

Preface

The prospect of political emancipation heralded for Jews in German lands a geographic shift from outside the body politic into its very midst. Of the many wrenching adjustments that shift would dictate, none was more disorienting than the mastering of a new language. When Glueckel of Hameln in the first quarter of the eighteenth century sought comfort in a diary after the death of her husband, she still wrote in Yiddish, even though she was hardly unworldly. A long status of exclusion had deprived Ashkenazic Jews of a common language in which to explain themselves to their Christian neighbors. The often disparaging literature about Judaism which was available had not been composed by Jews.

Mendelssohn's superb translation into German of the Torah and the Book of Psalms marks the determined effort to accelerate that inescapable transition. No less important, German Jews were not to enter into unchartered waters without a rendition of Scripture in a Western language soon destined to become their own. The centrality of Luther's translation of the Bible in German culture was emblematic for Mendelssohn, but not sufficient, because every translation is also an interpretation. Unlike Luther's Bible though, Mendelssohn's did not come out unaccompanied by commentary. Its Hebrew *Biur* averred resoundingly that Mendelssohn rejected Luther's principle of *sola scriptura*. Readers were to be guided to appreciate the plain meaning of Scripture (unemended) and all its subtleties as understood by medieval exegetes and modern rationalists. Mendelssohn strove to restore a tradition of *p'shat* long extinct in the world of Ashkenaz.

The present splendid volume of essays is a valuable study of the astonishing success of Mendelssohn's pioneering effort not in terms of sales or reprints but in terms of influence. It is not often that the proceedings of an academic conference coalesce so elegantly into a coherent whole, with each essay illuminating a related aspect of a common phenomenon infinitely complex. Separately and searchingly, these sparkling essays highlight the degree to which Mendelssohn's project engendered subsequent German translations and commentaries of the Bible (in part or whole) by pulpit rabbis, the degree to which it generated catechisms and children's Bibles for Jewish schools and finally the degree to which it also shaped conceptions of biblical poetry and images of God. Even Mendelssohn's staunch defense of the reliability and sanctity of the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible which prompted continued heated debate far into the twentieth century is touched on by several essays in this rich volume. In short, these proceedings are

yet again fresh evidence of Mendelssohn's broad ongoing impact once he had thrust the Hebrew Bible into the heart of German Jewish consciousness.

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