

Introduction

“Native of Poland and Professing the Arts in London” was the way Solomon Yom Tov Bennett (1767–1838) described himself on the title page of his first book published in 1809. As an immigrant from Polotsk in Belarus, formally Poland before 1772 but subsequently under Russian rule, he still saw himself as a Polish native. His self-promotion as an artist was his way of introducing himself to his readers as a skilled copper engraver. What was missing in this title was a self-acknowledgment of his Jewish origin and, with it, the significant biblical and Judaic learning that informed the rest of the book he was presenting to the English public. What was important to him at that moment as a relative newcomer to England was to underscore his birthplace and his artistic credentials. His Jewish identity would become self-evident from the opening pages of his composition.

Bennett was indeed an accomplished biblical scholar and a Jewish thinker as well as an artist of considerable talent, and, as we shall see, he did not conceal his Jewish identity; in fact, he brandished it. But acknowledging his past as a Pole and his status as an artist in England was also vital in defining his selfhood. This book is a study of his life and thought as it evolved from Polotsk to Copenhagen and Berlin through his arrival and long tenure in London. In his yearning to acquire secular learning and live in open societies, he could be labeled a *maskil* [a Jewish proponent of the Enlightenment]; however, his experience was different from that of most *maskilim* because it was ultimately shaped in an English environment where social intercourse with the non-Jewish world was made easier and more accessible in a relatively liberal and open cultural environment, in which certain elites had a keen interest in biblical and Hebraic studies. Bennett could not tolerate the arrogance and ignorance of the rabbinic establishment that he perceived and he acted defiantly against it, attempting to usurp its prerogatives and authority. Both for economic and social reasons, he felt the need to seek out and legitimate his expertise before a highly educated group of English literati who found him knowledgeable and useful for their own intellectual purposes. He entered their circle and sought their support without radically assimilating or even considering conversion. On the contrary, he was a committed Jew and a man of faith who had little interest in orthopraxis but held strong feelings about the moral and literary integrity of Judaism, its spiritual mission, and its contribution to Western civilization. He was fascinated by Second Temple Judaism, not unlike other *maskilim*; but for unique reasons, he considered this period in Jewish history as a political and spiritual return to the original core of Abrahamic belief and a repudiation of the excesses of First Temple monarchy. He saw the

ideal and most authentic Jewish polity to be like that of the English: a limited monarchy based on democratic principles, neither an absolute monarchy nor a theocracy. His biblicism, his anti-monarchical views, and his emphasis on the spiritual essence of Judaism mark the very core of his proud Jewish identity. His abiding sense of the moral mission of Jews to the world along with an appreciation of diasporic Jewish life—a preference to be a stranger in a foreign land rather than a ruler of one's own, as he put it—also made him stand out among other contemporary thinkers.

Modern scholarship has hardly noticed Solomon Yom Tov Bennett. Some seventy years ago, Arthur Barnett did reclaim Bennett from oblivion in a well-researched and pioneering essay on his life, written for fellow Anglo-Jewish historians;¹ and more than one hundred years ago, Salli Kirschstein, the art collector and historian, devoted a chapter in his book on Jewish engravers to some of Bennett's copper engravings created during the four years he lived in Berlin.² Subsequently, he has been mentioned in several different overviews of Anglo-Jewish history, including my own, based heavily on Barnett's more thorough account.³

In returning to Bennett's life and thought, I wish to make a case for the significance of this singular writer, artist, and public figure based on a deeper immersion in his writings and those of some of his contemporaries, both already known and more recently discovered. Bennett well exemplifies the intellectual path of several notable Polish Jewish immigrants to western Europe, in this case, to Great Britain.⁴

1 Arthur Barnett, "Solomon Bennett 1761–1838: Artist, Hebraist, and Controversialist," *Jewish Historical Society of England Transactions* 17 (1951–1952): 91–111. Note that I do not give the same birthdate; on this see below. See also Arthur Barnett, *The Western Synagogue through Two Centuries (1781–1961)* (London: Valentine Mitchell, 1961), 51–55.

2 Salli Kirschstein, *Juedische graphiker aus der zeit von 1625– 1825* (Berlin: Der Zirkel Architektur-Verlag, 1918), 15–27. See also Alfred Rubens, *A Jewish Iconography*, rev. edn. (London: Jewish Museum, 1981), index, and his "Early Anglo-Jewish Artists," *Jewish Historical Society of England Transactions* 14 (1935–1939): 112–117.

3 Todd M. Endelman, *The Jews of Georgian England, 1714– 1830* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), index, s.v. "Bennett, Solomon"; David S. Katz, *The Jews in the History of England, 1484– 1850* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2002), index, s.v. "Bennett, Solomon"; David B. Ruderman, *Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), index, s.v. "Bennett, Solomon." See most recently David B. Ruderman, "'A Native of Poland Professing the Arts in London': The Unconventional Jewish Life and Thought of Solomon Yom Tov Bennett (1767–1838)," *European Journal of Jewish Studies* 17 (2023): 176–203.

4 This is not the place to develop the point, but I have in mind the need for a future comparative study of a collective group of eastern European Jews who migrated in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to western Europe, their cultural similarities and differences: Jews such as Zalkind Hourwitz, Solomon Dubno, Israel Zamosh, Solomon Maimon, Isaac Satanov, and others. To this list might be added such converts as Moses Margolioth, Stanislas Hoga, and Ridley Haim Herschell, to

He is also distinctive for his remarkable dual interests in art and thought, being equally comfortable with icons and words; for his distinct focus on biblical grammar, philology, history, and exegesis in his writing; for opening social and intellectual connections with some of the most famous and accomplished Christian intellectuals of London while simultaneously evoking suspicion and alienation from the Jewish rabbinic establishment of the city; and finally, for his self-determination and drive to complete his lifelong ambition of serving Western civilization by re-writing and correcting the entire standard edition of the English Old Testament, a task of translation, he fervently believed, that could be fulfilled only by a learned Jewish Hebraist like himself.

Bennett's deepest commitment to Jewish civilization was to language. For him Hebrew, the divine language, never deviated from its primitive state. This provoked him to attack his Jewish colleague Hyman Hurwitz on the latter's alleged misunderstanding of the language of the Bible. For Bennett, the gift of language by some mode of writing communicated to posterity a universal history rather than mere tradition. It is this linguistic connection that motivated him to write one of his most important works, defined his Jewish identity, and stimulated his need to polemicize with uninformed Christians. It also led him into a career as biblical critic and translator.

The capstone of Bennett's career was the project of an authentic English translation of the Old Testament. Only a Jew could do this right, so he believed; and it was the holy task of the Jew to improve and perfect an imperfect Christianity based on a faulty transmission of its biblical foundations. This ultimately became his calling, one never fulfilled because of his death.

Ironically, his contentious personality and his inability to abide by the norms of a Jewish community he could not respect and found oppressive served him better in the non-Jewish world. He was seen as suspicious in the eyes of fellow Jews, who snubbed him as non-orthodox, a deserter of his wife and family in Belarus, and he defiantly acknowledged his independence of rabbinical authority. Although he referred to himself as merely "an untitled layman," he usurped the power of the local rabbis of London in several contested cases, even challenging the vaunted authority of several Continental rabbis. He went so far as to perform a wedding between a Jew of priestly descent and a convert against the wishes of both chief rabbis.

mention only a few. I am indebted to Marcin Wodziński for a discussion on the place of Polish Jewish émigrés in the Polish Haskalah and how might one contextualize Bennett in this mix.

His Christian friends were oblivious to his criticisms of their theological stances and their Hebrew learning; in a strange way, his outspokenness made him more attractive to them. Some of the most elite of the literary community respected his written work, supported its publication, and even recommended him for economic support during years of personal hardship. He spoke of his friendships with English gentlemen who lacked prejudice and were literary figures of the highest order. He certainly never thrived economically as a writer but he did gain some notice and appreciation for his efforts.

This intellectual biography grew out of my previous books on the cultural life of Anglo-Jewry in the early modern and modern periods, and the intense and significant interactions between Jews and Christians, especially in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. My work on Bennett represents an extension of two previous books: *Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key* and *Missionaries, Converts, and Rabbis*.⁵ The first considers the intellectual lives of a cluster of Anglo-Jewish thinkers in London during this period, among whom Bennett already appeared as a minor character. The second further examines the interactions between Jews and Christians by focusing on the prominent English missionary Alexander McCaul and his critique of the rabbis, several of the converts who initially fell under his influence, and several Jews who read McCaul's work, were alarmed by its influence, and sought to refute it. By completing my biography of Bennett, I see the two previous books and this one as a kind of trilogy of studies of English Jewish thought especially in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, an area previously neglected by earlier scholarship. By considering Bennett's life primarily in its English context but also through his Continental origins, specifically in eastern and central Europe, I hope to compare Anglo-Jewish intellectual developments with those more fully studied among German and other Jews. I also hope that the reconstruction of his scholarly and artistic world offers a greater insight into the English Protestant religious and literary culture of his day, especially its conspicuous passion for biblical scholarship and Hebraic learning, even that pursued by proud Jews entrenched in their own ancestral traditions.

As I have mentioned those previous two books, it seems important to recall briefly the context they describe and its relevance to Bennett's life and thought. *Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key*, written some twenty-five years ago, represented in part a reaction to the pioneering work of Todd Endelman on the his-

5 Ruderman, *Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key*, and David B. Ruderman, *Missionaries, Converts, and Rabbis: The Evangelical Alexander McCaul and Jewish-Christian Debate in the Nineteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2020).

tory of the Jews of Georgian England. Endelman singularly set out to refute two notions: that the origins of Jewish history in modern Europe could be found in Berlin, and that the primary agents of change in this era were intellectuals. Both assumptions, promoted by the well-known Israeli historian Jacob Katz, had dominated modern Jewish historiography until then. Endelman instead chose to focus on non-elites comprising the overwhelming majority of the twenty thousand Jews living in London at the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, consisting of some prominent acculturated aristocratic and middle-class businessmen but mainly of the poor and indigent—rag merchants, pickpockets, and beggars—and in all cases non-intellectuals, either in a traditional or a secular sense. There were no seminal figures in Great Britain, so he maintained, who contributed to modern Jewish thought or traditional Jewish learning. Unlike the elites of Germany and eastern Europe, Anglo-Jews were not vocal in articulating any distinct ideology of modern Judaism.⁶

My book both agreed and disagreed with Endelman's assertions. I argued that England did create a small coterie of Jewish thinkers with an intellectual style indigenous to England and unrelated to German developments. Like Endelman, accordingly, I challenged the Germanocentric model and argued that Jewish intellectual life needs to be studied regionally and pluralistically, taking into account the specific social, political, and intellectual stimulants of Jewish cultural formation. On the other hand, I maintained that there still existed a unique intellectual life of Anglo-Jews in dialogue with English thought and that the overly simple portrait of nonreflective Jewish modernization painted by Endelman was misleading. There was no version of the Haskalah in England imported from Germany and copied from German Jewish thinkers from Mendelssohn on, nor was there a recognizable movement or ideology shared by a collective elite. There were only individuals who absorbed and reflected on contemporary English thought and were loosely connected to each other—men such as David Levi or Abraham Tang, and certainly, as I now fully appreciate, Solomon Bennett.⁷

What were the primary features of English life and thought during the nearly four decades Bennett lived in London at the beginning of the nineteenth century that stimulated thinkers like him? In the first place, the language of discourse was almost exclusively English. When Bennett arrived as an immigrant in 1800, he had to contend immediately with the fact that Anglo-Jews, to a degree unprecedented in the rest of Europe, were monolingual like the Protestant majority. In a

6 See Endelman, *The Jews of Georgian England*, especially the new preface to the paperback edition (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999), ix–xxiii; Todd M. Endelman, *The Jews of Britain, 1656–2000* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 79–126.

7 Ruderman, *Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key*, 3–22.

society that allowed the Jewish minority a relatively high degree of social integration despite the lack of full citizenship, linguistic assimilation into the English language proceeded rapidly across all sectors of the Anglo-Jewish community. With the diminution of Jewish knowledge and Hebraic literacy in England, Jewish educators had no recourse but to translate their prayer books, their Bibles, their rabbinic anthologies, and their elementary handbooks into English. Through translations, Jewish religious attitudes and behavior resembled to an unparalleled degree those of their Protestant neighbors. The Englishing of Anglo-Jewish culture, a development not unlike what would take place in North America, would set the Jews of Great Britain considerably apart from their contemporaries in Germany and eastern Europe.⁸

More than any other factor, the Jewish community ultimately viewed itself as closer and more connected to its Christian neighbors because it expressed itself almost exclusively in English. This was especially the case with respect to the Bible, perhaps the most important document in defining the common character of the nation as a whole. The King James English translation of the Bible was the primary textbook of English schools, the essential path to literacy; it was read aloud extensively in the home and church, and it profoundly affected contemporary art and literature.⁹ Jews were not immune to the pervasive influence of this single text, at least the Old Testament, on their own religious and cultural lives. Some voiced concern that the English Bible was not necessarily an authentic Jewish one and that its numerous deviations from the original Hebrew version distorted the original meaning of the divine revelation, blurring the boundaries that had separated Jewish from Christian readers. The problem was compounded in an age when Christian scholars such as Benjamin Kennicott claimed that they could produce a more authentic Bible than the Masoretic Bible of the Jewish tradition and that they could understand the text even better than did Jews, its original guardians. The new Christian scholarship on the Bible affected Jews on the Continent as well, especially in Germany, but English Jews encountered the threat more profoundly than others given their considerable stake in reading and studying the Bible primarily in English translation.¹⁰

8 Ruderman, *Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key*, 6–8, 215–268.

9 On the place of the Bible in English culture, the literature is vast. See, for example, Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), for the eighteenth century; Scott Mandelbrote and Michael Ledger-Lomas, eds., *Dissent and the Bible, c. 1650–1950* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013); and Timothy Larson, *A People of One Book: The Bible and the Victorians* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

10 Ruderman, *Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key*, 7–8, 23–88.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century, the challenge of Anglican and dissenting clergy equipped with Hebrew knowledge and eager to engage in religious polemics and debates with Jews was heightened even more by a new offensive generated by evangelical missionaries: it sought to convert all peoples to Christianity but especially targeted Jews in England and throughout the Continent. In 1809, Joseph Frey founded the London Society for the Promotion of Christianity amongst the Jews, which would become the largest and most heavily funded missionary society in the history of Jewish–Christian relations. Missionizing to the Jews was hardly a novelty by the nineteenth century, but the London Society’s range of activities, its army of proselytizing clerics, its impressive publication program of English and translated Bibles and their worldwide distribution, its extensive schools for missionary training (especially in London at Bethnal Green), and the moral and financial support it garnered from political and clerical elites were without precedent. The entire Anglo-Jewish community in Bennett’s time felt particularly threatened by this new missionary offensive.¹¹

Beyond the challenges particularly affecting the Jewish minority in England were those confronting all religious orthodoxy, Christian and Jewish alike. The threats of atheism, deism, and Newtonianism that had alarmed clerical circles throughout the eighteenth century persisted into the nineteenth century as well. They proved particularly combustible during a period of evangelical awakening and fervor such as that of the early nineteenth century. Of course, German Jews faced similar concerns in confronting the intellectual world of their contemporaries. But the challenges English Jews faced in examining their faith and its continued relevance were freshly and uniquely shaped by their new environment, not simply imported or rehashed from the Continent. Some English Jews read Locke and Newton in English publications as well as an array of other local philosophers and exegetes. They were acquainted with radical ideas about God, revelation, nature, and history. Their contact with the radical and religious Enlightenment in England was unmediated and intense. Their response to Newton and Locke was a unique and original response to the secularizing forces of modernity that were particularly prominent in England.¹²

English Jews were also aware of a novel political ambience hardly ever encountered previously in the absolutist regimes of the Continent. Given the relatively open society that Great Britain offered minorities like the Jews and the opportunity for social and legal privileges generally denied their counterparts in

11 Ruderman, *Missionaries, Converts, and Rabbis*, especially 1–12.

12 Ruderman, *Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key*, 89–134, 184–214; David B. Ruderman, *Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery in Early Modern Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 310–368.

other European countries, Anglo-Jews experienced firsthand new opportunities available in a modern democracy. They mixed more freely with Christians in scientific societies, in Masonic lodges, in taverns, and even in Christian homes and other social settings. Living under a democratic regime, they familiarized themselves with new theories of government, new attitudes about the authority of the state and the rights of citizens, and they expressed a newfound loyalty to a tolerant government and its royal crown. Most significantly, they enjoyed the ability to express themselves freely in the sometimes-acrimonious public sphere of English culture, even regarding Jewish rights and liabilities in a manner unlike that of any other contemporary Jewish community in Europe.¹³

Each of these elements of English culture and society—the ubiquitous status of the English language; the centrality of the English Bible; the Christian study of Hebrew Scripture and its hegemonic claims of religious superiority; the intellectual challenges of Locke, Newton, and other indigenous philosophers and clerics; the unique democratic political structures; and the prevalence of religious tolerance and free speech—is particularly relevant to the life and thought of Solomon Bennett and each is echoed in his writing shaped by his own encounter with this relatively benevolent and inviting English environment. A study of his self-formation as a Jewish thinker in England is accordingly a case study of how the particular ambience of English society affected deeply his own perception of self and the other in the almost four decades of his residency in London.

The book is structured around two general intersecting themes: The first is the evolution of Bennett's writings from his first publication in 1809 until his almost completed translation of the Hebrew Bible of 1838. The other theme is the colorful history of his social interactions with contemporary Jews and Christians throughout his lifetime and their impact on his understanding of Jews and of Judaism and its legacy. He began his literary career as a polemicist against Christian exegesis or Christian misrepresentation of biblical texts; then he shifted to a more direct study of biblical texts and, finally, to the bold aspiration of retranslating the entire Hebrew Bible into English. Bennett's literary career was clearly accelerated by his inability to continue as an engraver because of eye problems. But while his craft had initially led him into a Christian world of artists and literary people, the latter were ultimately more interested in engaging him on the meaning of the biblical text, and he enjoyed their company and their financial and moral support. At the same time, he alienated himself from the chief rabbi and the leadership of the Jewish community, who saw him as a threat to their mandate. He became a Jew more comfortable with at least some Christians than with his own co-religionists.

13 Ruderman, *Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key*, 8–10, 135–183.

In chapter 1, I consider Bennett's life in his hometown of Polotsk, his departure for Copenhagen to study engraving, and the shaping of his career in Berlin as a fellow of the Royal Academy. Chapter 2 examines the context and significance of Bennett's first book, *The Constancy of Israel*, the shift from polemics to history and autobiography, and the relatively positive responses to the book among Christians. Chapters 3 and 4 change the focus to Bennett's social relations, first with Jews and then with Christians in the city of London. I reconstruct the long series of skirmishes between Bennett and the chief Ashkenazic rabbi of London, Solomon Hirschell, and his supporters. The battle between the two Solomons had a major impact on Bennett's view of Jews and rabbis in general and certainly contributed to public acrimony and distrust among the elites of the Anglo-Jewish community toward him. I then take up Bennett's multiple interactions with several well-known Christian elites of all persuasions during his illustrious career, demonstrating both how his encounters affected his Christian benefactors and how they shaped his self-understanding as a Jew. Chapter 5 continues the account of Bennett's Christian associates with a detailed consideration of his fascinating interactions with two Christian women open to Bennett's Hebraic learning and social contact.

In chapter 6, I take up Bennett's other major work, his commentary on the Temple of Ezekiel, both in the English printed edition and in the unpublished Hebrew version. By inserting two engraved plates of the temple he had created, Bennett demonstrated in this work how his artistic sensibilities as an engraver and architect could contribute to solving major issues of biblical exegesis. Chapter 7 considers Bennett's deep commitment to the Hebrew language, its antiquity and constancy, generating his biting critique of how his Jewish colleague (Hyman Hurwitz) understood the roots of biblical Hebrew, as well as his own excursus on the origins, continuity, and sacred status of the Hebrew language until the present day.

Chapter 8 finally considers Bennett's major albeit unfinished translation or retranslation of the King James Version of the Hebrew Bible, drawing on my discovery and first reading of the extant 1,600-page working copy that he left for posterity. It demonstrates how this ambitious project was the culmination of his literary and intellectual career as a Jewish thinker and artist and how it well illustrates the blended aspirations of its author/editor and the Protestant literary community he tried to serve so faithfully. I close with some brief final thoughts about Bennett and his legacy and about this book and its connection with my previous ones. The book also concludes with three appendixes: a consideration of two early discourses penned by Bennett, a complete list of his engravings known to me, and a note on the German translation of Bennett's *Constancy of Israel*.

As we shall see more fully below, Bennett was different than most of his other Jewish contemporaries because of his special passion for art, architecture,

and especially copper engraving. After gaining the proper credentials to pursue a career in this profession from his studies in Copenhagen, he then rose to the status of fellow at the Royal Academy of Art in Berlin. He continued to work as an engraver in London, but within a decade he was pursuing a career as simultaneously a writer and biblical scholar and finally as a translator. He presented himself in a unique pose in a self-engraving (Figure 1) that adorned several of his books after a painting by a yet-unidentified artist named G. Fraser. When Salli Kirschstein first commented on this work of art, he waxed eloquent on what he saw and even placed it at the opening of his book on Jewish engravers. Studying Bennett's self-image, he witnessed the entire history of this Jewish man: "In the eyes are a penetrating spirituality and a quiet pensive melancholy. You can read from his face all his wanderings and strivings, all his intellectual and artistic powers, and all his lone battle with life, far from home and kinsfolk."¹⁴ Kirschstein observed in Bennett's face a deeply committed Jew seared by the trials and tribulations of his wanderings and hardships. Does this portrait indeed yield so much insight into the man? The reader may judge for herself. I view Bennett's countenance more as a testimony to his independence and his defiance of his narrow Jewish upbringing. He appears with an uncovered head and he dresses elegantly as an English gentleman. His spirituality seems too elusive to discern; he does, however, appear sad and melancholic.

Besides this portrait of Bennett at a relatively young age, there exists another portrait of him preserved by family members for several generations (Figure 2). We observe an older gentleman, formally dressed with fuller but graying hair. He is pensive here as well, but the degree of sadness and introspection seems less intense. He again appears as a secular person, self-confident and self-important as the subject of a recipient of a second portrait might feel.

Can one or two pictures capture the essence of an author of many books and creator of many engravings, an immigrant, an indigent writer, a brittle and contentious man among friends and foes alike, a proficient translator and introspective person who thought deeply about his ancestral tradition and its relationship to others, especially to Christianity? These precious portraits might provide a very preliminary glimpse, at the very least, of the fascinating narrative of Bennett's prodigious intellectual life and his tempestuous as well as his fulfilling social life in the early decades of the nineteenth century, unfolding in fuller view in the chapters that follow.

¹⁴ Kirschstein, *Juedische graphiker*, 26 (all translations are my own, unless otherwise specified); see also Barnett, "Solomon Bennett," 96. The artist of the portrait upon which Bennett based his engraving (G. Fraser) has not yet been identified. My guess is that it could be the well-known artist Alexander George Fraser (1786–1865).

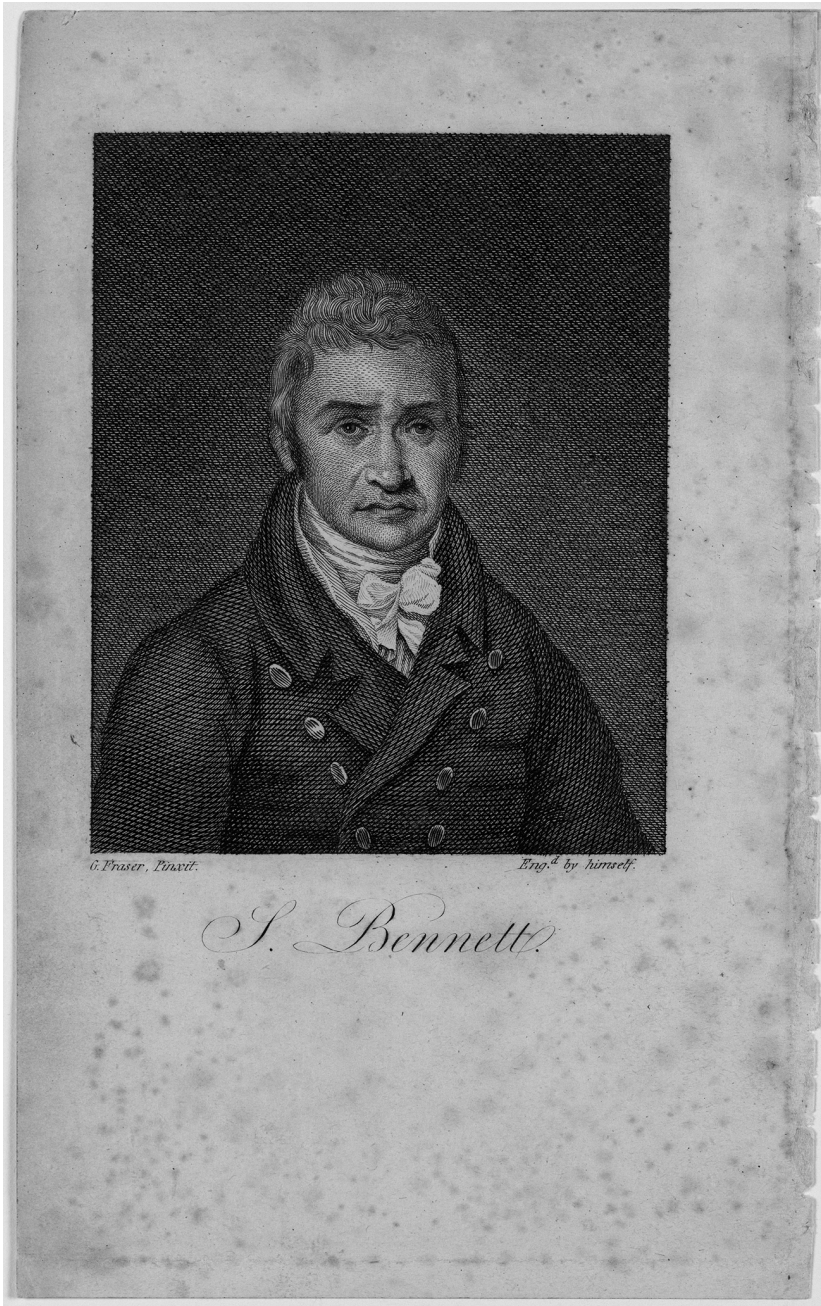
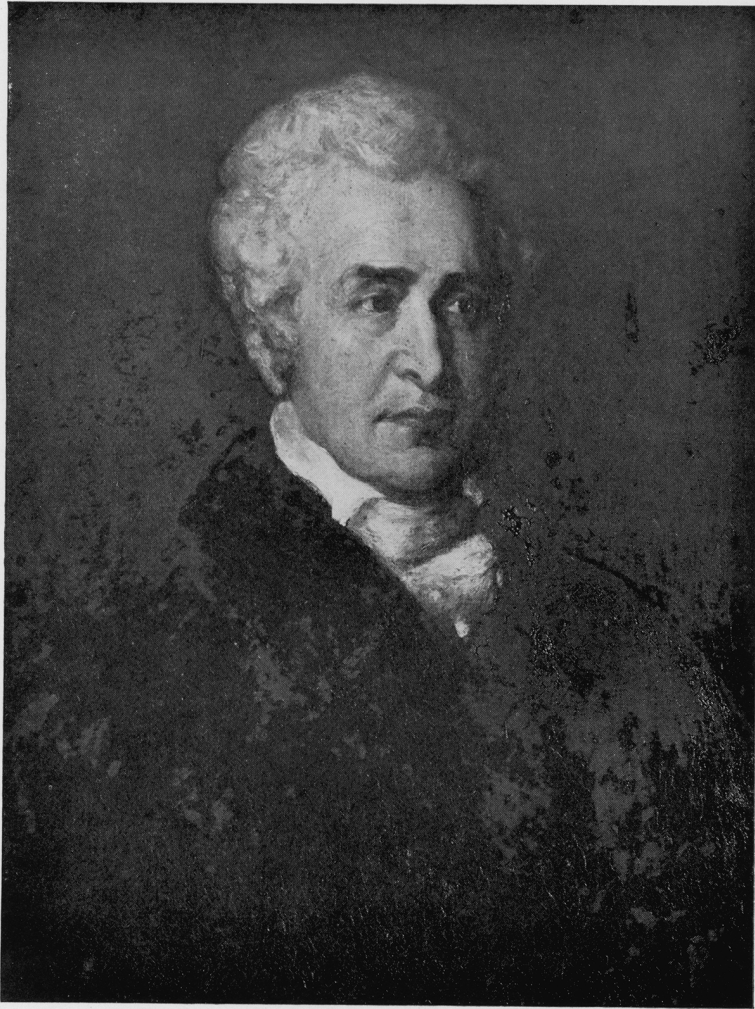


Figure 0.1: Engraving of Solomon Bennett, self-portrait.



*Solomon Bennett, 1761–1838
Artist, Hebraist and Controversialist*

From a painting in the possession of Hubert Meredith, his great-great grandson

Figure 0.2: Engraving of Solomon Bennett, possibly a self-portrait.