

## HEBRAISTS AND NON-HEBRAISTS OF THE SEVENTEENTH CENTURY

By LEON ROTH

Having had occasion to refer recently to the collected works of Jeremy Taylor, the well-known seventeenth-century Anglican divine, I noted with renewed astonishment the constant references to post-biblical Hebrew learning with which the pages of seventeenth-century authors are adorned. Taylor was of course a theologian and it was perhaps natural for him to seek rabbinic illustration on points of Christian antiquity or doctrine; and when he writes that he "learned" certain "advice from Maimonides' *Moreh Nevochim*" and that "Maimonides saith excellently to the same purpose in his *Treatise on Repentance*" (*Whole Works*, ed. 1847, VII, 213-14), we may be sure that we have before us a case of genuine interest in the work of the medieval rabbi. David Kimchi, Abenezra, Abarbanel, Elias Levita, Menasseh ben Israel and above all Maimonides—"Ben Maimon, the famous Jew", as he calls him (IX, 381)—served him as useful auxiliaries to learning.

I wondered though whether Taylor's references were direct (from the original texts or in translation), or whether they were taken at second hand from excerpts found in previous or contemporary authors. The same question arises with regard to other learned men of the age. For example, Ben Jonson in *The Alchemist*, a play first produced in 1610, makes a female character

a most rare scholar,  
And is gone mad with studying Broughton's works.  
If you but name a word touching the Hebrew,  
She falls into her fit, and will discourse  
So learnedly of genealogies,  
As you would run mad too, to hear her, sir. (II, I)

Broughton, whose works seem to have had so deleterious an effect on her wits, was (as we are told by William Gifford, the learned editor of Jonson),

an English divine, and a considerable proficient in the Hebrew. . . . He was of a very pugnacious humour, and wasted many years of his life in a most violent dispute with the Archbishop of Canterbury and a Jew

rabbi about the sense of *sheol* and *hades*. This rabbi, Howell says, was of the tribe of Aaron, and of such repute for sanctity at Amsterdam (where he saw him), that "when the other Jews met him, they fell down and kissed his feet".

Broughton's interest in Sheol and Hades had a theological source as he seems to have been much exercised by Jesus' reported descent into Hell; but the ravings (rv, iii) of Ben Jonson's "mad-woman" suggest that the common interest in Hebrew was wider and that the names at least of the Hebrew classical commentators were not unknown to the general public:

For except  
 We call the rabbins, and the heathen Greeks  
 To come from Salem, and from Athens,  
 And teach the people of Great Britain  
 To speak the tongue of Eber and Javan,  
 We shall know nothing. . . .  
 And so we may arrive by Talmud skill,  
 And profane Greek, to raise the building up  
 Of Helen's house against the Ismaelite,  
 King of Thogarma, and his habergions  
 Brimstony, blue and fiery; and the force  
 Of king Abaddon, and the beast of Cittim;  
 Which rabbi David Kimchi, Onkelos,  
 And Aben Ezra do interpret Rome.

It may be objected that this speech is put into the mouth of a supposed madwoman and can hardly be offered as evidence of general knowledge. Yet it certainly raises the problem of the extent of that knowledge and of its ultimate purpose and end. It is to this theme that, in the following notes, I propose to direct attention.

I start with a couple of individual instances.

## II

On 25 January 1659/60 Samuel Pepys records that he bought in St Paul's Churchyard in the City of London a copy of Buxtorf's Hebrew Grammar. It is strange to think of the busy Admiralty servant being concerned with Hebrew, and some future research student will perhaps enrich our historical literature with a dissertation on "The Influence of Hebrew Studies on the Administration of Naval Affairs in England during the Reigns of

Charles II and James II". For we find Pepys a few years later (4 February 1662/3) going to his old school on "Opposition Day"; and after hearing some of the speeches "of the several liberal sciences" (speeches which he naturally found "not so good as ours were in our time"), he returned after lunch to listen to the "head forms" being "posed in Latin, Greek and Hebrew". (Anyone interested in the sort of questions asked on such occasions should refer to the published account of the examination held at the Merchant Taylors' School nearly a century earlier (1572). On that occasion the boys were "tried" by Horne, bishop of Winchester, "in the Hebrew Psalter"; and this may explain why a schoolmaster of the name of John Davis, when he published a translation into English of Buxtorf's *Epitome* in 1656, thought it advantageous to annex to it "an English interlineall interpretation of some Hebrew Texts of the Psalmes, for the profit of young beginners".)

Buxtorf's *Grammar* is remarkable for recognizing the existence of a developed tradition of Hebrew long after the close of the biblical canon, and it evinces a knowledge not only of talmudic but of medieval and even of more recent writers. Buxtorf's own immediate concern is shown by his printing, both in text and translation, of the so-called Christological passages in the Hebrew Bible, while the book concludes, to us surprisingly, with a special section devoted to the German-Hebrew dialect now called Yiddish which he thought for various reasons that all students of Hebrew should make themselves acquainted with.

We are thus introduced to some of the guiding objectives in the seventeenth-century study of Hebrew.

The first, the desiderated conversion of the Jews, was no trivial affair of the local catching of a few souls. It was a historic concern, or rather a cosmic event, since it was held to be a necessary prelude to, or accompaniment of, or element in, the Second Advent, and thus a part of the penultimate, or even the ultimate, scene in the general world-drama. Similarly, religious disputation was more than a quirk, more even than a hobby. It was a serious business, for many, indeed, *the* serious business, of life. The third theme, the study of the Bible as such, became increasingly valued even beyond religious circles, both by scholars as a source- (and problem-) book of history, law and anthropology, and by creative writers as affording subjects for literary treatment. These and kindred topics will engage us later. In particular I shall have to ask how far the knowledge of the

original Hebrew (as opposed to its translated literature) was called into play.

So far as Pepys is concerned, his motive in acquiring books on Hebrew is unknown, but once acquired he seems to have kept them. When he bought another famous thesaurus about this time (it was Stephanus's *Greek* thesaurus for which he offered £4 at one bookseller on 27 December 1661 and had to pay £4 10s. at another a year later), it was not to keep it but to present it to his old school. The thesaurus of Hebrew Grammar he kept for himself. We can still handle it, adorned by his book-plate, in the Pepysian Library at Magdalene, and with it the *Synagoga Judaica*, the *Lexicon Hebraicum et Chaldaicum*, and the *Lexicon Chaldaicum, Talmudicum et Rabbinicum* of Buxtorf the Elder, as well as the Latin version of Maimonides's Guide by Buxtorf the son. Whether Pepys used the books himself is another question. His interest may have been bibliophilic only; or it may have been plainly commercial, since we find him making special note after the Great Fire that the surviving copies of Walton's Polyglotts, according to the booksellers, would be likely to fetch as much as £40 apiece (5 October 1666).

### III

Pepys may be taken as the type of the educated Englishman of the seventeenth century. A Cambridge Master of Arts and a Fellow of the Royal Society, he liked books and possessed a sufficient number of them and interest in them to make him get his relatives to catalogue them according to a system of his own and for himself to copy the catalogue with his own hand. He loved the theatre, and loved chiding himself for his almost daily indulgence in it. He would get up very early and read Cicero before breakfast and business. He would take a book on his many journeys, particularly when on the Thames boat, and would read when walking at his leisure in the London fields. But he was a man of the world and would never allow self-improvement to stand in the way of self-advancement. We may now consider his anti-thesis in his great and strange contemporary, the founder of the Society of Friends, George Fox.

George Fox did not read Cicero or frequent the theatre; nor was he a university man. On the contrary, he was "not taught of men at all", as William Penn says in a famous sentence, "nor learned what he said by study... No arts or parts had any share

in his matter or manner of his ministry" (*Journal*, ed. Nickalls, 1952, XLIII). And not only had he no "arts or parts" himself. He denied their value in others. At the very beginning of his mission (*ibid.* pp. 7, 8, 11, etc.) "he had received an opening from the Lord that to be bred at Oxford or Cambridge was not sufficient to fit a man to be a minister of Christ". And so he called to men by the witness of the Spirit and, in the Spirit, claimed the status of the first apostles. Yet his very insistence on the words of the Bible turned him to the original languages; and it is curious to observe how he sought to clinch his opposition to the taking of an oath by quoting what he seems to assert to have been the original words of the prohibition (Matt. v. 34) in the mouth of Jesus: *Lo tishshabium becol dabar* (p. 483). This was at the Lancaster assizes of August 1664. Two years later (p. 505) Fox tells us of a "young man convinced in Scarborough town whilst I was in prison, the bailiff's son; and he came to dispute and spoke Hebrew to me; and I spoke in Welsh and bid him fear God". There are two points of interest here. The first is that Fox expresses no surprise that a young man, a bailiff's son, should address him in Hebrew; the second is that, replying to him in Welsh, Fox should bid him, without further ado, to fear God. (I assume that the young man came to Fox with Hebrew texts and that Fox told him that he should not be puffed up with learning but fear God; but perhaps there is a better explanation.) In any case we do know that Fox was acquainted with Hebrew, and I pass the evidence in summary review.

(a) First, there are preserved a couple of Fox's Hebrew exercises in his own hand. These consist of two small sheets containing the following in English characters:

<i>Sheet one</i>	iom rebeni	day forth
	iom shelishi	day third
	iom sheni	day seckond
	arbagnim	four times ten
		forty
<i>Sheet two</i>	kol—	lightness or wildnes
	tzadah—	the hunted
	tzavvar—	the neck
	tzagnadenu—	our steps or our outgoings
	pe—	his mouth
	pele—	a worke of wonder
	gnam—	a peopel
gnetzem—	a bone	

gnarah— he was naked  
 gnol— a yoke  
 gnor— the skin  
 gnalol— the litel child

The first sheet is of interest in view of the Quakers' antipathy to the conventional names given to the days of the week, and their substituting for them of the ordinal adjective coupled with the word "day" as in Hebrew; the second, in that it would seem to indicate some of the biblical verses which were being used by Fox in his disputations. But they hardly suggest that Fox was a Hebrew *scholar*. Incidentally, all the above is, as I have said, in the English characters of Fox's somewhat untutored hand; but there is preserved in the British Museum, and reproduced in the illustrated edition of Green's *History*, a *Hebrew* alphabet written by Fox.

(b) Secondly, there is the quotation from Matthew used by Fox at the Lancaster assizes in Hebrew. This, according to Mr Cadbury in his essay in Brinton's *Children of Light* (Macmillan, 1938), is from Hutter's *Novum Testamentum Harmonicum* (1502), a copy of which was in Fox's personal library; so it need not detain us. In any case the issue, and presumably the use of the text, was not original to the Quakers and had been agitated by the Anabaptists and the Mennonites for over a century.

(c) Thirdly, as an appendix to Fox's *The Great Mystery of the Great Whore Unfolded* (London, 1659), there is a list of *Several Scriptures Corrupted by the Translators*; but these are mostly from the New Testament. There are one or two from the Hebrew but they are of no philological significance. (One of them offers a puzzle. On p. 374 there is a new translation proposed of Amos iii. 6: "Shall not the Lord do somewhat?", instead of "and the Lord hath not done it". But on the next page the new translation proposed for the verse is "and the Lord hath not done it", that is, the old translation just rejected. But I suppose that something went wrong here at the printers. In any case the new translation, whatever it was, is no proof of proficiency in Hebrew.)

(d) Fourthly, there are the "papers to the Jews written during visits to Holland and printed in Hebrew" to which Mr Cadbury makes reference in his epilogue to the Cambridge edition of the *Journal* by Nickalls. I have examined all those preserved in the library of the Society of Friends. So far as I could observe they are reducible to two only, and of these the substantial one

is not by Fox but by the lady who became his wife, Margaret Fell.

(i) Fox's own paper is a Message to the Jews on one small sheet of sixteen lines in somewhat crude type which tells the Jews that the Messiah has already come (cf. *Journal*, p. 705). It is only noticeably Quaker by its reiterated use of the word OR (light). It is dated in the traditional Hebrew (rabbinic) way and according to the traditional reckoning (Tammuz תמזז ה'תש"ד = 1684). From the Hebrew I should guess that it was not translated by a Jew. The Hebrew dating might of course be due to the printer.

(ii) The other paper, by Margaret Fell, is a more ambitious affair. There are preserved two editions. That in Hebrew alone, entitled *Sheelatb Shalom BeAbavah*, is a beautifully printed pamphlet of sixteen pages on excellent paper in the delightful Dutch cursive rabbinic type. It is undated and bears no printer's name, and concludes with a challenge on many theological questions addressed to Jewish rabbis and scholars. There is also a supplement signed by Samuel Fisher, an Oxford M.A. of Fox's entourage (on whom see Braithwaite's *Beginnings of Quakerism*, 1912, pp. 288-94 and H. J. Cadbury's essay "Early Quakerism and Uncanonical Law", in the *Harvard Theological Review*, July 1947, pp. 183 f., 193 f.). The other edition preserved is in Hebrew and English in parallel columns, the English being entitled *A Loving Salutation to the Seed of Abraham*, printed in London in 1660. The Hebrew of this pamphlet, which is much better than that of Fox's paper, is clearly from a Jewish translator; and Mr Cadbury, in the essay I have drawn on already, quotes (p. 155) a manuscript letter from Fox in which he mentions as a possible translator "A great teacher of the Jews which is come forth from Poland. He comes to meeting. He writes himself Samuel Levi ben Asshur, a Jewish Rabbi, etc. He wants imployment and is very poor. He is very perfect in the Hebrew. He reads the Syriack Testament without pricks as readily, I think, as I do English." From this letter too it would appear that Fox did not claim for himself proficiency in Hebrew.

There is a minor historical point which is perhaps worth mentioning in connexion with this and earlier Quaker pamphlets to the Jews. There is extant a letter from William Ames, then minister of the English Congregation at Amsterdam, to Margaret Fell, in which he writes:

There is a Jew at Amsterdam that by the Jews is cast out (as he himself and others saith) because he owns no other teacher but the light and he

sent for me and I spoke to him and he was pretty tender and doth own all that is spoken; and he said to read of Moses and the prophets without was nothing to him except he came to know it within; and so the name of Christ it is like he doth own; I gave order that one of the Dutch copies of thy book should be given to him and he sent me word he would come to our meeting, but in the meantime I was imprisoned.

This letter is dated 1657; and Mr Cadbury, who prints it in his essay in Brinton's *Children of Light* and discusses it further in the first volume of the Warburg Institute's *Medieval and Renaissance Studies* (I, 1941, p. 130) under the title *Spinoza and a Quaker Document of 1657*, assumes that the reference is to Margaret Fell's *For Menasseh Ben Israel, The Call of the Jews out of Babylon*, translated into Dutch by William Ames and published in Dutch in 1657. Mr Cadbury's identification of the Jew who was "cast out" with Spinoza is, I imagine, beyond doubt. The excommunication took place in 1656, and after it Spinoza stayed on in Amsterdam writing a defence some part of which is plausibly supposed to be embedded in the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. As is well known, he was closely connected with a pietistic sect in Holland, the tenets of which were not far distant from those of the Quakers.

To return to George Fox: it would seem clear that the published estimate of his early disciples that "he attained both to the reading, writing and understanding of Hebrew" (Mary Swift in *Journal F.H.S.* VI, quoting a pamphlet of 1691), is on the evidence excessive, in spite of the fact that Fox spent some of his time on board ship during the voyage to America discussing "the signification of the four rivers of Eden according to the Hebrew" (*Journal*, p. 585), and debated publicly with Roger Williams in Rhode Island on the meaning of the words "Abi Ad" (Cadbury in Brinton, pp. 138-9). It is thus understandable that when he wanted to know "whether heathen or Jews used priests in marriage ceremonies" he applied to "Richard Richardson, Schoolmaster" (*ibid.*) rather than to original sources of information. It was at a later date in his life that he came into contact, in Lady Conway's house at Ragley, with her mentor, the Hebraist<sup>1</sup> and celebrated Cabbalist Van Helmont. Van Helmont, recently turned Quaker, at the first (we are told) "helped Fox in answering some anti-Quaker publications"; but afterwards he

<sup>1</sup> In contradistinction to Henry More (below p. 214, n. 1).

produced some "Cabbalistical publications of his own in which Fox found something to criticise" (Cadbury in appendix to Fox's *Journal*, p. 742).

## IV

From these individual cases we may turn to a wider formulation of our theme.

The seventeenth century is famous in the history of scholarship for the so-called quarrel between the Ancients and Moderns. If we ask on which side Hebrew was to be found, the answer is, on neither. In *this* century, the seventeenth, Hebrew and Hebrew books were not, as they were in the preceding century, the sixteenth, a contending party. When Boileau, and afterwards Temple, mustered their forces and deployed their troops, the roll-call included Greek and Latin names only. There is a summing-up at the end of the century by Swift, and the officers commanding were, on the one side, Homer, Pindar, Euclid, Plato and Aristotle, Herodotus and Livy, and Hippocrates; while on the other—but we need not worry about them since they too contain no Hebraists, and I only mention one of them, Paracelsus, because of the felicitous command given him of the "stink-pot-fingers" (i.e. presumably, the scientists). A famous modern book by M. Hazard of the Académie française deals with the crisis in European consciousness from 1680 to 1715. If we go through it with a tooth-comb and remove any references we may find in it to Hebrew and Hebraic learning, the book remains much as it was. When Montaigne wrote his great essay on the Institution and Education of Children he makes no mention of Hebrew. On the contrary, he pleads for the training of the judgement and sense of proportion rather than the inculcation of learning (a "well-composed and temperate brain", as he puts it, not a "full-stuffed head"); and he regards even Greek and Latin, however much "great ornaments in a gentleman", as "purchased at over-high a rate". Montaigne's book appeared in the last quarter of the preceding century, the sixteenth, Florio's English version at the beginning of the seventeenth, in 1603; but we find much the same outlook, and much the same turning away from the Classics and *a fortiori* from Hebrew, in the *Thoughts Concerning Education* of John Locke (1693). Educationists, or at any rate the progressive educationalists, had begun to have their doubts about any sort of literary education; and a revival of interest in Hebrew had to wait till the middle of the

next century, the eighteenth, when the Hebraist Robert Lowth in his *Lectures on the Poetry of the Hebrews* (1753), to be followed by Herder, helped to pave the way for the Romantic revolt.

This was preceded by an interesting trend in seventeenth-century creative literature: the efflorescence, not to say effervescence, of biblical themes. This is seen in the epic, the drama, even in satire. Sylvester's translation of Du Bartas's "enormous pseudo-epic on the Creation...made a great impression", we are told, "on contemporary England"; and Dr Tillyard, from whose *Milton* (p. 8) I have culled this piece of information, quotes in his book on the *English Epic* (p. 423) a passage from Cowley's Preface to his *Davideis* (1656) in which he speaks of "this and the other bright and magnificent subjects of the like nature the Holy Scripture affords, and proffers, as it were, to Poesie...". Our question is whether a knowledge of the original Hebrew was involved, and I think we may take it that in the vast majority of instances it was not; the accepted versions sufficed. A possible exception is Milton and, greatly daring, I must say something about him.

For Milton is a special case. He is known to have learned Hebrew. He wrote on Hebraic subjects; and he is asserted by one well-known modern student, the late M. Saurat, to have derived the kernel of his general outlook, together with some of its unique and peculiar features, from later Hebrew sources.

To be brief, my own opinion on this much-contested subject may be summarized as follows:

(i) Milton's knowledge of Hebrew as evidenced in his translations from the Psalms, translations made before his blindness and when he was at the height of his powers, was not that of a great student even of biblical Hebrew.

(ii) The tone of his complaint in the *Areopagitica* against the Massorettes "with their Keri and Kethib" does not suggest wide general Hebrew learning; and its bare repetition in the *Apology for Smectymnuus* reinforces the impression of limitation.

(iii) There is no proof, so far as I know, that Milton even conceived of a literature in Aramaic such as that in which much post-biblical Hebrew learning is enshrined. His reference in the essay "Of education" to the acquisition of the Hebrew tongue (which "at a set hour might have been gained") is specifically directed to the end "that the Scriptures may be now read in their original". It would seem reasonable to suppose therefore that the words immediately following: "whereto it would be no impossibility

to add the Chaldee and Syrian dialect” would refer to the same end, i.e. the study of biblical Aramaic, and not to the study of the Talmud or Zohar. This conclusion would accord well with the evidence of his nephew Edward Phillips that his pupils “studied Hebrew, Chaldee and Syriac so far as to go through the Pentateuch in Hebrew, to make a good entrance into the Targum or Chaldee paraphrase, and to understand several chapters of St Matthew in the Syriac Testament”.

(iv) Even allowing, as Dr Tillyard magnanimously does, the central importance of the passage on “retraction” (*Tzimtzum*) in *Paradise Lost*, VII, 170–3 indicated by M. Saurat, it would appear that this and other Cabbalistical doctrines were no secret mysteries concealed in unread texts of esoteric doctrine but, by this time, almost commonplaces. Miss Nicolson’s study of Milton’s friend at Christ’s, Henry More (*Studies in Philology*, xxii, 1925), is quite decisive on this point;<sup>1</sup> and we may recall the passage in Locke’s *Essay on the theology of Space* (iv, x; see the note in Fraser’s edition, vol. 2, pp. 321 f.) which puzzled Locke’s French secretary and translator, Le Coste, and which was only cleared up by Sir Isaac Newton. Indeed, M. Saurat throws up his own case by indicating a possible source for Milton’s views in Robert Fludd and others.

(v) M. Saurat himself, as is shown in his later book *Victor Hugo et les dieux du peuple*, underestimated both the difficulty of

<sup>1</sup> More himself “freely professed his ignorance . . . in the Oriental tongues and Rabbinical learning” (to Lady Conway, March 1671–2, p. 355); and we find him writing to Lady Conway (August 1674, p. 390): “What your Ladyship says, that Monsieur Van Helmont will find very few persons, if any, that have so great a value for the writing of the Jews as himself, or will think the publishing of the book of so much consequence as he does, is to me hugely possible.” As appears clearly from his description of a dinner party he gave to discuss what was to be Knorr von Rosenrath’s *Cabbala Denudata*, his knowledge of Hebrew and Hebrew literature was at second hand. What interested him he read in Latin translations.

So for that matter did the genuine Hebraists. The learned Cambridge divine John Spencer, as his MS. notes in the margins of his copy of his *De Legibus Hebraeorum* (preserved in the University Library) show, read Maimonides’s *Guide* in Buxtorf’s translation; and since he quotes (e.g. p. 353) from Voss’s annotations in his Latin edition of Maimonides’s *De Idolatria* (Amsterdam, 1642), it may be assumed that all his many references to that treatise too were derived from the Latin. (I am not censuring the Master of Christ’s for using a crib but pointing out that even for so epoch-making a book as his undoubtedly was Hebraic learning was available outside of Hebrew.)

reading the Zohar in the original and the inadequacies of the French version and commentators he was forced to rely on.

My own view is thus that the claim that Milton had any special knowledge of Hebrew and Hebraic learning has no support in the available evidence. He is however of interest for our theme none the less. In the Cambridge MSS. described by Masson (II, 105 ff.) we have Milton's own preliminary jottings of subjects for poetic treatment. These, fifty-three in all, are purely biblical (they include, besides *Paradise Lost* and *Adam in Banishment*, themes like the Flood, Abram in Egypt, Sodom, Dinah, the Golden Calf, Corah, etc.; and eight from the New Testament) and show no knowledge of or interest in any Hebraic subject beyond the bounds of the biblical literature available in translation. *Samson Agonistes*, says Dr Tillyard (p. 329), contains "scarcely a word which could not be referred quite plausibly to the story of Samson as narrated in the Old Testament". Milton is thus of importance not for his alleged secret Hebraic lore but for his practical recognition of the fact that material for literary composition could be found in biblical as well as in classical literature.

This of course opens a wide field. When Dryden wished to satirize contemporary politics he used the biblical figures of Absalom and Ahitophel, Zimri, David and (anachronistically) Corah, adding in a second edition Doeg and Og. There was some parallel between David and Charles II, and Absalom and the Duke of Monmouth; but would the biblical Doeg have recognized himself in Elkanah Settle, or the King of Bashan in Thomas Shadwell? From the point of view of the Hebrew language we should perhaps note that Dryden uses a couple of Hebrew words, *Zaken* for a "Member of the House of Commons" and *Abethdin* for a "Lord Chancellor in general"; but these, I imagine, he could have picked up from a friend, as too his "*Sagan* of Jerusalem" for Dr Compton, bishop of London. Dryden was a good classical scholar and published versions of many difficult Greek and Latin books, while from the French he translated into English Maimbourg's *History of the League* which was so felicitously plagiarized by Dumas; but he was educated not in the Merchant Taylors' School but at Westminster and, so far as I know, had no Hebrew.

The same may be said of his great French contemporary Racine who, at Mme de Maintenon's instance, after *Esther* (1689) (an understandable, although ticklish, subject for the ladies of

St Cyr), produced the fierce and gloomy *Athalie* (1691). The subtitle announces the play as a "tragedy drawn from the Holy Scriptures"; and its subject, described by Mr Turnell as "the struggle between a religious order based on *loi*... and a pagan order based on force and bolstered up by ignoble superstition" (*The Classical Moment*, p. 221), was understood at the time more simply as a hint to the French to imitate the British "Glorious Revolution". The theme is thus, at least outwardly, as biblical as Milton's but it would seem to owe nothing to a knowledge of Hebrew. Not that one would have expected it. Racine was brought up in Port Royal, indeed for three years (Port Royal having been disbanded) he was Port Royal's only pupil; and although his tutors were among the famous scholars of the age, the language curriculum of the school comprised, with Spanish and Italian, only Latin and Greek.

## V

It would seem then that, from the point of view of the study of Hebrew, the creative writers of the seventeenth century are disappointing. The same may be said, in spite of a couple of casual references in Bacon and of Locke's excursion into Hebrew lexicography,<sup>1</sup> of the philosophers. There is one apparent exception. A formidable catalogue of references to rabbinic literature could be drawn up from the *Pensées* of Pascal (e.g. §§446, 630, 635, 642, 687, 688, 758, ed. Brunschvicq); but they would seem to be taken from the then recently published manuscript *Pugio Fidei* (Paris, 1651; cf. *Pensées*, §726) of the thirteenth-century Spanish Hebraist and polemist Raimun Marti.<sup>2</sup>

Yet, as Bacon noted early in the century, "Studies serve for

<sup>1</sup> Locke, *Essay*, III, vi, 44-7. See too John Lough in *The Library*, VIII (1953), 242, 243, 254 and 255, for Locke's interest (but evidently through Lightfoot) in Maimonides and Hebrew and Jewish books.

<sup>2</sup> In *Pensées*, §753 (Tourneur, éd. de Cluny, 1942, §277) read *Juifs for Grecs* with Brunschvicq (large edition), n. 2, comparing Tourneur, §462, n. 4; and *les for trois* with Tourneur. We have then the familiar saying of *Ketbouboth* 111a which I have no doubt Pascal found quoted somewhere in the *Pugio*.

Leibniz's extracts and summaries from Maimonides's *Guide* are from Buxtorf's Latin version. (It may be remarked that these were discovered and first printed *after* the learned and cautious Salaman Munk, in his edition of the Arabic text (1, 186), had called attention to the resemblance between Leibniz's monad and the atom of the Kalam as described in *Guide*, I, 51. Cf. the additional note in Munk, II, 377.)

delight, for ornament, and for ability", and we have still to consider one of the remarkable phenomena of the age, the class of lawyer-humanist of which the great exemplar was Hugo Grotius and its finished representative in England John Selden. Selden, reported in Budaeus's *Lexicon* as "commonly called the great dictator of learning of the English nation", was not only a biblical but a rabbinic scholar; and he used his rabbinic scholarship in the service of both national and international issues of urgent present importance. His *History of Tithes*, for example, sought to settle that burning contemporary problem by literary and historical analysis of relevant texts, including many from talmudic and later rabbinic literature. Like Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*<sup>1</sup> it was Erastian in tendency since it proved that tithes were not payable by divine, but by state, law; and like Spinoza's book it aroused a furore which resulted in its public suppression. His later work, the *Mare Clausum* (1635) which Pepys studied by way of business and a copy of which is found in his library, was also based in part on rabbinic sources; and it is of great interest to observe how he treats the text of the Mishnah and the dependent Halachic discussions as embodying legal precedents of juridical importance. This book was more pleasing to authority than the *History of Tithes* since it asserted, as against Grotius, the *English* sovereignty of the seas; and it may therefore be supposed to have helped to make familiar, if not to endear, the study of post-biblical Hebrew.

An even more striking instance of the employment of later Hebrew learning in the resolution of present discontents is provided by Selden's huge treatise on Natural and International Law; on which one may observe:

(i) It is in intention Hebraic specifically as is shown by its title—*De Jure Naturali et Gentium juxta Disciplinam Ebraeorum*;

(ii) Both literary men and jurists complained of it that it was all rabbinical learning and no rational theory. "He only copies the Rabbis and hardly reasons at all", grumbled Le Clerc. "He does not draw the principles of natural law from the pure lights of reason", said Barbeyrac, "but only from the Seven Precepts

<sup>1</sup> Much of the learning of this treatise, as well as its fundamental doctrine, would seem to derive from earlier treatises quoted in, or printed with, the *Abscondita Sapientiae* of the polymath Joseph del Medigo (cf. *Chronicon Spinozanum*, II, Hague, 1922). But Spinoza was a good Hebraist in his own right and had read widely in later Hebrew literature. See the casual character of his own note in the second page of *Theol.-Pol.* cap. xv.

given to Noah." These verdicts, among many others of similar tenor to be found in the preface to the 1726 edition of Selden's *Works*, suggest that Selden's considerable influence on seventeenth-century legal thought owed at least something to his Hebrew erudition. On the quality of this erudition there has been some discussion, but the late Dr Herzog's opinion may in this matter be considered final. "Very few non-Talmudists", he wrote (*Pub. Soc. Jewish Jurisprudence*, 1931, no. 3, p. 10), "Israelite or non-Israelite, have reached Selden's level of Talmudic-Rabbinic erudition. It is really uncanny that a man who certainly was not a Talmudist should have been able to produce what Selden has produced in the domain of Rabbinica."

## VI

Yet, as Nathan Isaacs observes in his essay in the Oxford *Legacy of Israel*: "Natural law is not made by erudition. Even Selden brought back from the Hebrews a mere confirmation of the law of his own country." The cynic might say that we would have guessed as much. One learned Hebraist writes a *Mare Liberum*, another a *Mare Clausum*; but the issue, although weighted on either side by learned quotations, does not depend on them. Not only natural law, nothing at all, can be made by erudition. But even so, an important case can be offered for erudition, and with a consideration of it this discussion may be brought to a close.

Erudition—pure scholarship—may open new gates for conjecture; erudition may break down (as it may also, it must be conceded, create) a too narrow obstinacy; erudition may give to what is in fact a novelty the requisite appearance, and authority, of the respectable. And erudition may warn against mistakes. I am reminded of Bagehot's well-known remarks on the influence exerted by a constitutional monarch grown grey in the public service. He has no power. He reigns but does not rule. He can originate no legislation, impose no veto. He is servant, not master. But he can say to a brash Prime Minister: Let me see now,

Have you referred to the transactions which happened during such and such an administration, I think about X years ago? They afford an instructive example of the bad results which are sure to attend the policy which you propose. You did not at that time take so prominent a part in public life as you do now, and it is possible that you do not

fully remember all the events. I should recommend you to recur to them, and to discuss them with your older colleagues who took part in them. It is unwise to recommend a policy which so lately worked so ill.

A contemporary anecdote relates that this is exactly how on one occasion Selden himself behaved. In 1643, we are told (*D.N.B.* s.v. p. 217),

Selden, with some other members of both houses, sat in the assembly of divines at Westminster. In the debates of this body (says Whitlocke) "Mr Selden spoke admirably, and confuted divers of them in their own learning. And sometimes, when they had cited a text of Scripture to prove their assertion, he would tell them, 'Perhaps in your little pocket-bibles with gilt leaves' (which they would often pull out and read) 'the translation may be thus, but the Greek or the Hebrew signifies thus and thus', and so would totally silence them."

So even in an assembly of divines erudition has its uses, and Hebrew studies can still glory in Selden just as Selden gloried in them. Indeed, Selden would seem to have been a man in whom the highest gifts of learning in general were both exemplified and vindicated. This is well expressed in the lines of another great scholarly humanist of the century, lines which might be offered as the true portrait of the ideal scholar in any age, the lines of the allocution to Selden of Ben Jonson:

Stand forth my object then: You that have been  
 Ever at home, yet have all countries seen;  
 And, like a compass, keeping one foot still  
 Upon your centre, do your circle fill  
 Of general knowledge; watched men, manners too;  
 Heard what times past have said, seen what ours do!  
 Which grace shall I make love to first? Your skill,  
 Or faith in things? or is't your wealth and will  
 T'inform and teach? or your unwearied pain  
 Of gathering? bounty in pouring out again?  
 . . . sharpness of all search, wisdom of choice,  
 Newness of sense, antiquity of voice!  
 (*Works*, ed. Cunningham, III, 301-2)

## VII

If I may sum up the results of this desultory inquiry, I should say that Hebraic studies, apart from their own proper scholarly field—and when we recall the names of men like Pococke, Lightfoot and Spencer as well as the Buxtorfs and Selden we see

the quality of seventeenth-century scholarship—were of little special significance. Few creative minds of the century seem to have had much knowledge of Hebrew, and hardly any can be said to have derived from their Hebrew knowledge what they could not have derived elsewhere.

Yet we may, I think, draw some consolatory reflections which are of some general importance.

Language and literature, if I may be so unmodern as to suggest such a thing, are the repository of thought, and it is the thought that matters. Thought may be translated. A translation is, as a rule, inferior to its original; but perhaps it is only an original which can *be* translated which is worth the prolonged attention of mankind. Much Hebraic thought, by which I mean thought of which the original expression was in Hebrew, was, in translation, behind the characteristic movement of the seventeenth century. Men like Fox and Pascal, great original geniuses though they were, owe much to the Hebraists although they themselves knew little of Hebrew.

Our own age is so bemused by the self-vaunted glories of the physical sciences that it commends the seventeenth century as the century in which modern physical science first came to its own; forgetting that the creative vision of science is not itself a product of science and that the lasting monuments of an age are not its scientific text-books but, even in the realm of science itself, its visions and enthusiasms. M. Montgredien, at the end of his survey of seventeenth-century literary France, notes the emergence in that country, towards the end of the century, of a profound interest in man: it is morals and politics, economics and history, which began to attract the finest minds; the striving which was once spent on rules of drama and canons of taste created the atmosphere which made possible the emergence, later, of Montesquieu, Voltaire and Rousseau. To me it would seem clear that it was this driving interest which set the tone to the whole seventeenth century. Pascal was only incidentally a pioneer experimentalist and a precursor of the inductive logic of Mill. He was both in his own feeling and in historical fact an exponent of a fresh type of religious thinking, a type which, although in some respects similar to that of recent fashion, surpasses it both in simplicity and profundity, and (not unimportantly) in conciseness.

To an attentive ear, the seventeenth century, for all its boisterousness and self-confidence, was, like our own and per-

haps for similar reasons, a century of seeking and of doubt. The quest for the inward light was not confined to George Fox. The great concern of the Cambridge Platonists, we are told, was with the personal life of the soul; and whether in that they were disciples of Plotinus, or the Cabbala, or, as the Reader in Rabbinic at Cambridge has shown reason for thinking, Maimonides, they found their support and strength in the old Hebrew books. As Dr Tillyard observes in connexion with the famous rejection of Greek thought in *Paradise Regained* (IV, 195 ff.): "It was in the Bible, especially in the Psalms, that [Milton] found expressed what for him was of all things most important, the communion of the isolated human being with God. Hence, and not from mere Stoic passivity, was derived the 'paradise within' which alone made life worth while" (p. 309).

The very phrase "isolated human being" rings strangely in the ears of this generation, a generation taught to think in terms of collectivity. Milton's own concluding words suggest a middle way. "In them", he says, that is, in the words of the Hebrew wisdom,

"In them is plainest taught, and easiest learnt,  
What makes a nation happy and keeps it so."