

2 Finding a Jewish Voice on British Soil: Bennett's *The Constancy of Israel* (1809)

After arriving in England as a new immigrant, Bennett remained silent about his new life for almost a decade. One can only speculate on the challenges he faced as a foreigner in London, his acclimation to the economic and cultural life of the city, and the relative speed with which he mastered the English language. He, of course, continued to earn a living as a copper engraver. Besides the collection of Bennett's engravings from Berlin, one can locate at least another twelve in British or American libraries that he produced in London for at least the first two decades of his settlement in the city (see Figures 2.1–2.3). At some point in the 1820s, problems with his sight prevented him from continuing to work as an artist. Following that juncture, his writing and his translation would occupy his time exclusively, and his income would decline precipitously.¹

Having left his wife and family behind in Polotsk, as we have seen, Bennett remained a single man in London for almost two decades. Finally, in 1818 he married his second wife, Elizabeth (Pescha bat Asher Angel was her Hebrew name), at the Western Synagogue, London, when he was already fifty-one and she was only seventeen. How they met, and how they built a relationship despite the huge gap in their ages, remains a mystery. So too are the unfortunate circumstances of Bennett's separation from his first wife and family and his self-proclaimed bachelor status during the first eighteen years of his residence in London. According to one report, his first wife died in 1815; whether he had previously divorced her or not, he appeared to be free to marry Elizabeth by 1818. What happened to the children of the first marriage is unknown.²

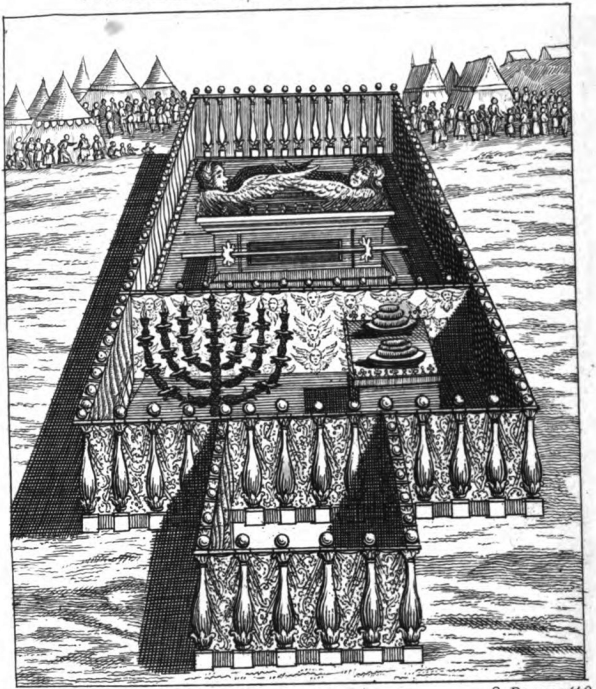
Solomon and Elizabeth had nine children, seven boys and two girls. The youngest was born in 1837, a year before the death of her father.³ Their names were Angelo (Asher ben Moreno Yom Tov, born 1819), Solomon and Charles (both born 1821), Isaac (Newton, born 1822), Moses (born 1825), Sarah (born 1826), Israel (born 1827), Nathaniel (born 1829), and Eve (born 1837). One of the children must have died by the time of Solomon's death, since his wife refers to their eight children in a letter written shortly thereafter (see the afterword, below).

1 A full list of his engravings can be found below in appendix II.

2 Arthur Barnett, "Solomon Bennett 1761–1838: Artist, Hebraist, and Controversialist," *Jewish Historical Society of England Transactions* 17 (1951–1952): 94.

3 For information on Bennett's family, see the useful entry in Cemetery Scribes, last updated in 2013: <http://www.cemeteryscribes.com/getperson.php?personID=I2941&tree=Cemeteries>.

The form of the Tabernacle.



EXODUS 25. Verfe 9.

*According to all that I shew thee after
the pattern of the Tabernacle and y^e pat-
tern of all the Instruments thereof etc*

Figure 2.1: Bennett's engraving of the Tabernacle.

Five of the Bennett sons became shorthand writers and reporters. Angelo, the eldest, was the most famous, a master of the system of shorthand writing advocated by Samuel Taylor.⁴ At the infamous trial of Palmer the poisoner in 1856, Angelo Bennett was the reporter.⁵ Several of the sons are also mentioned in the records of the Western Synagogue. Two of them, as late as 1849–1850, took an interest in

⁴ On Taylor's method, see Jeremy Norman, "Samuel Taylor Develops the First System of Shorthand Used Throughout the English Speaking World: 1786," *Jeremy Norman's History of Information* (last updated December 9, 2024), <https://historyofinformation.com/detail.php?id=3234>.

⁵ *The Queen v. Palmer: Verbatim Report of the Trial of William Palmer [. . .],* Transcribed from the Short-Hand Notes of Mr. Angelo Bennett (London: J. Allen, 1856).



Figure 2.2: Bennett's engraving of Hannah presenting Samuel to Eli.

Jewish matters. A fundraising event on behalf of the Western Jewish Free Schools for Boys and Girls was held on January, 3, 1850, and the names of two of his sons, Angelo Bennett and Isaac Newton Bennett, appear in the Committee list. His son Charles attended the Synagogue in St. Alban's Place, and another son, Moses, also attended, though not so frequently in later years.⁶

When still living as a bachelor almost a decade earlier, at the age of forty-two and in his ninth year of residency in London, Solomon Bennett published his first book. Having studied and practiced the craft of copper engraving in Copenhagen and Berlin before arriving in London, as we have seen, his decision to compose this work on Jewish history, biblical exegesis, and Jewish-Christian dispute, while even including his own personal memoir in the language of his newly adopted country, albeit in a less than elegant style, was audacious. He was certainly not yet abandoning his primary career as an engraver; he identified himself on the

⁶ See the entry of Cemetery Scribes, note 3 above, and Arthur Barnett, *The Western Synagogue through Two Centuries (1781–1961)* (London: Valentine Mitchell, 1961), 133, 219.



Figure 2.3: Bennett's engraving of William Shakespeare, after George Vertue's print.

title page of his book as a native of Poland professing the arts in London. But in writing and publishing his *Nezah Yisra'el: The Constancy of Israel*, he was for the very first time electing to publicize his private thoughts about being Jewish before a mainly Protestant readership, to defend his faith and community in the face of

intense missionary pressure, and to express his genuine appreciation for the politics and culture of his newly adopted country. And in composing his first work in the language of his adopted country, he was demonstrating his ability to write in a new language he had mastered in the course of less than a decade. Bennett's reflections are not only a dramatic turning point in his career and intellectual biography; they provide a valuable glimpse of the realities and possibilities of Jewish life and Jewish–Christian relations in Great Britain in the early decades of the nineteenth century. They also offer a preview of his great literary output to follow, including a revised translation of the standard English version of the Old Testament. And finally, they underscore the relative ease with which he gained acceptance as a Jewish intellectual among an impressive circle of Christian literati while ironically evoking suspicion and even contempt among some of his coreligionists.

2.1 The publication of Bennett's first book

Bennett self-published his book through the print shop of W. H. Wyatt of Picket Street, Temple Bar, London. Alongside the title page was a portrait of the author, which he had engraved himself and subsequently reproduced in most of his publications (for the title page, see Figure 2.4; for the portrait, see Figure 0.1). The title, *Neẓaḥ Yisra'el: The Constancy of Israel: An Unprejudiced Illustration of Some of the Most Important Texts of the Bible: or, A Polemical, Critical, and Theological Reply to a Public Letter, by Lord Crawford, Addressed to the Hebrew Nation*, underscores the primary incentive of the author in dealing with Jewish–Christian polemics. It also emphasizes his so-called unprejudiced perspective in cautiously presenting a Jewish reading of the Hebrew Bible as opposed to allegedly deficient Christian readings. The apologetic and humble tone stands out especially in the work's dedication, opening advertisement, and preface:

To the discerning readers of the clergy and laity of all denominations, either Christians or Jews, this impartial treatise is respectfully dedicated by the author. [. . .] I hope then that some of the Christians and Israelites, discerning Readers, although they will not dare to sanction my opinions or comments; yet they will not be too precipitate in forming their debates, before a close examination thereof; they will also indulge on some deficiencies of the Language, and attribute it to my being a Foreigner, and but a short time in this Metropolis.⁷

7 Solomon Bennett, *Neẓaḥ Yisra'el: The Constancy of Israel* (London: W. H. Wyatt, 1809), title page, dedication, [i].

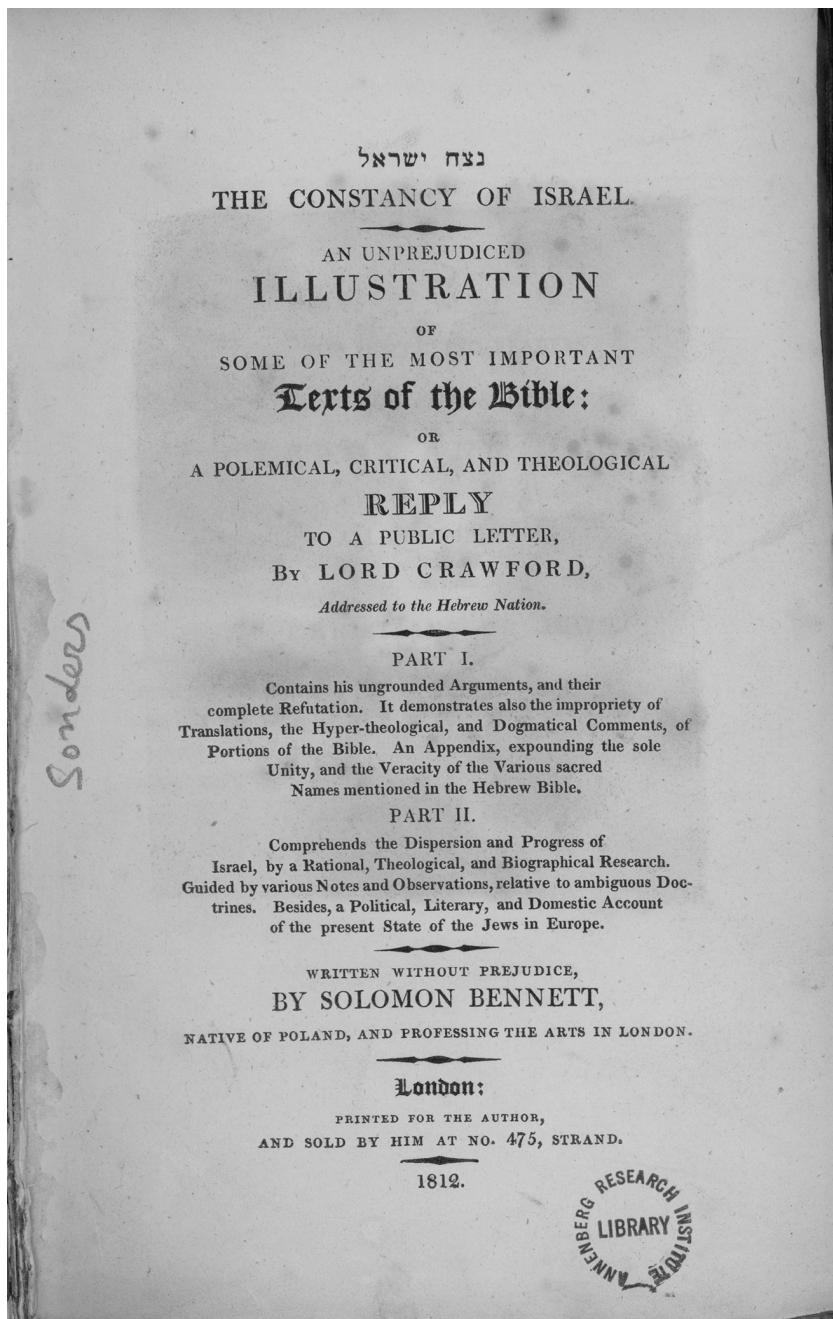


Figure 2.4: Title page of Bennett's *The Constancy of Israel* (London, 1809).

He openly admits his reluctance to criticize Christians: "though varied sometimes in opinions, yet, they are more nearly related in the sacred principles with us, than the other nations; but moreover a glorious nation in whose light my brethren are enlightened; and in their shadow constantly refreshed. [. . .] It might be esteemed an impious and ungrateful thing to express an opinion against their religious principles, which are so universally received in this part of the globe."⁸

But Bennett was not merely offering polite flattery to his Christian readers; he was expressing sincere admiration for their particular form of worship and cultural creativity shaped in England in contrast to the more intolerant forms of Christianity he had encountered in his previous domiciles:

As for my own part, I freely confess, I am far from being affected with religious prejudices; the unbounded veneration I feel for our present Nazarenes with regard to their extensive capacities, active in all branches of human knowledge, particularly in the Arts and Sciences, and whose examples had made a strong impression on my mind; from my infancy I was constantly their admirer; and very much exerted myself to be their imitator; adding the benefit and liberal instructions I received in my travels abroad, but particularly here in London, from several Professors, Doctors, and Artists in the many branches of human Literature and Arts, in which noble pursuit I hope to live and die.⁹

For Bennett, it was the missionaries who have adversely affected English society and have unjustly harassed its Jewish minority. No longer can he

remain silent, to the roaring of the many Proselytes, who, with arrogance and pride, abuse the pure doctrine of the faith of the Hebrews, and constantly send forth meagre fruits, by printing books and pamphlets, in scorn of their erudition and knowledge of the Old Testament—And alas! not one of our brethren thought proper to give any answer to defend their principles, as if they are exposed to lay down under the burden of a continual shame and confusion. [. . .] [T]hose Proselytes are grown so numerous and overbearing that thinking themselves to be the Messengers of Christ, to bring all the inhabitants of the globe to a general conversion: like the Author of *the Letter addressed to the Hebrew Nation*, who no doubt thinks himself eminent in Divinity, skilful in the Old and New Testaments.¹⁰

Bennett undoubtedly referred to the beginnings of intense missionizing efforts among the Jews, culminating in the founding of the London Society for Promoting Christianity in 1809, the same year as the publication of his book. He refers more obliquely to proselytes while loosely including within this group the author of *The Letter Addressed to the Hebrew Nation*, the immediate target of his remarks, as we shall see below. In contrast to these practitioners of religious intolerance,

⁸ Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, iv.

⁹ Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, iv–v.

¹⁰ Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, v–vi.

Bennett transparently declares the credo that guides him as a Jew and a new citizen of the English nation:

As to my own opinion, I think in reality that all the various religious are equally good, and all the national Testaments are beneficial to mankind; being, they all allude to one point, i.e. *Sur mera ve-aseh tov bakesh shalom ve radfehu*, “abhor the evil and embrace justice, seek for peace, and pursue it.” Psalm xxxiv. ver. 14. [. . .] Heavens grant that every nation may accomplish its Testament with righteousness! I have no doubt but mankind will soon agree, and will attain to an everlasting happiness,—Love, unity, and justice, are the chief points of the universe; as for the rest, I look upon merely as ceremonial affectations, which can make no difference with mankind at large; and still less to a Supreme Power abstractive from matter and Material affectations. In this principle I live, and in this principle I will continue.¹¹

Such a strong statement of religious cosmopolitanism may have found favor among some liberal Christians but it could hardly have won the hearts of the Christian evangelical missionaries and especially of the rabbinic leadership of the Anglo-Jewish community, who were soon to accuse Bennett of deviance from traditional practice.

Charles Crawford (1752–1815) was the author of *The Letter Addressed to the Hebrew Nation* published in 1805 in London, the first of three letters that were eventually reprinted together in 1817. Crawford was born in Antigua, the son of a wealthy landowner who had emigrated to the West Indies in the early eighteenth century. He returned to England, where he was educated, and later spent considerable time in Philadelphia, gaining a name for himself as a prolific author and poet and assuming the unearned title “Earl of Crawford and Lindsay.” He was best known for a poem in six books called *The Christian*, which appeared in numerous editions, and for works on Plato’s *Phaedo*, on the Christian origins of the American Indians, and on the evils of slavery, as well as a new edition of George Fox’s *A Looking-Glass for the Jews*, among many other popular books.¹² Crawford’s three letters, of which Bennett noticed only the first, were made up of conventional Christian readings of Old Testament verses utilized to demonstrate the truths of Christianity and the deficiencies of Jewish belief and practice.

Crawford had previously written numerous works on Christian beliefs, both in prose and in poetry, but his *Letters* display little originality and no apparent firsthand knowledge of the Hebrew language.¹³ It seems unclear why Bennett

¹¹ Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, viii–ix.

¹² Louis Leary, “Charles Crawford: A Forgotten Poet of Early Philadelphia,” *Pennsylvania Magazine of History and Biography* 83 (1959): 293–306.

¹³ Charles Crawford, *Three Letters to the Hebrew Nation by the Author of “The Christian,” a Poem* (London: W. Whittemore, 1817). Bennett saw only the first volume, *A Letter to the Hebrew*

singled out this unexceptional work for serious consideration in his first publication and why he assumed that Crawford, a relatively unaccomplished theologian, should be considered as part of a new missionary surge in London instigated by the “proselytes.” The only plausible answer seems to be timing. Crawford’s work appeared in London only four years before Bennett’s publication appeared. It provided Bennett a specific and easy target for his defense of the integrity of Jewish belief and exegesis at a moment when no other Jew, so he declares, had spoken up against the book. Having gone unnoticed by Christian and Jewish readers alike, Crawford’s letter provided Bennett the opportunity to display his formidable skills as a biblical scholar and to promote his larger vision of the place of Judaism in world civilization.

The Constancy of Israel is divided into two parts. The first presents a refutation of Crawford with an appendix focusing on yet another Christian polemic, this one composed by John Xeres, brought to Bennett’s attention by a Christian associate. The second part is considerably more expansive, providing a panoramic view of Jewish cultural history, particularly the continuity of its core beliefs throughout the diaspora, culminating in a portrait of contemporary Jewish life, especially in Poland until the time of Bennett’s departure in 1792. Bennett’s survey concludes with the telling of his own life story, as I have already discussed—that is, his departure from Poland, his education and professional activities in Copenhagen and Berlin, and his ultimate arrival in Great Britain.

2.2 Refuting Charles Crawford and John Xeres

Bennett begins his refutation of Crawford’s first letter with some ground rules. In interpreting Scripture, the simplest interpretation is the most acceptable. Moreover, biblical prophecy always focuses on one subject, not “a confusion of comprehensions,” and certainly not on figurative allegorical meanings meant to assign a fixed time to the coming of the messiah. To understand Scripture precisely, one needs to know Hebrew grammar well, a skill lacked even by many rabbis, who “are very little Orthographists and Etymologists.” In so articulating the right way to read the biblical text, Bennett was differentiating his scholarly credentials not only from those of his Christian opponent but even from those of the rabbis themselves.¹⁴

Nation (London: T. Becket, 1805); there are two copies of this rare edition in the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, New York.

¹⁴ Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, x–xviii.

On the basis of these principles, Bennett discounts assigning the prophecies of Daniel, Isaiah, Zechariah, Amos, and other prophets to Jesus, following the approach of earlier Jewish exegetes who had instead elucidated the historical context of their words. Crawford had paid special attention to Isaiah 53 as an unmistakable allusion to Jesus, and Bennett responds in a particularly biting manner:

I have often listened in some Chapels to a crow from the pulpit, with a human voice, saying, "The Jews never read the fifty-third Chapter of Isaiah, for fear they should be converted by this vision, and are strictly prohibited by their Rabbies from reading it." I testify, that I never have heard of such a prohibition; yet there is some truth in it, that the Jews (i.e. English), do neither read this Chapter, nor the whole Bible: Novels and Romances being more to their taste than their sacred Records, that they scarce comprehend their common Hebrew Prayers; but with respect to the innumerable Israelites throughout our dispersion, to my knowledge they read, understand, and reflect on it also.

Isaiah refers not to Jesus, Bennett declares, but to the restoration of Israel.¹⁵

The derogatory passage regarding "a crow on the pulpit" was later noticed by several reviewers of Bennett's work who subsequently could not take seriously his claim of being "unprejudiced." The passage is also interesting in suggesting that Bennett frequented Protestant churches and listened to preachers' sermons, and that he had little patience for what he considered ignorant homiletics. But his spleen was directed not only toward Christians but toward English Jews as well who, so he claimed, never read Isaiah 53 because they never read the Bible or even their prayer book. The passage well represents Bennett at his most mocking and confrontational, reminiscent of some of his other polemical writings and singled out especially by his Jewish detractors.

In the course of his remarks on Isaiah 53, Bennett quotes the famous passage of Matthew 3:19, "I will make you fishers of men." For Bennett, the statement contradicts the depiction of the suffering servant in the chapter as one who lacked deceit in his mouth, for indeed this immoral utterance did great harm to the Jews:

This doctrine, was zealously executed throughout all the Nazarene era. The Roman Catholics fished in many parts of the Globe with the net of sword, fire, and water; they oppressed in all their dominions, (to their everlasting shame!) the Jews as well as other persuasions of mankind. Our modern reformed Nazarenes continue still the above doctrine, but with good prospects and humanity, and not without a beneficial view towards mankind; they formed themselves into a Fisher Society to support Fishers or Proselytes, and to support in some measure the poor and unintelligent fishes which fall in their net. Indeed, such a command or doctrine is not to be found in any place of the Bible, neither in the Talmudical treatises of the Hebrews.

15 Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 33–35.

In Bennett's cautious interpretation, the bad fishers of Christian faith were the Catholics, while Protestants held "a [more] beneficial view towards mankind," although they still embraced the same notion as the present English missionaries.¹⁶

In turning to consider the proofs of Jesus that Crawford derives from the Psalms, Bennett is similarly dismissive, since "the Nazarene Commentators select terms and phrases, fabricate new words in the Hebrew Language, and form a new syntax in the poetical style, merely to support their opinion; they force visions from the most simple texts, of prayers, hymns, and poetry, tho' their Authors had not the smallest intention of describing visions."¹⁷

Bennett's other comments on Crawford's reading of biblical texts do not stray from the ordinary except for two unusual formulations at the close of this section of his work. The first, following a statement about the high level of Jewish cultural creativity over the centuries, addresses the reason for Christian success in Europe, especially after the era of Constantine: "its present glorious state is not owing to the principles of that religion; on the contrary, the wide extent of that religion is owing to its glorious state and Politic, and the extensive knowledge of many of its professors in all branches of the arts and sciences, and the improvement of all their intellectual capacities, which embellished also their religious principles."¹⁸ One wonders how Bennett's Christian readers might have reacted to such a declaration.

Bennett might have similarly evoked the ire of his Christian and Jewish readers with the following provocative passage:

Upon mature reflection, we will conclude, that any *tradition* or *dogma*, (not having the support of reason and proper demonstrations,) though it has been generally received and assented to for thousands and centuries of years; yet, in the present enlightened age has reached its last period of decay and dissolution and is treated as a chimera: as for example, the action of an *antipode*, which from eternity was entirely a secret, and was treated as the utmost absurdity and heresy. Moreover, our inhabited hemisphere was also asserted by the ancients to be barren in the frigid and torrid zones. Who would have dared to think that the universal system of the celestial bodies would be overthrown, and a new one formed? [. . .] The prophane doctrines of invisible beings who act on mankind, faith in sorcerers, visionaries, dreamers, &c. which had been but too successful on the human mind are now exploded, except in the brains of some chimerical individuals, or hypocrites, to dazzle the lowest class of the community. It cannot then appear strange to us, if the traditions or dogmas of a triumphant or suffering Messiah met with the same fate as all hyperbolical doctrines before mentioned[.]¹⁹

¹⁶ Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 42 and n.

¹⁷ Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 55.

¹⁸ Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 70.

¹⁹ Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 76–77.

He notes finally that he could have supported this hypothesis with various texts from “the Talmudical Doctors, and some of the ancient Hebrew Philosophers but I am sensible of the roaring of our modern religious Doctors, who are more partial to their traditions than to their intellectual capacities.”²⁰ With these two aggressive digs at Christian doctrine, Bennett concludes his observations on Crawford’s *Letter*.

Before closing the first part of *The Constancy of Israel*, Bennett offers a brief appendix, which he added for the following reason: “I was induced by a Gentleman, a friend of mine, to answer other questions which were made against the religious principles and the doctrine of the Hebrews. That Gentleman presented me a book published in the year 1719 intitled ‘an Address to the Jews by John [Jonah] Xeres, containing his reasons for leaving the Jews, and for embracing the Christian religion.’”²¹

Xeres and his book certainly were hardly well known in England or elsewhere almost a century after its publication. Bennett apparently examined the work superficially and concluded it was not worthy of a long refutation on his part. He did admit that Xeres had slightly better Hebraic skills than most Christian polemicists but he still found his arguments weak and unoriginal. Had Bennett more deeply investigated Xeres, he might have learned that he was originally a North African Jew who had immigrated to England and was persuaded by several English associates to convert to Christianity. He was a devoted student of the Huguenot pastor Pierre Allix, then living in England, a gifted scholar of Hebrew and rabbinic texts who was especially adept at deploying the latter for the purpose of conversion. It seems likely, as Matt Goldish has convincingly argued, that Xeres composed his book under Allix’s influence (Allix’s letter approving Xeres’ conversion under his supervision is printed in the volume), closely following his teacher’s method of finding alleged Christian truth in postbiblical rabbinic writing, and most likely he circulated Allix’s arguments among the Sephardic Jews of London. Allix’s works and that of Xeres provide valuable background for under-

²⁰ Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 77n.

²¹ Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 92; the book was *An Address to the Jews, by John Xeres: Containing His Reasons for Leaving the Jewish, and Embracing the Christian Religion* (London: J. Heptinstall, for Anthony Barker, 1710). On Jonah Xeres and his prominent mentor Pierre Allix, see Matt Goldish, “A Convert Among the London Conversos: New Light on the Oral Law Debate,” paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association of Jewish Studies, Boston, MA, December 22, 2003, and his “The Battle for ‘True’ Jewish Christianity: Peter Allix’s Polemics Against the Unitarians and Millenarians,” in *Everything Connects: In Conference with Richard H. Popkin*, ed. James Force and David Katz (Leiden: Brill, 1999), 143–162. My thanks to Professor Goldish for sending me his unpublished paper. See also Michal Aziza Ohana, “A Moroccan Jew’s Journey into Anglican Christianity,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 75, no. 2 (Autumn 2024): 337–360.

standing the motivation of David Nieto, the towering Sephardic leader of the London community, in publishing his famous defense of rabbinic Judaism, the *Matteh Dan-Kuzari ha-Sheni* in 1714, only five years after Xeres converted.

In the end, Bennett offered no more than a rather conventional refutation of Xeres' less original argument that the plural names of God in the Bible alluded to the Trinity. Whether because he lacked interest or ran out of steam, Bennett determined that "this converted wretch,"²² as he called him, deserved no more attention on his part.

2.3 The Jewish diaspora is a blessing, not a curse

Bennett calls part 2 of his book "*Tefusat Yisrael*, the Dispersion and Progress of Israel." It is a sweeping review of the history of humanity, initially focusing largely on Abraham and his legacy:

Just as the stars which give light, brightness, and animation to all creatures, and exhibit the glory of an Omnipotence; so, might it be with the posterity of Abraham, that the true principles of divinity, law, and morals of the sacred Code, were exhibited by the Israelites, by means of their dispersion. [. . .] Indeed gentlemen, we must acknowledge that the promise to Abraham, "And in thy seed shall be blessed all the nations of the earth," does not allude to their mercantile state, their stock-dealing, or eating good roast beef; neither does it allude to any mortal vain glory, no! [. . .] [T]he blessings then must consequently be referred to some sublime, spiritual subjects; agreeable to the mind, beneficial to mankind at large, as well as individuals[.]²³

Abraham's legacy was ensured for future generations by the leadership of Moses ("He combined all the philosophical principles of divinity, morals, rituals, husbandry, jurisdiction, and ceremonial laws, in his sacred extensive and public records"), and of Joshua and Samuel, but was diminished by the appointment of a monarch over Israel: "It is then to conclude, that the imitation of Royalty among Israel, was really against the will of God, the principles of the Patriarch, and the Mosaical code." Because of the unfortunate introduction of kings, "idolatry, robbery, bribery, and murder" plagued Israel, but the prophets and their rhetoric "brought people back to the religious principles of their ancestors."²⁴

It is at this point in Bennett's retelling of ancient Jewish history that he first enunciates a major theme of his entire work: "their dispersion in strange coun-

²² Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 112.

²³ Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 120, 122.

²⁴ Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 151–152.

tries was a most salutary event that could take place; not only for their personal welfare, but for the preservation of their religious principles. Divine Providence found it more proper, for the safety of the posterity of Abraham to put them under the protection of other nations, than to be their own masters and to be governed by arbitrary vile Kings[.]”²⁵ Moreover, dispersion was never a punishment for the crimes committed against Jesus, as Christian theologians claim. On the contrary, long before the time of Jesus, Jews enjoyed the bounties of diaspora and preferred them over living under the kings of Israel. Many noble families settled in Egypt, forsaking Jerusalem. Those dispersed in Assyria and Egypt

found it more proper to their safety, to enjoy the principles of their Patriarchs with regard to religion and policy, as subjects of other Monarchies and Kingdoms, to be incorporated citizens adapted to the politics and customs of the dominions where they were settled, rather than to be their own masters, and to form a dominant nation; [. . .] the ill conduct and management of their Kings and Princes, the jealousy of neighbouring dominions, the intrigues of the nobles and chiefs, the treasons among allies, and the many commotions arising in State affairs; all those inconveniences caused the above dispersed Israelites to resign all the dominant authorities, and prefer living in a manner like strangers, and under the subjection of other princes, as it is expressed “for we are strangers before thee[.]” [. . .] And so, they neglected and refrained entirely from their Mother country, till the present day.²⁶

Bennett’s point thus is twofold. It is a repudiation of the Christian accusation that the diaspora is a punishment for the sin of killing Christ. It is also a full-throated endorsement of how living among the nations as opposed to living as a nation-state is desirable, indeed necessary to preserve and transmit the moral ideals of the Abrahamic legacy to European civilization. Only in the diaspora, free of the excesses of political sovereignty, are Jews entitled to bear the title of the chosen people:

Let us now turn to Europe, to reflect in general on the progress of the principles of religion, the proper fruit of the Patriarchs, and the chief object of the divine blessing to Abraham, “In thy seed shall be blessed all the nations of the earth,” &c. Although, in the theological sense, some may vitiate, scoff, or satirize, as they please, at the common expression, “God’s chosen People;” (and as I myself, who am not much intoxicated with this holy Title) yet, in a historical sense, none can deny, but the authentic history, and the Code of the Patriarchal posterity, must be acknowledged, as a foundation and archetype to all posterior persuasions, doctrines of divinity, and moral philosophy, &c.; and their dispersion as an unextinguished *Monument*, replaced in all parts of the Globe, and in particular in Europe.²⁷

²⁵ Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 153.

²⁶ Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 164–166.

²⁷ Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 178.

Bennett next turns to the history of the rabbis of the Mishnah and Talmud and acknowledges the value of their religious commentaries, although he expresses his ambivalence toward rabbinic literature:

[H]owever “no granary is pure of chaff,” and many whimsical and nonsensical ideas, phrases, and allegories, have been interpolated and crept into this extensive work, from some insignificant disciples of the great. I oftentimes reflect on it with vehemence, that those interpolations were the cause of degrading, and throwing a rustic and corrosive liquid on the whole doctrine of the Rabbies, by the pretended doctors of our adversaries. I without scruple maintain, that a purification of the Talmudical Dogmas, and the allegorical phrases, is at our present time requisite, and perhaps more useful for the preservation of our faith, and the patriarchal principles.²⁸

It would appear from this statement that Bennett at least partially accepted the Christian charges against the culture of rabbinic learning.

Yet Bennett devotes considerable space to challenging the authenticity of ancient Christianity, its fallacious interpretations of Scripture, the insincere conversion of Constantine, and the internal disputes among various Christian sects. In contrast, the medieval and early modern heirs of rabbinic Judaism were highly cultured and made major contributions to the societies in which they lived, particularly the philosophers Maimonides, Crescas, Ibn Ezra, Levi Ben Gershon, Abarbanel, Saadia, Alfasi, Karo, Joseph Delmedigo, David Ganz, and Menasseh ben Israel. And “they were honoured some time to share in Politic and State affairs; they were also often chosen Ministers, Physicians, and Philosophers to their respective Kings, as at Naples, Spain, and Portugal (though these Kingdoms have now for the space of 350 Years been vacant of Jews.)”²⁹

Bennett adds, based on his own scholarly endeavors, that though much of their writing was preserved and published,

the greater parts of their doctrines are still in manuscript, preserved in several Museums. I have had myself the satisfaction to see in my travels numerous Hebrew manuscripts in national and private libraries, and very ancient, most of them treating on Philosophy and Science; but partly are unfortunately transmigrated, and not without corruption, into other European languages, and the name of its ancient Author changed into a modern. I have myself very often had the satisfaction, abroad as well as in England, of meeting with works, which we may authentically observe, were mere translations from some Hebrew manuscripts[.]³⁰

²⁸ Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 182–183.

²⁹ Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 200.

³⁰ Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 200–201.

Bennett also mentions the rise of Islam and its indebtedness to Judaism and its doctrinal struggle with Christianity during the Crusade period. But it is Christians' still intense obsession with enticing non-Christians to convert that irritates him the most. He reserves his harshest criticisms for the missionaries, especially the former Jews who work in their ranks, and their shameful activities of harassing and snaring vulnerable English Jews. His highly personal testimony is worth citing in full:

Specimens of such [missionizing] proceedings (or religious barterers) are still prevailing now a-day among the Schisms of the Reformed Church; though in a more moderate way, and an expensive manner, under the mask of Religion and Humanity; yet not without insidiousness and seduction. Brokers are sent to spy among the poor, illiterate, and distressed families, or individuals of the Jews, (like those of Petticoat-lane, Frying pan-alley, &c.) hand-sel is given, and the bargain is concluded. The converts of the latter are also applicable to different denominations, partly *mumar lehehayot* on account of necessity, partly *mumar lete'avon* on account of voluptuousness or vanity to live free and easy, or to be intermarried with Christians; and others from motives to avoid oppression and scorn, which prevail between the two sectaries. But there is a third sort of Converts, which are more pernicious and hypocritical, i. e. *mumar lehachis* to irritate or to provoke; hence the Scholastic Theology degenerates into mere Sophism; while those possess no other object, but like Sutlers of the word of God, to gain by the Christian public, credit and money; strolling from Religion to Religion, starting futile questions, framing hyperbolical opinions, forcing the Scripture by introducing strange senses on intricate words, more sounding than argumentative; out of which cavilling Sophists gain matter of contention; they draw arguments from authors whose authority they do not acknowledge, and whose doctrines thus have entirely resigned, going from chapel to chapel, amusing their hearers with stories and legendaries of their opponents, merely in spite of their former persuasion. In short, they pretend to assert what they really do not believe. Those miserables have no other object in view, than to gain from their protectors, credit, honour, and to enrich their pockets from the ignorance of their adherents. I then have full reason to say, that all such mutual endeavours are not from motives of humanity or moral accomplishments, but rather from political views, to infuse into the minds of the illiterate dissention and fatal prejudice.³¹

Bennett continues to relate to his readers the lamentable record of forced conversions, missionary harassment, and expulsions in Catholic countries, including the

31 Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 206–207n. Of the three categories of *mumarim* (Bennett calls them “denominations”; *mumarim* is generally translated as “apostates”), the last two are well-known types discussed in rabbinic literature. See B.T. *Avodah Zarah* 26b; Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot Teshuvah*, 3:9; and the useful discussion of Jacob J. Petuchowski, “The Mumar: A Study in Rabbinic Psychology,” *Hebrew Union College Annual* 30 (1959): 179–190. The first category, containing the *mumar* who leaves the Jewish fold out of economic necessity, surely reflects what Bennett saw in London during his lifetime.

deprivation of Jewish political and economic opportunities “as I myself was an eye-witness on my travels in those dominions, O! to their everlasting shame!!!”³²

The record in Protestant countries with respect to the treatment of the Jews is certainly better but far from unblemished. A particularly egregious example, according to Bennett, is the following:

in a Work published under the title of “*The Manners of the Ancient Israelites, by Claud Fleury, translated and enlarged by Adam Clarke*” [the following quote appears]: “The Jews hate all the rest of mankind, they even think themselves obliged to kill them, unless they submit to the *precepts, given to Noah*; and nobody is with them [i.e., is recognized by them as] their neighbours, but an Israelite. [. . .] As this is an avowed sentiment of all the ancient and modern Jews, we may see how dangerous it might be to permit them to have any rule or influence in any nation under the Sun. Had they strength and authority, their career would be like that of Mahommed, everyone must be butchered who would not submit to be *circumcised*.”³³

Bennett’s reference is to a translation from French of a work by the famous French jurist and ecclesiastical historian Claude Fleury (1640–1723), first published as *A Short History of the Ancient Israelites, with an Account of Their Manners, Customs, Laws* (1802) and then printed in a second edition in 1805 as *The Manners of the Ancient Israelites*, translated and “the whole much enlarged” by “A. Clarke.” Adam Clarke was a vaunted British Methodist theologian, author of a multivolume commentary on the Bible, and a contemporary of Bennett. On more than one occasion throughout his career, Bennett challenged Clarke’s biblical scholarship and mocked his Hebraic learning. Clarke was considered by many the leading biblical scholar of his day, but he was clearly deficient in the eyes of this Jewish exegete. But the issue here for Bennett was not merely Clarke’s professional incompetence; it was his moral depravity in unjustly accusing the Jews of a crime, owing to a misreading of a Maimonidean text on the Noahide laws. Bennett quickly offered a correction of the Fleury/Clarke statement with the proper rabbinic references and then furiously added: “If these Prelates were ignorant of the particulars described in the above text of Mymonides [Maimonides], silence would then become more honourable to them, than to expose their illusive minds; which tends only to furnish the illiterate with matters of contention and dissention. [. . .] If Mr. Adam Clarke, with his adherents, should have authority

³² Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 208.

³³ Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 209n. See Claude Fleury, *The Manners of the Ancient Israelites*, translated and “much enlarged” by A. Clarke, 2nd edn. (Manchester: S. Russell for W. Baynes, 1805), 342.

and influence in Government affairs, their career would surpass those of the Roman Catholic Church!”³⁴

Bennett finally returns to his historical overview and the ultimate dissemination of the Abrahamic principles in the modern world. He reviews the new geographic and mechanical discoveries and the rise of science, so that “Religion itself became refined and embellished with Moral Philosophy and Reason; and a general Toleration to the different persuasions in Europe was granted.” These transformative developments also spelled an improved situation for the Jewish minority: “In this last century when superstition and prejudice has been evaporated and extirpated from mankind, the house of Jacob then became also more considerable; the gross oppressions, insults, derision were rejected with shame; and with true humanity liberties were granted them to share in some realms in Europe[.]”³⁵

Bennett’s measured observation that liberties were granted the Jews only in some realms of Europe leads him finally to consider the present era and provide, as he calls it, “a short account of the present state of my dispersed brethren in Europe, according to experience in my native country, and in my travels.”³⁶ The focus is Poland, the principal asylum of the Jews in Europe, numbering some two million, and so he claims, his birthplace.

As we have already seen in the previous chapter, his first memories are mixed. On the one hand, “The memory of my infancy is still struck with horror, at the oppressions and cruelties, individually inflicted on the Jews in that kingdom, and the shedding of their blood for *false accusations*, by the inducement of the Priests[.]” On the other hand, the Jews are highly proficient in “Hebrew theological Studies,” possessing “acute minds” and “very much inclined to philosophical and scientific Studies.”³⁷

As also mentioned, Bennett provides an overview of the events leading up to and following the first partition of Poland, the imposition of restrictive legislation by Peter Bogdanovich Passek, and the successful petition of a Jewish delegation to Catherine II to rescind his harsh decrees. The narrative now shifts from the communal to the personal: his departure to study in Copenhagen, the completion of his degree, his residency in Berlin, and his ultimate departure to London, described above.

³⁴ Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 211n. For more on Bennett and Clarke, see below, chapter 7. See also Simon Mayers, “Monuments to the Truth of Christianity: Anti-Judaism in the Works of Adam Clarke,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 93 (2017): 45–66.

³⁵ Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 212–214.

³⁶ Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 214.

³⁷ Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 215, 216.

Bennett closes his work with an optimistic hope for the future and a plea for virtue and humanity among the diverse communities of Western civilization: “The variety of national opinions or religious Ceremonies, can by no means prejudice the law of natural virtue and good qualities. [. . .] [T]he *Universe* is not framed with uniformity, [. . .] every part having its place, virtue and scope in the Creation.”³⁸

In the final analysis, the Jews in their dispersion have a vital role to play in the future of humanity: “dispersion was the absolute will of God, for the progress and preservation of the seed of Abraham, with the pure principles of Divinity received from the Patriarchs; whose laws and records were a light and guide to mankind at large” and never meant as a punishment for the crucifying of Christ. The posterity of Adam changed over time but they continued “still in their true principles of the patriarchal religion, law, and manners, adapted to the Mosaical Code, and the prophetical Records.” In light of this fact, it is beyond doubt, Bennett concludes, “that mankind will arrive to a still more progressive state, and more glorious to human welfare: which is pointed out by the prophet Zephaniah, iii. ch. 9. v. ‘For then will I turn to the people a pure language, that they all may call upon the name of the Lord, to serve him with one consent.’ Amen.”³⁹

2.4 Christian reactions

Solomon Bennett had hoped that his first publishing venture would be widely noticed and appreciated for its learned arguments against Christian misinterpretations of Scripture and for articulating a special place for diasporic Judaism in the larger Christian culture of England and Europe. His hopes were not fully realized, and he later expressed regret that the work was not more widely reviewed. Nevertheless, several reviews were printed in the years following the publication of *The Constancy of Israel*, and one is of particular interest.⁴⁰ Appearing in a prestigious journal, *The Monthly Review*, it was penned by the Reverend Dr. Christo-

³⁸ Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 231–233.

³⁹ Bennett, *The Constancy of Israel*, 232, 234, 335.

⁴⁰ Other reviews of Bennett’s work include “Mr. Bennett’s Constancy of Israel,” *The Literary Panorama* (London) 7 (December 1, 1809): 460–469, perhaps written by the editor Charles Taylor; see especially 464: “We have given these extracts, partly because we would willingly provoke the sons of Israel to better things; partly because we would put on their guard those very worthy persons, who patronize endeavours to convert the Jewish people; and partly because it contributes to complete the picture of the present state and character of the Jewish nation, at large, which, as our author speaks as an eye-witness of it, we consider as the most important part of his volume, to our general purpose of giving information.” See also S. Newton, “Remarks on Mr. S. Bennett’s Translation of 110th Psalm,” *The Jewish Repository on Monthly Communications Re-*

pher Lake Moody (1753–1815), a regular contributor. Moody became active as a reviewer during the journal's second series (1790–1815), especially after the death in 1803 of its founder, Ralph Griffiths. Moody's wife, the well-known poet Elizabeth Greenly Moody (1737–1814), was also an occasional contributor to the journal. Here is a small part of Moody's reactions to Bennett's book:

A truly curious publication is here offered to us, which we are sorry that we have so long delayed to notice, and which we would not recommend to the attention of the London Society for the Promotion of Christianity among the Jews; since in arguing with the race of Israel to effect their conversion, it is of the first importance to ascertain the precise ground which they occupy, and the interpretations which they give of those prophecies in the Bible which we refer to the New Dispensation. Hitherto, our commentators have not paid sufficient regard to this very material circumstance, and to such neglect perhaps is owing the little impression which they have made on the minds of Jews. The volume before us, though by no means so "unprejudiced" as the author supposes, though written in very imperfect English (which we readily excuse in a native of Poland, who has resided only a few years in this country,) and though fraught with a kind of spleen against "the Nazarene commentators" [. . .] is intitled to consideration for this particular reason, that it unveils the principles and arguments of the Jews in reference to the mission and doctrines of the Savior. Jews have preserved a kind of silence but this Polish Jew speaks his sentiments without concealment. [. . .] Notwithstanding the incorrect language in which this work is written, it ought not to be thrown by with a laugh. If this Polish Jew has developed the views of Jews in general, and their common mode of interpreting the prophecies, the addresses which Christians have hitherto offered to the race of Abraham are little adapted to the purpose, and we cannot wonder that they have failed. Mr. Bennett has taught us that our controversy with them must be differently conducted, before we can make any impression on them.⁴¹

Moody had certainly offered a respectful and even appreciative reaction to Bennett's heartfelt refutation of the standard Christian arguments against Judaism. Bennett's response, published a year later in *The New Review* as "A Defence of S. Bennett Against the Monthly Review," might appropriately have acknowledged the favorable tone of his reviewer and perhaps even reciprocated in kind. But Bennett was sharply focused instead on articulating his own position as forcefully as he could. He began by citing two other dismissive reviews that both claimed his skills as an engraver (as displayed by his self-portrait printed in the book)

specting the Jews and the Proceedings of the London Society 1 (1813): 132–137, and "The Constancy of Israel," *The Jewish Expositor and the Friend of Israel* 1 (1816): 272–276.

41 "The Constancy of Israel," *The Monthly Review or the Literary Journal Enlarged* 68 (August 1812): 396–401 (article 8); quotation, 396–397. On Moody, see Benjamin Colbert, "Christopher Lake Moody," *British Travel Writing*, University of Wolverhampton (2017), <https://btw.wlv.ac.uk/authors/1004>. Moody is identified as the author of the review by Benjamin C. Nangle in *The Monthly Review Second Series, 1790–1815* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), 45, 88. My sincere thanks to Professor Yaacob Dweck for his assistance in obtaining this information.

were far superior to his theological arguments. How was it possible to fathom his argument based on sound philology and scholarship, he contended, given such snide remarks? It was the fault of such reviewers, he claimed, that his book did not sell more copies. In turning finally to Moody's review, Bennett referred to his brief rehearsal of the standard Christian argument that the dispersion of the Jews was the result of their rejection of Jesus. Reiterating what was, as we have seen, a major theme of his entire book, Bennett vigorously rejected Moody's comment while ignoring his positive posture on Jewish exegesis and his plea for Christians to familiarize themselves with the book's point of view.⁴² In so doing, Bennett appears to have missed an opportunity for respectful mutual exchange; but he clearly took advantage of the open playing field he had gained to express his most severe criticisms of regnant Christian attitudes toward the Jews.

2.5 A final thought

Writing in 1979, Harvey Meirovich, in a well-researched essay on English Ashkenazic reactions to the nineteenth-century missionaries, noticed Solomon Bennett's work and suggested that his diaspora-centered theory of Jewish history adumbrated a similar notion held by the later German Jewish reformers.⁴³ The parallel is worthy of mention, though Bennett, despite his critique of rabbinic praxis and the rabbinate itself, would hardly have considered himself a precursor of Reform Judaism. In sharp contrast to the reformers first in Germany and then in Great Britain, Bennett had no ideological stake in reforming Jewish law; he was strongly against biblical criticism and any deviation from a literalist reading of the Bible; he had no interest in rewriting and abbreviating Jewish liturgy; and he had no opinions about the aesthetics of the organ and mixed seating in the synagogue or the use of the vernacular in preaching. Contextualizing him in this way appears to me to pigeonhole him within an ideology to which he would strongly object. If anything, he was more a *maskil* than a reformer.

Meirovich was correct, however, in underscoring the centrality of this notion of diaspora in Bennett's work of Jewish polemic and advocacy. The book represents a unique blend of praise and critique of Christianity as well as of Judaism. How fascinating it appears that this author, without any contradiction in his mind, could juxtapose his admiration for English Protestant culture and politics

42 "Defence of Mr. S. Bennett against the Monthly Review," *New Review: Or Monthly Analysis of General Literature* 1, no. 2 (February 1813): 246–249.

43 Harvey Meirovich, "Ashkenazic Reactions to the Conversionists, 1800–1850," *Transactions and Miscellanies, Jewish Historical Society of England* 26 (1974–1978): 21, n. 3.

with his disgust for “the crows in the pulpit” and the missionaries and converts; or his devotion to the moral legacy of Abraham and Moses and its continued relevance with his disdain for rabbis and superficial and ignorant Anglo-Jews. Yet despite these ambiguities and tensions vis-à-vis both religions, he boldly articulated a vision of how Jews and their cultural legacy contribute to the world and how Christians could be spiritually enriched by including the Jewish minority in the modern body politic and civilization they were creating in Great Britain.

Intertwined with Bennett’s grand message heralding the Jewish contribution to contemporary Christian culture is the presence of a personal story, marking a critical moment in the author’s life—a transition from his former Jewish existence in eastern and central Europe to his new identity as an immigrant in England. How meaningful it was for Bennett to recall in this book the memories of his childhood in Poland and his subsequent European wanderings at the same time that he was shaping his new professional and cultural life in London.

The work also marked a different kind of transition, a gradual one, from engraver to Jewish writer and public intellectual. Bennett’s composition was a declaration that its author was more than a professional artist, that he had something to say to both Christians and Jews alike in the English language, a mixture of both criticism and praise, and that his expertise as a Jewish and biblical scholar was of great value to both communities. Ultimately, there was a direct line of argument from *The Constancy of Israel* in 1809 to the completion of Bennett’s revision of the Protestant Bible right before his death in 1838. In sum, Bennett’s first book offers the modern reader a fascinating ego-document situating a Polish Jewish immigrant in a new land of challenge and opportunity, attempting to promote himself as a learned author, establish a public image, and open a dialogue with other intellectuals like himself.