy’s historical analysis reflected the larger post-Wellhausen portrayal of “Late Judaism”—i.e. the Priestly materials that replace religious spontaneity, the spirituality of the Prophets, with rigid heteronomy. This view reflected the longer chain of biblical criticism stretching from Herder to deWette to Wellhausen, all of which posited a declension from “Early Israel” of historical and prophetic texts to the later legal materials. According to Schechter, Toy even got right the role of ritual vis-à-vis sin, as opposed to the conventional Pauline view that ceremony served to distract men from their moral duties. Rather, in Toy’s words “The Levitical law is not to be looked on as a mere extension and organization of the ritual…Its ritual was, in great part, the organized expression of the consciousness of sin.”

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Yet Schechter knew that Toy, as a professing Christian, still posited a Whiggish trajectory stretching upward from Judaism to Christianity. Thus Judaism must contain “the germs of the disease”, in Schechter’s words—otherwise, how to explain the emergence of progress in the form of Christianity? This Judaic defect Toy finds, according to Schechter, in the propensity of law to over regulate, attempting “to define all the beliefs and acts of life.”

This point enables Schechter to tack towards the rabbis, which is how he often dealt with biblical criticism, enlarging the subject to the history of transmission of Jewish texts, values, and behaviors. This took the pressure off of the Bible, since it was only the first stage in an ever-evolving stream of cultural creativity. Yet such a move on Schechter’s part carried its own dangers too: It at least suggested to readers that cultural creativity of a later stage might imply non-theistic origins of such a culture, and carried within it its own Whiggish narrative, suggesting that the “tradition” was greater than the texts themselves revealed by God at Sinai.

Schechter avoided engaging any of those concerns, which he tackled later in his 1896 Studies in Judaism. Rather, he tried to show that Judaism regulates life, not thought or belief, with the exception of certain core biblical notions such as God, Providence, Reward and Punishment “without which no religion is conceivable” and are not “external and strange to man’s own knowledge” as opposed to “acceptable through the weight of authority.” Schechter didn’t much care for churches, and hated the idea of rabbinical synods opining on mandatory beliefs. Like Mendelssohn, whom ironically he had criticized two years before for his disavowal of dogmas in Judaism, Schechter wished invidiously to contrast Judaism—a religion of reasonable ideas easily grasped—as opposed to the doctrinaire and fantastic notions of superstitious Christianity. Such breadth called to mind English notions of the Broad Church, founded by among others Benjamin Jowett, Montefiore’s teacher at Oxford, and about whom Schechter commented favorably.

But now Schechter himself went further. Whether he changed on account of his new position or chose to reveal what he previously secretly harbored, we cannot ascertain. But in a review of a book on canonization written by his Cambridge colleague, H.E. Ryles, in 1893, Schechter stated, “gradual growth does not apply to these three groups [the tripartite division of the Bible] at large, but also to every book of the twenty-four in particular which constitute the Old Testament, each book having, according to the modern school, a history of its own before it was admitted to the Canon.”

This position held out risks and rewards for Jews trying to deal with the loss of Mosaic authorship. Cambridge served as home to a group of biblicists who created the Cambridge Bible Commentary. By and large this group, in the wake of Wellhausen, saw the priestly materials as late. But crucially for Jews, they also believed that the very historicity of the biblical text, its dynamism, reflected not

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31Ibid., p. 239.
textual or cultural corruption, but the progressive revelation of God to succeeding generations. In that light, critical scholarship added to our knowledge of God through our knowledge of the process by which His text came to be.34 This reading squared the Victorian circle, placing biblical criticism in the service of evangelical Protestantism, by stressing the Bible as the word of God rather than intellectual doctrine, the record of God and his personal relationship with the generations. This scheme—depending on the author—could lead upward to the rabbis as the next link in the chain of ancient Israel as it gave way to Second Temple and post-biblical Judaism, or it could decry their post-exilic cult and absurd exegetical interpretations of Scripture.

However far from home Schechter strayed when it came to biblical criticism, he also personalized the issue—critiquing the critics and their cultural agendas. Since so much of the field was Protestant, and anti-Semitic in its disdain for Israel’s ancient cultic practices, Schechter tried to walk a fine line: accepting the notion of historical development, while rejecting the declension model of that trajectory as it applied normatively to the history of Jewish culture.

His close relationship with Robertson Smith epitomized his attempt to finesse the problems of the field. Smith pioneered in the use of comparative religion, utilizing the anthropological technique of experiencing living cultures, and unpacking their system of rituals and folkways. He premised this on the counter-assumption that meaningful comparisons could be drawn between peoples and cultures, a challenge to the uniqueness of Israel posited by Jews and Christians alike. But in his insistence on the centrality of ritual and worldview, as opposed to abstract ideas and doctrines, Schechter could find a powerful support. He too believed that ideas drew their power not from their Platonic coherence, but from the extent to which communities internalized and externalized them in their world. This focus on the group rather than the individual ran counter to Protestantism’s focus on the individual, but could be seen as congruent with Judaism’s corporate character.

Schechter also welcomed Smith’s views of a personal God, witnessed by prophets, experienced by person, families, clans, even the bureaucratic levitical priesthood, potentially congruent with a covenantal understanding akin to Judaism’s. Most importantly, in The Religion of the Semites, his important and popular lecture series that became a central text of English criticism, Smith refused to divide Israelite history into good and bad, pre- and post-Exile.

Smith’s work then became a text that Schechter deployed to reinforce his Jewish traditionalist Wissenschaft forebears. He sought to counter any attempt by non-Jewish critics (or Jewish ones for that matter) that undermined the legitimacy of Jewish law. In the case of Ryle, Schechter attacked the author’s attempt to polarize the Second Temple period, in which the Prophets became canonized around 300 BCE, standing in opposition to the law. When Ryle depicted rabbinism as “spiritual sterility”, Schechter called him on it.35 Where others saw ancient Israel as a series of sharply discontinuous chapters, Schechter crafted a linear narrative of consensus and continuity, stretching from

35Schechter, review of Ryle in JQR 5 (1893), pp. 342-44.
Moses at Sinai, with God as continuous Revealer, all the way to the Divine inspiration accorded to the rabbinc interpreters of the biblical text. By positing textual development, higher criticism ironically made that plot line possible, at least in the hands of a rabbinic advocate.\footnote{JC, 15 February 1885, p. 13.}

But Smith’s function as a possible proof text for Schechter reminds us how difficult he found the task of building a modern view of the ancients after the wrecking of his earlier perspective. Smith himself seemed to embody a tension, if not downright contradiction, between his own theology of a personal God acting as revealer and providential figure and his sociological perspective on the natural, immanent causes of the history of religions and their development.\footnote{William Robertson Smith, Religion of the Semites (New Brunswick: Transaction, 2002); useful assessments include William Johnstone, ed., William Robertson Smith: Essays in Reassessment (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1995); T. O. Beidelman, William Robertson Smith and the Sociological Study of Religion (Chicago: Chicago, 1974); J. W. Rogerson, The Bible and Criticism in Victorian Britain: Profiles of F. D. Maurice and William Robertson Smith (Sheffield: Sheffield, 1995), pp. 56-179.}

We may say the same of Schechter. His narrative placed people at the center, with God somehow present as well. Jewish history was the result of their encounter. But that elided the great question of modern Jewish life: how to understand authority in the wake of the breakdown of Jewish theology and community.

The private Schechter revealed how combative he remained about defending the “Jewish bible” and the ethos of Israel over and against Christianity. In a letter to Gottheil, he lamented:

If you would have the misfortune to read as much Christian theology as I do, you will be convinced that they are a to’eva [abomination] and that at the bottom they are longing for nothing else than their old savage…[pagan] gods and goddesses which the policy of Charlemagne took away from them. Of course they were converted by force and never meant to become real honest monotheists. They have now their opportunity and want to undo the history, but let them say so frankly and be direct and straightforward with us and not bore us with subject-objective nonsense, which gives itself the air of superior wisdom by Capitals and hyfons – Man-God? Why not Elephant-Spider, humble-Chief Rabbis, enlightened-bishop etc. etc…Pray, I am not such a fanatic as you believe. I do believe that God is a merciful father and will deal kindly with all creatures especially those born and bred in sin and in error…Are there not such things as truth and untruth, and is not the duty of the teacher to expound the former and to warn against the latter….or is the mission of the theologian somewhat like that of the Leader-writer in the Times whose business it is to register the public opinion, digest it well, and throw it in some shape of Oxford English with some touch of sham philosophy, so that the philistines are almost astonished at the details of their own wisdom.
About…of the deity [regarding] the article [of] Edersheim in the E. Britannica. I did not mean exactly Christianity, but vulgar pantheism in general, of which Christianity is only a part.  

Seen in the light of such diatribes, Schechter’s life work emerges. He sought the role of public intellectual, for the sake of teaching and defending Judaism. It irked him that Christians claimed the Bible, because their tradition—ironically, like Judaism—emerged over time, growing farther and farther away from the text and its worldview. Unlike Judaism, however, that Christian project began in error and proceeded in its faulty fashion.

In 1896, Schechter published his first book in English, a collection of previously published essays drawn from his English language journal articles and talks, titled Studies in Judaism. He introduced the collection with a statement that remains the closest thing we have to a coherent declaration of his beliefs about a warrant for Jewish belief and practice. That reflection stressed an idea of revelation cum progressive traditionalism, emphasizing the authority of some mythic idea of the Jewish people over its tradition and implicitly its God and texts.

He wanted to expose Western Jewry to its opposite number in space and time—what he dubbed the Eastern Synagogue, but also the historical as opposed to the contemporary synagogue, attempting to place what he called “the High Synagogue” into historical perspective. While he doesn’t elaborate on what exactly that phrase means, it becomes clear that the High Synagogue (perhaps formal and orderly, like “High Church”—which, ironically, was less “modern”) means that which has encountered and somehow been altered (not altogether favorably) by modernity, particularly Bible criticism and historicism.

He acknowledged the danger science posed to Judaism as a scripture-based religion. Nature and history critically understood challenged the epistemology and authority of a divinely revealed text. Judaism dealt with the problems of reading the Bible scientifically by the entire hermeneutic move of rabbinic Judaism, shifting “the centre of gravity in Judaism” and placing “it in the secondary meaning, thus making religion independent of philology and all its dangerous consequences.”

Here he referred to his scholarly forebears and role models—Krochmal, Rapaport, and Zunz, all of whom accepted biblical criticism and sought to harness its emphasis on the historicity of the Bible for the sake of constructing a series of links connecting the rabbinic age to their Israelite antecedents, in one great chain of being. But he reckoned the loss and the gain: the text becomes historicized, while its narrating agent, Tradition, becomes equal to the text upon which it builds. “Tradition

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38 Schechter to Gottheil, August 1894, SSP (JTS), Gottheil File.
40 Ibid., p. xi.
41 Ibid., pp. xii-xiv.
becomes thus the means whereby the modern divine seeks to compensate himself for the loss of the Bible, and the theological balance is the satisfaction of all parties happily readjusted.”

This is the first plank in Schechter’s personal platform. But Schechter surely knew better; the “parties” in modern life organized themselves around their opposition to his formulation. The Orthodox rejected the demotion of revelation to history and the uncertainty of legal authority that ensued, while Reform looked askance at endowing Tradition with such power over the free will and personal autonomy of the Kantian individual.

After recounting the fruit of the Historical School’s labors, Schechter tells the reader his second tenet.

The historical school has never, to my knowledge, offered to the world a theological programme of its own. By the nature of its task, its labours are mostly conducted in the field of philology and archaeology, and it pays but little attention to purely dogmatic questions. On the whole, its attitude towards religion may be defined as an enlightened Scepticism combined with a staunch conservatism which is not even wholly devoid of a certain mystical touch. As far as we may gather from vague remarks and hints thrown out now and then, its theological position may perhaps be defined:—It is not the mere revealed Bible that is of first importance to the Jew, but the Bible as it repeats itself in history, in other words, as it is interpreted by Tradition.

Since Schechter played the rebel and critic throughout much of his life, he shows his own dilemma: how to combine the two sides of his personality, the skeptic and the pietist. He never compromised either trait—he preferred to think both could be subsumed under a broader philosophy of history. But that left open the definition of history, of Tradition, and the crucial question of authority for making change.

He then faced squarely the matter of authority, in the most famous and romantic passage of the essay.

Since then the interpretation of Scripture or the Secondary Meaning is mainly a product of changing historical influences, it follows that the centre of authority is actually removed from the Bible and placed in some living body, which, by reason of its being in touch with the ideal aspirations and the religious needs of the age, is best able to determine the nature of the Secondary Meaning. This living body, however, is not represented by any section of the nation, or any corporate priesthood, or Rabbinhood, but by the collective conscience of Catholic Israel as embodied in the Universal Synagogue. The Synagogue “with its long continuous cry after God for more than twenty-three centuries,” with its unremitting activity in teaching and developing the word of God, with its uninterrupted succession of proph-

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42Ibid., pp. xiv-xv.

43Ibid., pp. xvii-xviii.
According to Schechter, Israel itself decided its life, not God, not a revealed text; Israel itself decided what would be its canonical texts, part of the process of reception, creation, and transmission of culture. The Synagogue not only interprets the text, it creates it and validates it, along with “general custom which forms the real rule of practice.” What limited the authority of Israel? Only “its long, continuous cry after God for more than twenty-three centuries,” an evocative if not analytically precise formulation. To the obvious objection that such a historiosophy of religion flouted the notion of Judaism as a revealed religion, establishing a revealing and commanding God, Schechter retorted, “It is ‘God who has chosen the Torah, and Moses His servant, and Israel His people.’ But indeed God’s choice invariably coincides with the wishes of Israel; He ‘performeth all things’ upon which the councils of Israel, meeting under promise of the Divine presence and communion, have previously agreed. As the Talmud somewhere expresses [B. Shabbat 88a—with reference to the establishment of Purim] itself with regard to the Book of Esther, ‘They have confirmed above what Israel has accepted below.”

Schechter managed to transcend all disputes in Jewish life, minimizing them by situating them within the longue durée of Jewish history. A focus on the Bible, appealing to liberal Jews, would be anti-progressive literally, by going against the grain of historical development. To the contrary, Jews were as vital and progressive a religious civilization as any nineteenth-century Protestant could claim for his church, evolving organically all the while. This worldview upheld the notion of authority against personal autonomy, the group versus the individual, while not reducing authority to a church dominated by priests—the oldest Jewish leadership position, but the least legitimate in Schechter’s eyes, because its authority was autocratic in essence, anterior to and unconnected with the synagogue.

Still, Schechter’s ambivalence about his own mythic reading of Jewish history was evident in his writings. He avoided the possible conflict between his depiction of such a people-driven civilization and the fact that throughout history Jews themselves had often operated with a much more theocentric view of authority—even as in practice they flouted it.

Most importantly, he historicized his historicism. First he confidently asserted that the historical view dominated the center, with only marginal opposition from the likes of the Neo-Orthodox or the Reformers. In the next breath, he asked:

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44Ibid., pp. xviii.
How long the position of this school will prove tenable is another question. Being brought up in the old Low Synagogue, where, with all attachment to tradition, the Bible was looked upon as the crown and the climax of Judaism, the old Adam still asserts itself in me, and in unguarded moments makes me rebel against this new rival of revelation in the shape of history. At times this now fashionable exaltation of Tradition at the expense of Scripture even impresses me as a sort of religious bimetallism in which bold speculators in theology try to keep up the market value of an inferior currency by denouncing loudly the bright shining gold which, they would have us believe, is less fitted to circulate in the vulgar use of daily life than the small cash of historical interpretation. Nor can I quite reconcile myself to this alliance of religion with history, which seems to me both unworthy and unnatural…It bowed before truth, but it had never made a covenant with facts only because they were facts. History had to be re-made and to sanctify itself before it found its way into its sacred annals.\footnote{Ibid., pp. xx-xxi.}

He split the difference by ascribing to his view a historiographical significance, not a theological one, leaving unresolved what he believed in the latter realm. It was clear, though, what he failed to believe. He recognized the supremacy of history as a guide to current thinking, and he wished to weigh in with a view of Jewish history that transcended the divisions of immigrants and natives, rich and poor. He fought the anti-rabbanite Christian supercessionists who posited the irrelevance and archaicism by constructing a continuous narrative of a communitarian culture, one led but not automatically dominated by its leaders, all of whom sacrificed for the greater good, at times heroically. Yet for all that he recognized the historically contingent aspect of his own construct. A historical age demanded stories of the past, but what of theology, the timeless search for God? Schechter felt the pang of loss, that “old Adam” who grew up believing in the revealed word of God. He fretted that that historicism would prove an inadequate compensation: “we may hope that even its theology, as far as it goes, will ‘do’ for us, though I neither hope nor believe that it will do for those who come after us.”

History became a tool, a method for fixing texts, constructing an intelligible, culturally meaningful portrait of the past for the sake of galvanizing Jews in the present who he hoped to yoke to that sense of collective history and destiny. Public identity requires history to connect individuals to the larger realm of the civic. As a juridical prescriptive, “Catholic Israel” was inadequate: how to differentiate radical change from what the “Universal Synagogue” deemed appropriate reform—via referendum? It worked only as a romantic rendering of the historical community, revering its texts and traditions even as it built upon them.

**III. TOWARD LEADERSHIP**

Eventually practicalities toppled Schechter from his Olympian perch. His increasing fame and role in public Jewish life drew him into practical questions of pedagogy—philosophical questions of visions of Jewish education regarding the Bible and methodologies of teaching. In 1898, he became a professor of Hebrew at the University of London. He delivered his inaugural lecture on Hebrew and the Hebrew Bible, “The Study of the Bible.” He stated openly that his vision revolved around a
commitment to Semitic studies in a context free from prejudice so common in the field of the history of ancient Israel.47

Identity politics drove this lecture. He argued two schools of biblical criticism existed, an old and a new. The tried and true consisted of the conservatives, those who like Ewald, Dillman, Kittel and others. Those thinkers practiced science dispassionately, driven by pure motives rather than a desire to deprecate Judaism’s origins and history. Wellhausen and his ilk comprised the new school, those whose conclusions reflected their anti-Jewish bias, such as their dismissals of Jewish law as nothing but “priestly fetich.” Schechter’s did not reveal his deeper thoughts and feelings; he surely opposed what he regarded as anti-Jewish motivation, but what of the substantive conclusions of the higher criticism? To what extent could he accept criticism if satisfied about the character of the critic? Or were the critic and his scalpel one and the same?

Avoiding laying bare his deeper convictions, he insisted that the Bible needed to be studied systematically and sequentially, from within as it were. First the teacher must lecture “on the Bible” rather than teaching “about the Bible. For the great fact remains that the best commentary on the Bible is the Bible itself...To use a quaint old expression applied to Scripture: ‘Turn it and turn it over again, for the All is therein.’” From this followed other tenets. Teach traditional Jewish Bible scholarship, i.e. the commentaries of the medievals like Rashi; teach the Jewish Bible; and teach the Bible holistically, not as a pretext for abstractions about ethics or theology. He recounted the occasion of his saying to Smith: “You [gentiles] know Hebrew grammar; we know Hebrew.”48

There existed no easy path to reconciling biblical criticism with a narrated sacred history. Each added something to the knowledge of the text—whether as a tool for discovering historical context and original intent, or a prism through which to read the text and the world of its interpreters down through the ages, Jewish and Christian alike. Its readers breathed new life into it; the text illuminated the minds of its readers. But the goals of reading the Bible—the cultural politics of the book—formed always an important subtext in any commentator’s or community’s angle into the text. While Schechter affirmed the historical and the Jewish Bible, anti-Semitic deployment of the further tempered his heterodoxy. It made him reluctant to embrace what he suspected to be true. He chose love of the text over a radical historicism that challenged that love.

How then could he train rabbis in the Bible? This talk suggested a turning inward. He now chose the vertical Bible, the Jewish Bible, placing tradition above the historicized Bible. In this, he resembled a figure he increasingly admired, the radical Anglican turned Roman Catholic John Henry Newman, who in rejecting Anglicanism explicitly chose a religion of tradition, ritual, one existing largely independent of its textual and historical origins. Historicity, in that sense, worked in both


48Solomon Schechter, “The Study of the Bible” in Studies in Judaism, Second Series (Philadelphia: JPS, 1908), pp. 31-53, infra 36-37. A modern anecdote calls this to mind. Harold Kushner told a group of JTS rabbinical students that for all of its merits, the UAHC Torah volume, edited by Gunther Plaut, suffered from its condescending to the biblical world. To paraphrase him, it looked at itself as modern, more knowledgable, and therefore possessing a wisdom that the biblical text lacked. I think Schechter would have reacted similarly to the Plaut volume.
directions. The past gave way to the present; for the pietist, the present could create the past, seeing the old in light of the new.

The lay leaders of a struggling rabbinical seminary called Schechter to a new post in a new land—America. Mostly wealthy German Jews, often liberal in Jewish practice, these men nevertheless saw a need for a counterweight to Reform Judaism, viewed by many as too radical to serve a more traditional Jewry migrating from eastern Europe. That suggested some sense of polarities balanced, rather than a more compelling centering of Jewish life around a common vision.

Schechter’s private and public statements suggest that he saw his role as creating such a center, building “Catholic Israel.” That required articulating a vision that could set on fire the minds of all Jews, not just the rabbis he planned to train at JTS. He needed to talk about the Bible to lay out what this vision demanded. In his first public address upon coming to America in 1902, Solomon Schechter took as his subject the emancipation of Jewish science, the need for Jews to free themselves by liberating their culture from self-hatred and the antagonism and derision of others. “The first thing that we have to recover is the Bible,” he maintained.

There is a story of a Catholic saint who was beheaded by his pagan persecutors, but, like a good saint, he took his head under his arm and walked off. You smile, and think it perhaps too much of a miracle, but a Judaism without a Bible is even a greater miracle. It would mean a headless Judaism, for, gentlemen, Judaism is not merely an ethical society placed under the auspices of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses and Aaron. Nor may you flatter yourselves that a few chapters of ill-digested Kant, a few pages from Matthew Arnold’s Literature and Dogma …you may not think that such ingredients will go for the making of Judaism.

Judaism is a revealed religion, with sacred writings revealing the history of the past, making positive demands on the present and holding out solemn promises for the future. And these sacred writings are the Bible, and they ought to be the possession of every Jew, interpreted and commented on in the Jewish spirit.

Judaism as a mere “ethical society” nodded to Reform in its emphasis on the universal and moral law at the expense of Jewish law. Invoking Kant and Arnold indicated Schechter’s disinterest in nineteenth-century Jewish philosophizing about an essential Jewishness. Revelation and history signaled his faith propositions, axioms that he upheld over and above his views of the documentary hypothesis. That Judaism—even its canonical texts, including the Bible—unfolded over time troubled him little. Rather such evolution expressed the organic power of the people and its civilization. “Solemn promises for the future” hinted at messianism, a reading of Jewish history as sacred not merely materialist. In a nod to the spirit of American democracy, Schechter called for a Jewish people who would possess the Book and create its own commentary. A text-centered people con-

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stituted a kind of civic space of egalitarianism, a space that formed every Jew, who in turn formed a true community. Nomos and narrative: authentic culture featured a text, a people, and an ever-growing chain of interpretation, creating, transmitting, and receiving tradition. All of that rested on the ground of the Bible.

But notice what he omits. He speaks of Judaism more than what the Bible actually is. No notion of authorship or of the book’s historicity, no mention of the book’s transmission and how the passage of time might have effected its text, not a word about its style and rhetoric. In short, Schechter speaks of the idea and doctrine of the Bible inside his view of the idea and doctrine of Judaism, without engaging the challenges of ascertaining what the biblical text was and remained.

The move to America accelerated Schechter’s increasing conservatism, his view of tradition as a counter-Reformation of Jewry. The strength of Reform Judaism challenged him to respond. In England, especially in the academic atmosphere of Cambridge, Schechter donned the liberal garb of modernist at home with text criticism. Now, charged with building a traditionalist alternative to Hebrew Union College, Schechter sought to define his school as a counter-liberal institution.

That explains his most famous pronouncement on Bible criticism, “Higher Criticism—Higher Anti-Semitism”, a talk he gave in 1903, at a dinner in honor of his colleague and rival, Kaufman Kohler, newly installed President of Hebrew Union College. “He decried the latter as that “which burns the soul, though it leaves the body unhurt.” The talk denounced Christian biblicists of that ilk, while subtlely challenging Reform not to engage in splitting the Jewish community over loyalty to its Scriptures. He wrote to Bentwich: “You will understand that I had to be complimentary to Dr. K who was the guest of the evening, but people knew who and what was meant.”50 Schechter believed in the effectiveness of his rhetoric, making his view the dominant one and encouraging Reform to tack back to the middle. He wrote, “I think we are beginning to make progress. The reformers here curse and shout but unconsciously they begin to repeat my assertions and phrases in their papers, whilst the public is entirely sick of them.”51

But his easy confidence in the ascendancy of the Seminary, and of his notion of the Universal Synagogue, proved unfounded. Twentieth-century Jewish life quickly decentralized, generating more not less ideas, ideologies, and organizations. The frontiers of life in America and in Ottoman Palestine attracted entrepreneurs of all sorts, including new voices in cultural and educational matters. Rather than dominating the conversation as a leading rabbi, scholar, and institutional leader a la the British United Synagogue, Schechter became one more voice in the crowded conversation.

As a prominent scholar and leader, Schechter found himself drawn into international conversations about Jewish education as it emerged out from under rabbinic control. In the the time of the Second

50Schechter, “Higher Criticism—Higher Anti-Semitism,” Seminary Addresses and Other Papers, p. 36; Schechter to H. Bentwich, 24 April 1903, HBP (CZA), A100/60.

51Schechter to H. Bentwich, 29 May 1903, HBP (CZA), 100/60.
Aliyah, dominated by socialist currents, Schechter glimpsed the face of what Zionist might portend for Jewish identity and culture. It found no favor in his eyes.

To his friend Asher Ginzberg (Ahad haAm), he confessed his concern about the direction in which Zionist schools in Palestine seemed headed. Political as ever, for Schechter the question of who governed these schools, Russian socialists or more tradition-friendly Jews, remained the paramount issue. Schechter focused his concern on the identity of the school’s Bible teachers.

Both the press and travelers returning from the Holy Land say and respond unanimously that there is presently great outrage in the Land of Israel on account of the migrants exiled there from Russia during the period of terror. Most of them, according to reports from the press and travelers, are of the class of young people or new idlers who have spent a little time in yeshiva, but the majority of whose learning is rather from some academic institution in Switzerland. Their method in the explication of scripture is the method of the extreme critics, such as … the students of Wellhausen and his colleague Stade, who say that nothing has come of Israel. Philosophically, they are students of Nietzsche and his followers, masters of the “superman” and value revision; and in belles lettres they wallow in the mud and filth precisely like the corrupt writers of France and Russia, without matching the aesthetic quality of those writers, and they call themselves “realists,” that is to say, “blood and fire and columns of smoke”…It is reported that they have already established a school for themselves in Jaffa, and that they are educating local children there on the basis of the aforesaid authors and causing desecration of God’s name, desecration of the nation, divisiveness and pent-up hatred towards all who seek the good of the Yishuv – to the extent that the label “Zionist” is abhorrent to intelligent people who can by no means be suspected of being extremists or trouble-makers; and in my heart I am troubled that this new academy will gather more and more riffraff from the Swiss graduates and that they, too, will be added to our enemies and will make a ferment of the land, bringing about a third destruction. It has not escaped my lord that chaos has come to the world and that we are beset by the most terrible curse of the [biblical] rebuke, that “you will be mad on account of what your eyes see,” on account of the persecution and oppression. Our scientific literature, which performed so valorously in the preceding century, has declined extraordinarily, and there remain only a few straggling remnants of the students of Frankel, Zunz and others. The young people from Russia, for many of whom the Torah is their inheritance, had the capacity to glorify Jewish learning after the necessary training in an academy of secular studies. But our hope has been disappointed, because they are merely word jumblers, followers of Wellhausen and repeaters of his inventions; and they do not understand that this entire method is based on the premise of Schleiermacher Wette etc., that the Christian religion is the decisive religion and our entire output is nothing but a corridor to the hall of the apostles. It is superfluous to go on about this matter, because my lord knows as I do, and better, the nature of this method and the enthusiasm of the young people. “The world has been given over to dunces.” Henceforth our entire hope lies in the national movement in the way explicated by his honor; and I have also written some commentary on this subject, as he is aware. But this movement will also be a hindrance if the leaders are not possessed of the religion of Moses and Israel and of
civility. Accordingly, may he permit me to raise before him that it is essential to ensure that both the teachers and the students in the new academy should be mitzvah-observant and dedicated not only to raising the lot of the Jews, but also to raising the lot of Judaism in the sense transmitted to us by our forefathers and rabbis of blessed memory. In simpler terms, it is necessary that neither the teachers nor the students violate that which is sacred to the Jews, by violating the Sabbath and festivals, or by eating non-kosher food, or by teaching that there is no Torah in Israel, just mere literature. They must also guard their mouths, tongues and pens from despicable words. Articles are being published in the world at large that are embarrassing to every civil person, and it is our duty to ensure that the eyes of our young children, who are pure of heart, do not take them in. Woe, what has happened to us!

May my lord forgive me if I have forced my words upon him. I believe that he has previously honored me by reading some of my article; and has in any event seen that I am not of the zealots; and my acquaintances will also attest about me that I am not one of those who jumps to the fore to sit among the great and that I am not self-aggrandizing and do not seek to be recognized as a leader of the generation or as a man of wisdom. I have also attained old age, and I both need and enjoy rest. But I have exceeded my limit and approached him — perhaps improperly — regarding a matter that concerns the life of the nation and its future. Because I have no doubt that on the day that purity and holiness cease from Israel, Israel will also cease to be.\footnote{Solomon Schechter to Ahad haAm, June 9, 1908.}

\section*{IV. Conclusion}

In theoretical terms, Schechter showed himself to be methodologically eclectic. He affirmed the epistemology of history that allowed for the documentary hypothesis, while theologically he affirmed revelation and positivist law. Above all, he relied upon an epistemology of what I would call empathy over cognition, maintaining the uniqueness of a truth that arose within one’s community of discourse.

In that sense, Schechter belongs with those who reflect the romantic tendency in European thought. An emphasis on wholes not parts, the organic rather than the mechanical, reflect his agnosticism regarding Enlightenment ideas. He sought transcendent meaning in the biblical text and empathy with that meaning, with feeling at the core of individual and communal consciousness. Peoplehood thus took on theological and not just social significance, as a kind of theological category unto itself. Schechter’s approach to situating the study and teaching of Bible in a community of meanings remains important. As contemporary Jews, we have expectations for Jewish life that we tend to impose on narrower textual questions, when we should realize that the real question is the nature of the community in which we live. This is another way of borrowing from Robert Orsi’s idea that religion is more about relationships than it is about theology, in the Platonic or Enlightenment sense. Through religious practice, heaven and earth connect via sacred symbols, sacred figures, and texts. Schechter the romantic insisted that Jews must love their tradition; only when one regarded oneself...
as inside of it, no matter how agnostic one might be in intellectual terms, could one find its meaning, and contribute to it.\(^53\)

What is to be done? Does teaching create or buttress belief? In Schechter’s time defenders of traditionalist canonical cultures confronted the decomposition of their worldview and of their communities, and therefore the narrow question of what texts to teach and how to teach them bowed before the larger question of why and for what greater purpose. Any set of ideas, much less theories, must be understood against those larger intellectual and historical realities.

Modernity features two categories of alienation. Historicism freed some intellectually, as it distanced them from what Yerushalmi termed Jewish memory—the lived experience of Jewish life. For others, philosophy and science forced them to ask new questions, state new claims, construct new justifications for those claims about the truth of Judaism via historicism.

History, not philosophy, moved Schechter. That proved strategic or fortunate: because history may be read with passion or dispassion, its narrative may separate the subject from the object, or attach them anew to one’s sacred narrative. Schechter found a way via romanticism to deal with history as positive and continuous. This became a third way into the future: neither a defiant anti-modernism nor a liberalism, in effect a modern illiberalism, corporate in its embrace of particularism and way of life, yet open to new ways of reading texts and epistemologies.

Schechter loved the Bible—it mattered to his beloved rabbis and to their tradition, so it mattered to him. Its reception meant more than its origins. That notion shaped the culture he built at JTS, and Conservative Judaism too—an institution and a movement that has been both larger and smaller than the major issues of 20th-century Jewish life, transcending the petty divisions of modernity but failing to respond fully to its philosophical challenges in the same way that either orthodox or liberal Judaism did. Conservative scholars could study and love a tradition that they no longer quite believed in, a tradition that no longer quite existed. Schechter’s Judaism stood both at the center of Jewish life and occupied a sideline position in the ideological wars.

Schechter’s position is one answer to the question of why any person would try to defend the text in spite of their acceptance of biblical criticism. Contemporary Jewish academics, traditionalist Jews and scholars of ancient Judaism like James Kugel and Jon Levenson, take much the same tack. Kugel responded to one Orthodox critic of his book *How to Read the Bible* by saying that traditionalist Jews don’t practice biblical fundamentalism; that is the point of rabbinic midrash. But these are the nuances of scholars, not movement leaders. Schechter acknowledged as much when he noted that the historical school had its own history, that it might live and die and give way to a more profound

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\(^{53}\) Referring once to a speech of Abraham Lincoln, Schechter mentioned the possibility that William Seward had authored the statement in question. Schechter called this “higher criticism.” He went on to say in effect it mattered little who created the text, it had become a part of Lincolnalia, through the historical process. See “Abraham Lincoln,” in *Seminary Addresses and Other Papers* (Cincinnati: Ark, 1915).
ideology of Jewish life. It worked as a tool of textual study, not as a guide to Jewish praxis. While observant Bible scholars could note the evolution of the text as itself a sign of cultural vitality, ultimately a core legislative question remains: What should Jewish life be, and according to whose authority?

What emerges from all of this is a portrait of a complex person with complicated views regarding the Bible. Perhaps that is the most important legacy of Schechter’s oeuvre: the acceptance of multiple categories of truth—the true and the good, the intellectual and the empathetic. Those were enough for Schechter, with one foot in tradition and one in the academy. Whether or not those categories will suffice for us in our own time remains to be seen.

54 http://www.jameskugel.com/critic.php, see the section “Divine Inspiration.” There Kugel responds to an Orthodox Jew dismayed by his and Kugel’s failure to reconcile traditionalist belief and modern criticism. As Kugel puts it, “When you actually consider Judaism as it is, the role of the Torah in it is really not what you say it is. Ultimately, Jews are not Torah-fundamentalists. On the contrary, our whole tradition is based on adding liberally to what the Torah says (despite Deut. 4:2), sometimes reading its words in a way out of keeping with their apparent meaning, and sometimes even distorting or disregarding its words entirely…. No, this observer would say, it is simply not true that the whole system of halakhah depends on the words of the Torah. Those words were the starting-point, but what has truly proven determinative in them (indeed, what was recognized as such from the start) was the general direction that those words point in and embody, and whose trajectory was then carried forward through the Mishnah and Gemara and all later writings.” I find Kugel’s formulation strikingly close to Schechter’s notion of primary and secondary meanings of the text as corollated with the written and oral Torot, with the latter—and the notion of historicity embedded in that dynamic—ascendant. See as well Jon Levenson’s collected essays, The Hebrew Bible, the Old Testament, and Historical Criticism (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1993).