

5 Two English Ladies and a Jew from Polotsk

In the previous chapter, we examined in some detail Bennett's male Christian associates along with his Jewish adversaries. Though almost all his Christian associates in London were men, two were women. This chapter is devoted to those two individuals and their unusual relationships with Bennett. Rachel Fanny Antonina Lee (1773?–1829) and Catherine Housman (1770–1855) both initially employed Solomon Bennett as a copper engraver, but both ultimately developed long-term relations with him that were based primarily on his Hebraic and biblical expertise. Both women wrote about Bennett in their published writings, and Bennett likewise had occasion to mention them both and, in the case of Lee, to write several personal letters. Both were women of means, both authors of multiple tomes, professing a strong attachment to their personal faith that naturally flowed into a genuine passion to master the Hebrew language and to comprehend the original biblical text. But the two were radically different individuals. Rachel Fanny Antonina Lee was a well-known public figure tarred in her youth by the allegation she had run away with two brothers who had taken advantage of her, a scandalous episode for which she was subsequently satirized in the press for her indiscretion. She also declared her opposition to her Anglican upbringing at her public trial. In contrast, Catherine Housman, a longtime resident of Bath, was hardly known outside her city, where she was renowned for her generous acts and literary activity. While Lee seemed to have accepted her notoriety, at least initially, Housman appears to have preferred a lower profile to pursue her biblical studies, although her extensive publications do attest to an aggressive and polemical style when the Christian faith, as she understood it, was threatened by its modern “pagan” defilers.

Devoting an entire chapter to these two women and their relationship to a Jewish artist and intellectual seems appropriate for several reasons. Both women left their mark on the social and intellectual worlds they inhabited through their writings and personal interactions and are fascinating historical subjects. Their interactions with Bennett are relatively well documented, at least in comparison to those with his male Christian associates. And most importantly, they offer a highly unusual glimpse into Jewish–Christian intellectual, professional, and social interactions between two Christian women and a Jewish man. Bennett never pointed to anything unusual in his relationship with these two because they were women, but it is certainly worth asking how in fact the power dynamics of these cross-gendered exchanges were different, particularly when both parties—the Christian women and the Jewish man—were themselves already marginalized in a society dominated by Christian men. Accordingly, the microhistory of Bennett

and his female associates offers a relatively novel perspective for examining the history of Jewish–Christian interreligious dialogue in the nineteenth century.

5.1 Mrs. Lee, the Baroness Le Despenser

Rachel Fanny Antonina Lee (see Figure 5.1) was an illegitimate daughter of Francis Dashwood (1708–1781), the eleventh Baron Le Despenser, an English politician and founder of the Hellfire Club (formally known as the Order of the Friars of St. Francis of Wycombe). She was sent off to France at a young age and educated at a convent, and on his death she inherited some forty thousand pounds. Returning to Great Britain around the outbreak of the French Revolution, she lived initially in London under the supervision of a Mrs. Catherine Gordon, the mother of two sons, Loudon and Lockhart, who were later to do serious damage to Lee’s life and public image. Soon after, she married Matthew Allen Lee (known as “Handsome Lee”), but they separated after two years and she never remarried.

Despite her beautiful looks and fine education, she did not fit well into the high society of her father. She moved to Manchester, but she was in London when she was allegedly abducted from her residence by the Gordon brothers in 1803 (see Figure 5.2). Both men had matriculated at Oxford, and the older of the two, Lockhart, was then a married clergyman. The brothers were arrested in Gloucester and tried at Oxford, where Lee was compelled to testify against them both. The trial ended abruptly when she refused to take an oath professing her Christian faith. The brothers were severely condemned by the judge but ultimately acquitted. Loudon quickly published an apology for his and his brother’s actions (1804), pleading their innocence and asserting Lee’s guilt. She subsequently defended herself by publishing her own version of the events, *A Vindication of Mrs. Lee’s Conduct* (1807).

The trial and the subsequent savaging of her public image in the press appear to have deeply affected Lee during the remaining twenty-two years of her life. She seemed uncomfortable with and suspicious of people with whom she was in contact; she lived in relative isolation as a spinster; and she hardly trusted even her own relatives and close associates. Her published investigation into the conduct, and her alleged jealousy, of her sister-in-law Lady Anne Dashwood, along with her various published charges against others who she claimed had wronged her, appear to have occupied much of her time and energy right up until her premature death in 1829. Only one of her books, published under the pseudonym Philopatria and titled *An Essay on Government* (1808), gave her some sense of satisfaction and pride. Drawing heavily on the legal theories of the English jurist Sir William Blackstone, Lee tried to balance her dissenting views of the English gov-



Figure 5.1: Rachel Fanny Antonina Lee, the Baroness Le Despenser.

ernment with a sincere English patriotism during a time of conflict with France. The respectable book was even noticed favorably by William Wordsworth and



Figure 5.2: The abduction of Rachel Fanny Antonina Lee by Loudon and Lockhart Gordon.

seems to have ensured a modest fame to this woman engaging in the heavily male-dominated genre of political writing.¹

It is during these last two decades of her life that Lee made the acquaintance of the Jew Solomon Bennett. It was also during this period that she elected to study Hebrew to enhance her appreciation of the Old Testament. The ultimate result of this effort was the publication in 1822 of an original work, addressed to the

¹ On Rachel Fanny Antonina Lee, the Baroness Le Despenser, see the comprehensive biography by Anne M. Powers, *The Female Infidel: The Vindication of Fanny Dashwood* (United Kingdom: [author], 2018); Thomas de Quincey, "The Female Infidel," chap. 4 of *Autobiographic Sketches, 1790–1803*, De Quincey's Works 14 (Edinburgh: Adam and Charles Black, 1862), 128–144; Cecil Roth, "Eccentric Englishwomen: III. 'Baroness Despenser,'" *The Spectator*, August 30, 1937, 792–793; Daniel S. Roberts, "Wordsworth's Reading of Rachel Lee: de Quincy's Evidence," *Notes and Queries* 49 (2002): 465–467; and Richard Garnett, revised by J. Gilliland, "Lee [née Dashwood], Rachel Fanny Antonina (1773?–1829)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, May 11, 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/16302>.

Jewish community, in the Hebrew language with an accompanying English translation by H. V. Bolaffey.

Haim Vita Bolaffey (1778/9–1835), a Sephardic Jew apparently from Florence and the brother-in-law of David Meldola, the son of the chief Sephardic rabbi Raphael Meldola, arrived in London a few years after Bennett, published several liturgical translations and two Hebrew grammars, and was a Hebrew tutor at Oxford and at Eton College.² Some years later, he became a Hebraic consultant and translator for Lee, a role which paralleled that of Bennett along with at least two other Jews also competent in the Hebrew language, as we shall soon see. That Lee, with all her other preoccupations, chose to support at least four different Jews all professing an expertise in the Hebrew language is interesting enough; that she seemed to develop a somewhat personal relationship with at least some of them is even more worthy of notice.

The work that Lee apparently composed on her own and then had translated into English by Bolaffey bore the full title *The Hebrew Epistle of Antonina Desperser etc. Entitled “Iggeret Ha-Kolel El Ha-Ivrim” or A Circular Epistle to the Hebrews*.³ Bolaffey opens the work with a translator’s preface setting out the author’s intentions to present her Hebrew composition in an engaging epistolary manner rather than a formal discourse. He then makes explicit his conviction that she is perfectly capable of fulfilling this task: “From the honour I have of being personally acquainted with Philopatria [Lee’s earlier pseudonym, which she uses in this work], the author of the *Essay on Government*, I have had frequent opportunities to ascertain her great erudition in Hebrew Literature. I have had the satisfaction to see some commentaries, written in Hebrew, [. . .] which are highly creditable to the understanding and judgment of the noble author.”⁴ It is difficult to justify Bolaffey’s testimony regarding Lee’s great erudition in Hebrew literature in light of the Hebrew text that follows. His explicit flattery more likely suggests an effort to win Lee’s approval of and appreciation for his work. As we shall soon see, Bennett offered her similar but more restrained compliments for her limited competence in Hebrew.

2 On Bolaffey, see Cecil Roth, “Two Livornese Jews in England: Michael Bolaffi, Musician, and Hayim Vita Bolaffey, Linguist,” *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* 16 (1945–1951): 223–225, and Stephen Massil, “Two Hebrew Grammars and the Enlightenment,” *Jewish Historical Studies* 41 (2007): 99–143. The Hebrew grammar is Hayim Vita Bolaffey, *An Easy Grammar of the Primæval Language, Commonly Called Hebrew, Entitled “Orah meshor” or, The “Straight Path” to Real Knowledge, Fully Exemplified by Instructive and Elegant Extracts* (London: Hatchard and G. & W. B. Whittaker, 1820). He earlier published *The Aleph-Beth: or The First Step to the Hebrew Language* (London: Galabin and Marchand, 1811).

3 Published in London by H. N. and M. Solomon, 1822.

4 Bolaffey, preface to Lee, *The Hebrew Epistle*, iv (note).

It appears that Bolaffey was quite aware of the meager accomplishments of Lee in both the substance and style of her remarks but sought to inflate the value of her work as best he could. He tells the reader that the work is written in Hebrew because the language makes possible “closer and more concise expression,” adding that it is intended not

to offer learned precepts and detailed documentation but rather to exhibit general sentiments of sympathy and philanthropy to enlarge and harmonize the imagination, and by that means dispose the minds of readers to a similar taste and habit of thinking in true religion and genuine morals, as the best supports in the adverse scenes of human life; in which it appears from the general tenor of her Epistle, that she has sometimes had occasion to exercise, in a high degree, the virtues of fortitude and forbearance.⁵

He further extols her words as reflections of the infinite wisdom and benevolence of the Creator, pointing throughout to the instructions of the Holy Bible. He defends her apparently hidden allusions to Virgil and other “eminent writers” who may perhaps not appear germane to her main subject. He hopes his readers can appreciate “the warmth, the graces, the strength, the dignity of the composition” in the translation that Bolaffey has rendered into English.⁶ How well, it seemed, had this translator successfully compensated for a lack of substance of the work, by elevating sentiments over clear ideas, apologizing for extraneous authors unconnected with the message of the work, and, most importantly, linking her unexceptional reflections to her own fortitude in withstanding the pressures of her life!

Lee addresses her epistle to “the general assembly of the Israelites,” by which she meant the community of Ashkenazic Jews living in London. She announces that her trusted messenger Isaac Lyon (Aryeh) the son of Solomon would deliver the epistle directly into their hands.⁷ She calls for her friends to arise to seek re-

5 Bolaffey, preface to Lee, *The Hebrew Epistle*, 4–5. Professor Iris Idelson-Shein points out to me that Bolaffey’s description of Lee’s composition, as “not meant to offer learned precepts and detailed documentation but rather to exhibit general sentiments of sympathy and philanthropy,” participates, in her words, in the gendered binaries of rational men and sentimental women. It does seem that he describes her effort in a stereotypical language. On the other hand, her stringing together Hebrew phrases with little rhyme or reason must have presented a challenge to Bolaffey as he tried to translate the work meaningfully. His argument that her words were meant to convey a mood more than an actual message appears to me as his way of enhancing her effort rather than deprecating it.

6 Bolaffey, preface to Lee, *The Hebrew Epistle*, vi–vii.

7 Isaac Lyon (1787–1850) was the third Jew employed by the baroness, acting as a kind of personal messenger or secretary for her, and he was often mentioned in her numerous papers. Lyon’s father was Solomon Lyon, the distinguished teacher of Hebrew at Cambridge, Oxford, and Eton. On him see Naomi Cream, “Reverend Solomon Lyon of Cambridge (1755–1820),” *Jewish His-*

demption and prosperity for the entire human race. She mentions her other Hebrew writings, her commentaries based on her own understanding, unconcerned with “the trifling minutiae of Grammar, nor the arbitrary rules. [. . .] I wrote them under the Supreme influence rapidly, as if the Divine light was shining on my mind and the Hurim and Thummim Illuminating the depths of my intellect.” She was perhaps aware of her own deficiencies in Hebrew composition, which could apparently be overcome by divine intervention. She adds that she has spoken words of peace and not reproof and presented her *Essay on Government* to the chief rabbi of the German (Ashkenazic) Congregation along with this epistle.⁸

She mentions ambiguously a redemptive and invigorating moment soon to come. And she refers more explicitly to her own personal tragedies and challenges, her arduous struggle against her enemies and even her friends who failed her. But she finds a way to heal: “The Supreme Healer alone infinite in power afforded the invigorating remedy to my wounds and gloriously exalted me!” She calls again and again for the coming of a judgment day, one with “an end to the groanings from oppression among our friends” and “a new order of things.” This epistle constitutes “a seal of peace, a reference to future years.”⁹

At the end, she returns to the legitimating Jewish testimony regarding her sacred mission: “My Messenger, Isaac Lyon [Aryeh], saw me write, and read nearly the whole, and I also shewed to him many fragments which were additions, to this Epistle. He has attested those facts, and many others can vouch for the truth of this assertion[.]” She closes with her name and self-designated title: “Antonina Despenser, the only Daughter of Francis Baron Despenser.”¹⁰

A close comparison of Bolaffey’s English translation with Lee’s Hebrew text reveals a faithful rendering of the original, smoothing out the many rough edges of the sometimes awkward and unnatural Hebrew phrasing and syntax, and yielding quite impressively a felicitous and most readable English essay. It is as if Bolaffey had discussed the Hebrew work with its author and well understood the precise meaning of her Hebrew constructions—well enough to transform them

torical Studies 36 (1999–2001): 31–69. Isaac was the first Jewish man to travel voluntarily to Australia, where for a few years he taught children of convicts in the newly founded penal colony of New South Wales. On his return to England, he published several minor Hebrew works and taught children in various institutions. He was clearly not as erudite as his well-known father but certainly had received a decent Jewish education. On Isaac, see Naomi Cream, “Isaac Leo Lyon: The First Free Jewish Migrant to Australia?” *Journal of the Australian Jewish Historical Society* 12 (1993): 3–16.

⁸ Lee, *The Hebrew Epistle*, 4–10 (*Iggeret*, 4–7).

⁹ Lee, *The Hebrew Epistle*, 12–20 (*Iggeret*, 9–14).

¹⁰ Lee, *The Hebrew Epistle*, 23–24 (*Iggeret*, 17). She was not in fact the only daughter of Francis, Baron Despenser.

into elegant English. How ironic to consider how an imperfect Hebrew epistle composed by a Christian baroness could be translated into a polished English composition by a Sephardic Hebrew scholar from Italy, a relative newcomer to England!¹¹

The seemingly successful joint venture between a Christian woman and her Jewish translator did not end well, however, much to the consternation of both individuals. Two years after the publication of the *Epistle*, Lee published two separate accounts of her highly incriminating accusations against Bolaffey of theft and dishonesty. In the first, *A Declaration*, written in January 1824, she laid out in meticulous detail the charges against her Jewish employee. Bolaffey had initially revealed his financial distress to her and she had offered him a five-pound gift to alleviate his misery. He had acknowledged her gift and indicated it would be helpful to him. Apparently the banknote she promised him was folded with other banknotes and he mistakenly took twenty pounds from her to which he was not entitled and spent it on his rent. He subsequently had the temerity to send her a bill for two years of his “literary labor, and Instruction in Hebrew, Italian and French” for two hundred pounds, subtracting the twenty pounds he had already taken. According to Lee, he had never worked for her except in translating the *Epistle* and this fictional bill simply added insult to injury. She proceeded to discuss her previous conversations and engagements with him, his work as her translator, his dissatisfaction as “the Hebrew master of a Charity school,” and his desire to work for her as a full-time secretary, although she had never agreed to such an arrangement.¹²

She also alluded to her present distressed psychological state, which Bolaffey by his dishonest act had rendered even more troubled. Nevertheless, she fully acknowledged that for a time the two had harmoniously worked well together. While he had not actually taught her Hebrew, or French and Italian, he had reviewed her other biblical commentaries and he had been “deserving of esteem and confidence; he always expressed a fervent wish to be taken under my protection; and frequently confirmed in the most decisive manner his professions of attachment to my person and his determination to adhere under all or any circumstances to my Cause, and to any Cause which I might support.”¹³ Before closing

11 On the larger theme of translation as a meeting ground for Jewish–Christian relations, see Naomi Seidman, *Faithful Renderings: Jewish-Christian Difference and the Politics of Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

12 Rachel Fanny Antonina Lee, *A Declaration (Relating to the Conduct of H. V. Bolaffey)* (London: F. Kiernan, 1824); this four-page “declaration” is “relating to the conduct of H. V. Bolaffey towards Mrs. Lee.”

13 Lee, *A Declaration*, [3].

her declaration, she referred explicitly to Bolaffey's problems with his health and finances, and even to a lawsuit for which she had previously offered him some assistance.

Lee's declaration against Bolaffey followed her bizarre practice of publishing other litigious works against her perceived enemies, especially Lady Anne Dashwood, her sister-in-law, whom she accused of coveting her valuable possessions. In what she called a "final addenda" to her investigation of Dashwood and her alleged collaborator, Mr. Delmar, Lee continued her obsessive retelling of the Bolaffey incident with new intensity and conviction.¹⁴ She now divulged that Bolaffey had voluntarily returned the twenty-pound note, and she then gave it to him as a gift as "he raised his hands and his eyes to heaven and uttered a Hebrew thanksgiving."¹⁵ He next asked for her blessing, but she continually reproached him and departed from the room. Yet she added: "Notwithstanding the proceedings specified in the Declaration, the Baroness does not regret having chosen H. V. Bolaffey to be the Translator of her Circular[.]" Moreover, she testified that Bolaffey had always spoken about her "in the highest terms of commendation. [. . .] He seemed to be overjoyed when he was with the Baroness," and he was always ready to prove his allegiance to her.¹⁶

It is at this point that Solomon Bennett finally makes his appearance in Lee's narrative. She had shown her Hebrew commentaries not only to Bolaffey but to Bennett as well: "The Baroness had shewed some pages of the *perushim* to Solomon Bennett, a well-known engraver among the Jews who approved generally speaking of the characters, and also, with few exceptions, of the phrases. The asperity of the person above mentioned is well known; with reference to which the following fact must be satisfactory, to all impartial persons."¹⁷ Lee obviously knew Bennett's reputation well as one accused, especially by his Jewish enemies, of being a contentious and harsh critic of intellectual superficiality and boorishness. His modest praise of her Hebrew work, in comparison to the effusiveness of Bolaffey, was not to be taken for granted.

She continues to describe Bennett and their relationship:

When the Baroness some years ago wrote a Hebrew inscription for a cedar box, she sent it to Solomon Bennett and gave him authority to write the same inscription in those characters which he might deem most accurate; he did not make any alteration in the characters

¹⁴ Rachel Fanny Antonina Lee, *Final Addenda to an Investigation into the Conduct of Lady Anne Dashwood and Mr. Delmar with Respect to Antonina the Baroness Despensier, Author of the Essay on Government*, etc. (London: F. Kiernan, 1824).

¹⁵ Lee, *Final Addenda*, 81.

¹⁶ Lee, *Final Addenda*, 82, 85.

¹⁷ Lee, *Final Addenda*, 86.

which the Baroness sent to him. It is further necessary to declare that the Baroness, at first sent to Solomon Bennett, merely with reference to the inscription about mentioned; she however afterwards spoke to him, and shewed him other Hebrew characters of which he equally approved; she also translated some passages, read remarks which she had written, etc. He subsequently engraved several seals for her; and she had communications with him, with reference to Books, etc. Justice however requires the further asseveration that he never in the slightest degree assisted the Baroness in any of her Hebrew writings; conscience has several times induced him to corroborate the fact above mentioned; there were several urgent, and perhaps, to many, obvious reasons, for the degree of tenacity which the Baroness evinced with reference to the points in question; among others the senseless malignity, and the gross ignorance of a few, who, at the period when she first spoke to Solomon Bennett, i.e. about nine years ago, were instruments of the worst of purposes, may be adduced; with reference to which, and to her own situation, she was equally scrupulous with respect to various circumstances of little comparative consequence, which need not here be detailed. Solomon Bennett has always admitted the facts in question; and must also recollect that the Baroness for the reason above declared, carried her tenacity so far that she refused to let him write even a Hebrew character in case of a trivial mistake, or omission, in any writings which she might show to him; though he several times wrote attestations, addressed to her, with reference to transactions in which he might have been concerned, etc.¹⁸

The passage is interesting for several reasons. Lee and Bennett had met some nine years earlier, in 1815. This seems to have predated her first encounter with Bolaffey. She had initially engaged him as an engraver but her particular interest in Hebrew was apparent from the start. Although not mentioned here, they had a mutual friend, William Frend, the Unitarian clergyman and social reformer, who had been one of Bennett's major supporters.¹⁹ She sought legitimation from Bennett, the Hebrew scholar, as she had done with Bolaffey, and she underscored this need especially because she had endured a tarnished public image for most of her adult life. While she solicited Solomon's help, she insisted on the quality of her own work and demanded credit for it. Their relationship was transactional but based on a considerable amount of mutual trust and respect.

In the thousands of documents in the Baroness's extensive archive, one would not expect to discover a letter from Solomon Bennett written in his own hand specifically about the Bolaffey affair. But such a letter exists, dated February 1, 1824, only a few weeks after the *Declaration* was published. It offers a deeper understanding of the relationship between the Baroness and Bennett and between Bennett and Bolaffey, and it deserves to be cited in full:

¹⁸ Lee, *Final Addenda*, 86–87.

¹⁹ On Lee's close relation with Frend, see Powers, *The Female Infidel*, index, s.v. "Frend, William." On Frend, see the previous chapter.

Baroness!

I have read your declaration attentively and am sorry on both sides, viz. of your sustaining losses, and that a member of my nation, particularly a man who claims a portion of erudition, yet should be guilty of that heinous crime of theft—for surely the theft was committed previous to charging you with the fraudulent bill of 200 pounds; it is fabricated to cover the crime of his theft with another heinous crime of a fraudulent bill. The baroness has to recollect that I always have warned you for hypocrites and imposters but now you have experienced it. I am therefore to admonish you of the past and to advise you for the future: viz. to pardon a capital crime is a crime for itself. I am on that account fully convinced if you do not prosecute the offender [viz. Bolaffey] for his criminal conduct, he will infallibly prosecute his designe with respect to his fraudulent bill; depend upon it, he will neither spare your character nor your money nor your generous disposition which you have shown to that villain. He will neither spare to ridicule your Hebrew knowledge all with the views to make himself innocent and master over you. I have also to remind you the good the Baroness may be able to do with the sum of 200 pounds. How many indigent and needy persons the baroness may be able to assist with that sum rather than to indulge felony in its carrier? I conclude it with my sole opinion to prosecute the offender according to law, and to save your pecuniary subsistence but above all your character! As mentioned before.

Your sincere obedient servant, SBennett 14 Panton St., Haymarket

PS. Please not to acquaint anyone of my making such communications to you.²⁰

Bennett apparently knew Bolaffey outside their possible meetings in the home of Lee. David Meldola was a friend of Bennett and he was also Bolaffey's brother-in-law, as already mentioned.²¹ What is so striking is Bennett's unhesitating conclusion that Bolaffey was guilty of the crimes Lee had delineated, and he strongly encouraged her to prosecute her translator according to the letter of the law, even though he had not bothered to examine how Bolaffey understood the incident, and even though Bolaffey was a fellow Jew. Had not Bolaffey acquired some legitimate credentials by authoring two Hebrew grammars as well as teaching three languages at Oxford and Eton? What motivated Bennett to throw him under the bus, so to speak, to take the side of his Christian patron, while asking her to keep his surprising view a secret? Was it merely competition between the two Jewish teachers to gain the loyalty of their common employer that led him to

²⁰ The National Archives, Richmond, United Kingdom, TS11/276/999/4 RC3554475.

²¹ See Richard Barnett, "Haham Meldola and Hazan de Sola," *Transactions of the Jewish Historical Society of England* 21 (1962–1967): 1–38; including the translation of the letter from Bennett to Meldola quoted in chapter 1 (see n. 34). See also the letter of Isaac Leeser to David Meldola of March 14, 1851, where Bennett is mentioned, p. 2: Isaac Leeser Collection, Box 1, FF8, item 23, Library at the Herbert D. Katz Center for Advanced Judaic Studies, University of Pennsylvania (LSDCBx1FF8 23); available in the Gershwind-Bennett Isaac Leeser Digital Repository at the University of Pennsylvania, <https://colenda.library.upenn.edu/catalog/81431-p3sb3xj7f>. My thanks to Dr. Arthur Kiron for the reference.

include Bolaffey among the “hypocrites and imposters,” or did he know something else about this man and his character? Bennett had good reason to keep his letter private; that Lee chose to preserve it provides an awkward glimpse behind the scenes of her relationship with the two Jewish scholars.

One other letter from Bennett—dated July 4, 1824, some seven months after the letter above—was saved by the Baroness in her archive. The pretext for writing this time was to inform her of the publication of his commentary on the Temple of Ezekiel, but he quickly added the following lines, meant to confirm his endorsement of her Hebraic skills against any potential doubters of her accomplishments: “I beg to repeat my opinion, frequently given, during eight or nine years, that I have had at various periods, personal communication with you. I consider your Hebrew characters, generally speaking, correct, and I also approve (generally speaking) of the composition of your *perushim*, and of some other of your Hebrew writings which I have seen.”²²

Bennett signed the letter with his full Hebrew and English name, as if to indicate that he was sending Lee a kind of *haskamah*, authenticating and legitimating her Hebrew competence (with some qualification) as a defense against any possible detractors such as Bolaffey. It appears to be not only a formal gesture to an employer but an act of genuine kindness on the part of an associate who had known her for almost a decade and appreciated her efforts.²³

22 The National Archives, Richmond, United Kingdom, TS11/276/999/4, RC3554475.

There is still one more bit of evidence revealing the ties between Lee and Bennett. In her own personal archive, she deposited a pamphlet written and published by Bennett that is otherwise unknown (see the National Archives, Richmond, United Kingdom, TS11/276/999/4, RC3554475). This work, *An Appeal to the Judicious and Candid Class of the Hebrew Congregation*, signed by him and three others in 1816, justifies his co-officiating at a wedding between a Kohen (a Jew of priestly lineage) and a convert's daughter in the face of the opposition of London's two chief rabbis. On the incident, see chapter 3, above. Bennett had shared this publication with the baroness, who apparently read it, since there are two annotations in her own handwriting on the first page. The first was in response to Bennett's statement that the chief rabbis' stance against the marriage was in contradiction to Numbers 31:18. Elaborating on this idea a few lines below, she writes: “And which of the modern Rabbinical (or barbarous) laws do our learned rabbi preferre [*sic*], to those of the Written, or the Oral laws? But if such be admitted, we may as well change the whole, and there is then an end with the Sanctity attributed to Scripture!” How remarkable that this interesting text exists thanks to its preservation by a Christian woman! And more importantly, it suggests that she and Bennett engaged in interreligious dialogue and that she was interested in rabbinic law, though she disapproved of it when it seemed to contradict the sanctity of Scripture.

23 There is a fourth Jew who was supported by Lee and may have worked for her when he was in London. His name is Hart Simonds of Lesly, in Prussia, as he writes (or Zvi Hirsch ben Shimon)

5.2 Mrs. Catherine Housman of Bath

In sharp contrast to the well-publicized and well-documented Rachel Fanny Antonina Lee, Catherine Housman has remained in the shadows of the historical past. Despite my best efforts, I have yet to find any serious discussion of her life or publications in scholarly literature. Notwithstanding this relative anonymity, during her lifetime she did publish six books, which are easily located in major libraries and readily accessible on the internet. Given her strong biblical interests and her animated discussions of the relationship between modern science and Christian faith, she seems to have found a following even among contemporary readers. It is therefore puzzling to try to explain her obscurity among women writers of nineteenth-century England. What is clear, however, is the significant role she played in Solomon Bennett's career in London both as his generous patron and even possibly as his intellectual partner, as we shall soon see.

on the title pages of his one known and unusual publication in English and Hebrew: *The Arguments of Faith or Incontrovertible Answers to Sophists and Epicureans* (London: printed for the author by Francis Kiernan, 1822). He writes: "With tears in my eyes and a sad heart. I implored my Creator and exclaimed. O Almighty! Abandon me not, look upon my affliction and my pain! Thy never-ceasing mercy heard me from Thy throne. And before I had finished my humble supplication, I espied a deliverer approaching me, the Baroness Antonina Despensier, only daughter of the much beloved Baron Despensier whose name as well as that of her father 'as he sitteth among the elect of the land' is renowned. I became elevated by her condescension, and then I spoke within myself—'I will give her the fruit of her hands, and let her own works praise her in the gates.' O Almighty God! Let this deed be remembered in Thy eternal mind, and let her glory brighten forever. Amen" (75–76). He adds in a note: "She assisted me, a stranger, without any previous knowledge of me, to her own detriment, for which may her Almighty deliverer assist her in all her difficulties and enable her to complete all her works. (75n). Anne Powers, who first noticed this passage, observes in *The Female Infidel* (330–331) that Lee certainly must have had her hand in the project, as he echoes her (false) claim that she was the only daughter of the Baron Despensier. Powers indicates that Simonds petitioned Lee two years later for ten pounds for the fifty copies of the book he had delivered to her, even threatening to sue her. Kiernan was paid the ten pounds in 1825, and Simonds apologized to the baroness. Powers does not provide the source for this information, which I could not verify.

Simonds's work, written for a Jewish readership but also an English one, is a rather conventional Jewish refutation of selected biblical passages alleged by Christian exegetes to allude to Jesus. That Lee was willing to support the publication of this book, given her issues with Christianity, is highly interesting. My thanks to Professor Marcin Wodziński, whose educated guess is that Simonds's place of origin, Lesly, was Loslau, or Wodzisław Śląski, in Upper Silesia, which already had some Jewish population at the end of the eighteenth century (see "Wodzisław Śląski: Demography," Polin: *Virtual Shtetl*, 2017, <https://sztetl.org.pl/en/node/453/100-demography/22139-demography>).

Catherine Housman was born in Liverpool in 1776 and died in 1855 at the age of eighty-five, as recorded in the Bath Archives. *The Bath Chronicle* (Thursday, February 22, 1855, p. 3) mentions that she died on February 19 at her residence in 14 Sydney Place, at a very advanced age: “Mrs. Housman, was an old and respected inhabitant of this city, whose loss will be sincerely regretted by the neighbouring poor.” The *Chronicle* of Thursday, March 22, 1855 (p. 2), contains an advertisement for the sale by auction of her effects. These included a “select library,” a grand piano-forte, china, glass, and plate.²⁴ As to other details of her life, there are only passing references in her writing: she was enrolled in a “seminary”; she attended various lectures; she corresponded with a Boston clergyman (Isaac Boyle) who was a relative; she read widely on biblical, archeological, theological, and scientific subjects; and she was a woman of means who supported local charity, subsidized her own publications, and, at least in the case of Bennett, underwrote those of others. She seemed to know various prominent public figures, especially in Bath, several of whom are mentioned in her writings, and was respected as an accomplished author. She learned biblical Hebrew and had also studied postbiblical Hebrew writings, including poetry. She read considerably in ancient history and archaeology and was fascinated by antique art and symbolism. She was also familiar with contemporary writings on science, especially works challenging scientific theories as threatening to Christian faith. She was apparently a widow, since her name in her books and in the archives appears as Mrs. Housman or Mrs. Catherine Housman.

Between 1821 and 1849, Housman published six books—all focused on the same theme of defending the inerrancy of biblical truths against the regnant scientific theories of her day regarding creation, heliocentricity, atomism, multiple worlds, gravitation, and more. The books seemed to be responses to specific texts that aroused her anger, and in some cases they apparently originated as private letters to friends, which she later collected and prepared for publication.

Housman’s first book was titled in Hebrew and English: *Michtav o-Aḥvah mi-Sefer Torah Limḥot et ha-Aglah / A Writing or Declaration from the Law Book, to Obliterate the House of the Revolver, or Solar System* (1821). Written initially as an amusement, she tells us, it was eventually recast as a book to counter the famous

²⁴ This information is gleaned from *Bath Chronicle*, February 22, 1855, 3; March 22, 1855, 2. See also P. J. Bendall, *Newton St Loe, Bath: Memorial Inscriptions* (2016), <https://www.batharchives.co.uk/sites/www.bathvenues.co.uk/files/2022-07/NSL%2520Memorials%2520Issue%25202.pdf>. Catherine Housman’s will is located at the National Archives, Richmond, United Kingdom, PROB 11/2208/200. The will, which has two codicils, mentions the distribution of her assets to individuals and institutions located primarily in Bath and Liverpool. Among the beneficiaries is her Boston relative mentioned in her books, Rev. Isaac Boyle; and see below.

sentiment of Alexander Pope: “Nature and Nature’s Laws Lay Hid in Night—God said, ‘Let Newton be!’ and all was Light.” She adds, “In regard to Pope’s epitaph, I unite with many who deem those lines profane. And in respect to Sir Isaac Newton, although he might have been one of the very best of men, nevertheless, if we permit the word of God to bias, and form our judgment on that base, it compels us to allow, that when Sir Isaac demonstrated those laws of Kepler, he must have been under the influence of some deception.”²⁵ What follows is her concerted attempt to show that the origin of this deception, the Newtonian solar system, was to be located in ancient heathen notions of the gods. As they were condemned by the biblical prophets, they deserve the same repudiation in the author’s day. Referring to of the worship of the idol Rimmon by the ancient king of Syria’s house, she writes: “Although the present age may be deemed highly enlightened with respect to the arts and sciences, yet there must be an exception of one branch (for the science of the system of creation must be excluded) as that remains in the same dark state as it was full eight-hundred and ninety years before the birth of our Saviour, our present Orrery or solar system being the very same as that which the Syrian king adopted.”²⁶

She proceeds to offer familiar and oft-repeated arguments against the credibility of the solar system and astronomy in general, which is “based on conjecture though dressed up with all the parade of mathematical demonstration.” She is particularly offended by the teaching of Newton’s works in the seminaries, where “a pupil is invited to walk the solar path, as if he was going to be led into the light of God’s path, to cull the flowers of sublimity, or to set his feet on some precious stone of sure foundation.” But the theory of Newton is equivalent to the theory of Baal against the truth of the Lord, and “what our God reveals we ought to know; what he conceals, we never can.”²⁷ The Epicureans, the Peripatetics, the Gassendists, and the Cartesians, she adds, have examined and discussed under the terms of vacuum and infinity all those parts of physics which remain full of doubts, questions, and uncertainties that can never be resolved. As it is impossible for them to know the finite bounds of matter or its infinity, the divisibility of that

25 Catherine Housman, *Michtav o-Ahvhah mi-Sefer Torah Limhot et ha-Aglah / A Writing or Declaration from the Law Book, to Obliterate the House of the Revolver, or Solar System* (London: A. J. Valpy, 1821), v–vi.

26 Housman, *Michtav o-Ahvhah mi-Sefer Torah / A Writing or Declaration from the Law Book*, 102.

27 Housman, *Michtav o-Ahvhah mi-Sefer Torah / A Writing or Declaration from the Law Book*, 121, 133, 240, 260. On the general context of Housman’s anti-Newtonianism in the first half of the nineteenth century, see John Gascoigne, “From Bentley to the Victorians: The Rise and Fall of British Newtonian Natural Theology,” *Science in Context* 2 (1988): 219–256, and Francis Reid, “Isaac Frost’s *Two Systems of Astronomy* (1846): Plebeian Resistance and Scriptural Astronomy,” *British Journal of the History of Science* 38 (2005): 161–177.

same matter is another secret of which they will be eternally ignorant. But she makes clear that there remains a positive place for scientific inquiry: “You are not, my dear sir [she is writing to a relative], to conclude, although I am against Newtonian theory, that I am against any branch of useful science. I hold the talents of mankind in high esteem as anyone. It is merely a dissenting voice against astronomy’s unfathomables, seemingly so devoid of truth, that even its adopters outlive their faith, and where to cultivate is time ill-spent.”²⁸

Interspersed among her acute anti-Newtonian comments are several equally impressive displays of Hebraic knowledge. She cites and explains Akiva’s midrash on man, woman, and fire in the Babylonian Talmud tractate *Sotah* 17a. She offers her own Hebrew translation of the first Psalm, deviating from the standard version. She waxes eloquent on the beauty of the Hebrew language:

The Hebrew language, under those who dip into its treasurable depository merely for amusement, may find much entertainment, from the great degree of system and analogy it contains. There is a lambent spirit that plays about the word which reason has the faculty to collect, examine, and diffuse again each part into its own letter or into a kindred one. Although order be diversified, still do we find unanimity preserved, and trace also in each ancient page an affection of the same spirit, breathing throughout the whole tradition, enticing each individual (whose final expectations are to stand in his proportionate lot in Zion’s Heavenly Temple) to depart from the serpent *dever*, wilderness of suppositions and errors into the *davar* of light and truth.²⁹

After citing a passage from the Aramaic Targum, she admits: “I am under obligation to a learned friend for the above note, not having any knowledge myself of the Syriac or nothing of the Chaldee except for its resemblance to Hebrew.”³⁰ Was her learned friend Solomon Bennett? We shall examine her indebtedness to him below. But her Hebraic literacy is beyond question, as she then proceeds to quote from “a beautiful Hebrew poem composed by Solomon ibn Gabirol in the 4th century [*sic*]” that is among the “ancient compositions” in her possession. She translates the poem, which begins with the words *Ashrei Ayin Ra’atah shoshanat ha-Sharon* [Happy is the eye which beholds the rose of Sharon].³¹

²⁸ Housman, *Michtav o-Aḥvah mi-Sefer Torah / A Writing or Declaration from the Law Book*, 121, 275.

²⁹ Housman, *Michtav o-Aḥvah mi-Sefer Torah / A Writing or Declaration from the Law Book*, 257, 279, 282–283. *Dever* [plague] and *davar* [word] have the same root.

³⁰ Housman, *Michtav o-Aḥvah mi-Sefer Torah / A Writing or Declaration from the Law Book*, 318.

³¹ Housman, *Michtav o-Aḥvah mi-Sefer Torah / A Writing or Declaration from the Law Book*, 324–325. On the poem itself and a listing of its variants, see Israel Davidson, *Oẓar ha-shira ve-ha-piyyut* [Thesaurus of medieval Hebrew poetry], vol. 1 (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary 1924), 381 aleph, no. 8434.

Housman's second book was published twelve years later; *Three Letters to a Friend* (1833) was written as a response to two popular books by the Reverend Alexander Keith (1792–1880): *The Evidence of the Truth of the Christian Religion from the Fulfilment of Prophecy* (1823) and *Signs of the Times* (1832). Keith was a Free Church of Scotland minister who won acclaim for his refutation of David Hume, especially in his early work. Known as “Prophecy Keith,” he traveled to Palestine as part of Scotland’s mission of inquiry to the Jews.³²

Writing to Mrs. Cuming, her trusted friend, Housman objected to Keith’s assumption that the progress of science had ultimately become equivalent to the cause of truth because of geological discoveries or Newton’s theories. While referring to some of the key Newtonians of her day, such as Halley and Herschel, she also mentions and cites approvingly several of the critics of Newton, such as Robert Woodhouse, Thomas Baker, and John Scott, whose works she had consulted. Keith may be an able writer, she concludes, “but he passed over the sins of the science of Baal.”³³ The opinions of the critics helped convince her that the Newtonian system was on the decline.

In her next letter she takes on the geological theories of Georges Cuvier, particularly his notion of catastrophism, a succession of deluges plaguing the earth, relying on one Captain George Forman, who challenged his theory in a book of essays published in 1832. She argues that Forman’s demolition of Cuvier is useful as long as he avoids deviating from Scripture:

The young students in geology, upon the authority of their great master, imbibe notions which they believe to be founded on physical laws, and when they find that these notions, even with the utmost latitude of interpretation, cannot be made to accord with the facts recorded in Scripture, they are too apt to give up the revelation of God for the wild fancies of a philosopher. [. . .] Forman’s idea of a single deluge countering the forty is a precious gem, a defender of the faith of the Holy Writ. But one must weed out the few Baalish trees which mingle in his otherwise excellent reasonings.³⁴

³² On Rev. Alexander Keith, see Lionel Alexander Ritchie, “Keith, Alexander (1792–1880), *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, September 23, 2004, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/15262>.

³³ Catherine Housman, *Three Letters to a Friend* (London: A. J. Valpey, 1833), 27. She had read Robert Woodhouse, *Treatise on Astronomy Theoretical and Practical* (Cambridge: J. Smith for J. Deighton & Sons, 1821); Thomas Baker, *Reflections Upon Learning, Wherein Is Shewn the Insufficiency Thereof, in Its Several Particulars, in Order to Evince the Usefulness and Necessity of Revelation* (London: A. Bosvile, 1699); and John Scott, *The Holy Scriptural Doctrine of the Divine Trinity in Essential Unity* (London: printed by the author and others, 1754).

³⁴ Housman, *Three Letters to a Friend*, 49–52. See Captain Walter Forman, *Treatises on Several Very Important Subjects on Natural Philosophy* (London: Wason and Foxwell, 1832), appendix f, “Cuvier’s Theory of a Succession of Deluges.”

She also dismisses the Reverend Thomas Chalmers's *Discourses on the Christian Revelation viewed in Connexion with the Modern Astronomy* (1817), his well-known and highly influential arguments for a meaningful synthesis between Newton and Christian faith: "Newton's hypothesis retards our belief in the certainty of Jesus's view of creation. [. . .] You should pause before surrendering your faith to Dr. Thomas Chalmers' *Discourses*. [. . .] Believing in Newton is anti-Christian, apostacy, and idolatry."³⁵

Six years later, Housman published a letter to Dr. Joseph Hume Spry of Bath, her friend and neighbor, and made sure to send a copy to her relative in Boston, Rev. Isaac Boyle. As in her other works, she again reveals her considerable erudition in Hebraic studies and in the Christian polemical attacks against Newton in her day. Of considerable interest are her reflections on the history of the Hebrew language. She disagrees with Humphrey Prideaux that the returning exiles learned Hebrew in Aramaic after their exile in Babylon, arguing to the contrary that they did not lose their native language so quickly. She cites approvingly Benjamin Kennicott's opinions on the Judean Hebrew of the exiles as well as Gerald Fitzgerald's *An Essay on the Originality and Permanency of the Biblical History* (Dublin, 1796). She concludes that the Hebrew letters were never changed during Ezra's time, that Hebrew was the first and original language of mankind and was preserved with the most vigilant care from Moses to Malachi, that Saadia composed the first Hebrew grammar in the tenth century, and that the vowel points were neither original nor essential to the Hebrew language, which itself was pure from its inception.³⁶

Housman continues her assault on the Newtonian solar system with an additional set of recent authorities she had consulted, especially Thomas Wirtgman's *Opinions of the Divarication of the New Testament* (1835), Charles Babbage's *The Decline of Science in England and on Some of Its Causes* (1830), and John Murray's *Proof of Revelation Based on an Appeal to Existing Monuments, Sculptures, Gems, Coins, and Medals* (1831). Her primary concern, as before, is to argue for the primacy of faith: "[W]e see how, at every turn, it is the study of those who devote themselves to science to *ridicule* the *idea* of standing in awe of God, or in attributing to HIM the immediate superintendence over his works!"³⁷

³⁵ Housman, *Three Letters to a Friend*, 55–95; quotation, 95. On Chalmers, see now Jonathan R. Topham, *Reading the Book of Nature: How Eight Best Sellers Reconnected Christianity and the Sciences on the Eve of the Victorian Age* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2022).

³⁶ Catherine Housman, *Letter to Dr. Spry in Vindication of the Word of God against Every Species of Scientific Opposition* (London: W. Hughes, 1839), 8–50.

³⁷ Housman, *Letter to Dr. Spry*, 61–81, 97–130, 185–193; quotation, 63.

Catherine Housman wrote three other books, but I conclude this brief overview of her writing by focusing only on the volume she published in 1849 titled *Meditations on the Scriptural Interpretations Contained in Sir William Drummond's "Oedipus Judaicus,"* a work particularly relevant to Bennett, since (as we have seen in the previous chapter) he corresponded with Drummond.³⁸ Sir William Drummond of Logiealmond printed his *Oedipus Judaicus* in 1811 for private circulation; in it, he attempted to prove that the Old Testament was an extended astrological allegory. The book immediately incurred the wrath of several critics.³⁹ Housman discovered the volume relatively late, but given her previous defenses of the literal truth of Scripture, she could not restrain herself from offering her own personal assault on his speculations. She relied especially on the Reverend George Townsend's *Oedipus Romanus* (1819), an attempt to extend Drummond's thesis to the twelve Caesars of Rome, to satirize and belittle Drummond's fallacious reading. Using his vast knowledge of ancient pagan religious and archeology, Sir William, Housman claimed, had discovered a new way of eliciting truth, "commanding us to desert the alter of Revelation to kneel at that of reason and liberality, pointing to the Persian sphere, the Indian zodiac, and the Egyptian hieroglyphic, as the sacred substitute of the Christian scriptures."⁴⁰ Drummond insisted that the Hebrews had invented the zodiac, that the zodiacal structure found at Palmyra was built by Solomon, and that multiple biblical passages could be reduced to an astrological explanation, especially those describing the Temple and Tabernacle, all hypotheses that Housman found strained and unconvincing. She ultimately concludes that "Drummond most unaccountably resolves all things into zodiacal signs and constellations; and I am decidedly of the opinion that he never would have indulged in the hallucinations contained in his *Oedipus Judaicus* which robs the Scriptures of all reasonable claims to truth, had he not fully adopted the tenets of the solar system[.]"⁴¹ To refute Drummond, she even cites an English translation of Maimonides' *Sefer ha-Maddah* on Abraham's confrontation with the idolatry of his day. She closes with a long quotation from George Townsend on the danger of Drummond's learning, ingenuity, and talent being not in the service of Christianity, with which she totally concurs. Revelation must be literally interpreted or it ceases to be history: "The narratives of scripture, before

38 The other two works Housman published are *Letter to Charles Empson, Esq.* (London: Hughes and Robinson, 1848), and *Observations on a Volume Recently Published Entitled "Perfect Peace" or Letters Memorial of the Late John Warren Howell, Esq. of Bath, M.R.C.S.* (London: W. Hughes, 1844).

39 On Drummond, see chapter 4 above.

40 Housman, *Meditations on the Scriptural Interpretations*, 10.

41 Housman, *Meditations on the Scriptural Interpretations*, 33–61; quotation, 61.

Sir Drummond's interpretation, melt away like the rainbow in the heavens. The doctrines of Christianity cease to exist; morality becomes a matter of convenience, principle a dream, the laws of God chimerical, the laws of man expedient."⁴²

At first glance, it is hard to fathom how Solomon Bennett was attracted to Catherine Housman other than as a major source for subsidizing his publications. She certainly appears to be his most enthusiastic patron, a factor that undoubtedly had much to do with the bond the two developed over time. But their mutually positive feelings toward each other rested on more than her financial support. In the first place, she appreciated his engravings and purchased them for her highly illustrated books. Already in her first book of 1821, *A Writing or Declaration from the Law Book*, she uses four: one based on Exodus 25:9 (the form of the Tabernacle), one based on 1 Kings 11:7 (Solomon's altar for Chemosh [Chemosh]), and one based on Daniel 13:18 (Daniel discovers the deceit of Bel's priests). Bennett's original engraving of the Molten Sea based on 1 Kings 7 is also included, drawing on his book describing Solomon's circulating water system of the Temple, which Housman generously cites.⁴³ The first three engravings (but not the Molten Sea) are used again in *Three Letters to a Friend* and in *Letter to Charles Empson*. Two of them appear in *Meditations on the Scriptural Interpretations*; one appears in her *Letter to Dr. Spry*. In other words, she circulated and recirculated Bennett's engravings among others that fit the subject matter of her books.⁴⁴

Housman also seemed to have read Bennett carefully. He had sent her multiple copies of his Ezekiel commentary, which he dedicated to her. She not only appreciated his commentary on King Solomon's Molten Sea, reproducing his accompanying plate and carefully summarizing his thoughts; she also read his *Theological and Critical Treatise on the Primogeniture and Integrity of the Hebrew Language* (1835). She discusses the integrity and continuity of the Hebrew language in her *Letter to Dr. Spry* in a manner almost identical to that of Bennett, and then she adds (in a discussion of derivatives of Hebrew in other languages):

⁴² Housman, *Meditations on the Scriptural Interpretations*, 63–79, 101–109; quotation, 105. She uses the English translation of Maimonides by Hermann Hedwig Bernard: *The Main Principles of the Creed and Ethics of the Jews, Exhibited in Selections from the Yad Hachazakah of Maimonides* (Cambridge: J. Smith, printer to the University, 1832).

⁴³ Housman, *Michtav o-Ah'vah mi-Sefer Torah / A Letter or Declaration from the Law Book*, 8, 44, 242, 326–40. Bennett published *The Molten Sea* in 1821.

⁴⁴ Housman, *Three Letters to a Friend*, 66–68; *Letter to Charles Empson*, 32, 106, and end of volume; *Meditations on the Scriptural Interpretations*, 52, 72; and *Letter to Dr. Spry*, 204. See also appendix II, below.

“The above specimens testify to the truth of the late Solomon Bennett’s remarks that the Hebrew language ‘lendeth to all and borroweth of none.’”⁴⁵ Her book to Spry appeared only a year after Bennett’s death in 1838. In addition, she may have used several illustrations from a Passover Haggadah in his possession.⁴⁶

Bennett, for his part, was indebted to her for her financial contributions to several of his publications, especially his work on the Hebrew language, *Specimen of a New Translation of the Hebrew Bible* (1836), and, of course, his Ezekiel commentary. Here is his dedication to Mrs. Housman at the beginning of the elegant edition of the latter work:

Madam,

Our sacred writings assure us, among other encouragements to the pursuit of wisdom and learning that “*Ez Hayyim Hi* [. . .]”: “She is the tree of life to those who fortify her, and they that support her are happy” (Prov. iii. 18): of which passage the Rabbinical exposition is, that The text does not say “*le-lomdeha*,” to those that *study and learn* her, but “*le-mahzikim ba*,” to those who *fortify and support* her; implying, that both those who study and those who support her, shall equally reap the fruit of the tree of life.

Impressed with the feelings and truth of the mentioned Rabbinical laudable theme, and grateful for the assistance I have received from you, who, out of pure zeal for ancient literature and the sacred writings, spontaneously patronised this work, and enabled me to bring it before the public, I have requested permission to dedicate it to you; and assure you, that a sense of your kindness and encouragement will remain indelibly fixed in the heart of,

Madam,

your much obliged, and very humble servant, S. Bennett.⁴⁷

Bennett’s dedication appears more than perfunctory; rather, it is warmly felt and expressed. No doubt their genuine connection, at least over the last seventeen years of his life from the time of her first publication in 1821, was based on their mutual “pure zeal for ancient literature and the sacred writings.” Bennett’s intel-

⁴⁵ Housman, *Letter to Dr. Spry*, 50.

⁴⁶ Housman, *Michtav o-Aḥvah mi-Sefer Torah / A Letter or Declaration from the Law Book*, 33, 283; *Three Letters to a Friend*, 78: “Image in colors of the molten calf of transgression in the wilderness illustrating their change of glory by evolutions around the sun. Copied by a friend from a very ancient Hebrew book concerning the Passover, in the private collection of a gentleman who obligingly permitted the above.”

⁴⁷ Solomon Bennett, *The Temple of Ezekiel: viz. An Elucidation of the 40th, 41st, 42nd, &c. Chapters of Ezekiel, Consistently with the Hebrew Original; and a Minute Description of the Edifice, on Scientific Principles, Illustrated by a Ground-Plan and Bird’s-Eye View* (London: published by the author, R. Hunter, and M. Solomon, 1824), v–vi, “Dedication to Mrs. Housman of Sidney Place, Bath; and formerly of Springfield, near Liverpool.” See the next chapter for an extended discussion of this work, as well as appendix 1 on *The Molten Sea*.

lectual tie to Housman may rest on even more than their mutual zeal for ancient literature, as I propose below.

Solomon Bennett worked tirelessly until the day of his death in 1838 on his revised English translation of the standard edition of the Old Testament, which included his short introductions to some of the biblical books and his comments related to his translations throughout. His handwritten copy of this almost completed work is extant. It opens with his translation of Genesis and an original introduction. The translation was published posthumously in 1841 by his Christian friend Francis Foster Barham without the introduction, which apparently was not to the liking of the editor, who wrote his own preface to Bennett's translation. Here is a part of Bennett's introduction relevant to the views of Housman:

Modern critics, the groppers after the ruins of Egypt and Asia tell us of civilizations that preceded the one depicted in our sacred scripture. [. . .] [T]hese whims are mere undigested suppositions invented from the hieroglyphical figures of fragments of ancient Egypt, the mode of the characters being mere cyphers, dull and insignificant. Some philosophers designate an antiquity to the world from the zodiacs of Egypt, Persia and the ruins of the East and some grope among the constellations of the celestial hosts which they consider far and beyond our computations in Scripture. How can these undigested suppositions challenge the plain authority of the truth of scripture, written in plain and explicit language? [. . .] They settled in their mind to change places between the sun and earth so that the latter revolves around the former. They found it no difficult task to transmigrate all the visibly lucid stars into material and opaque bodies, namely many habitable globes like our inhabitable earth. They defy the first chapter of Genesis entirely with the doctrine of plurality of worlds ad infinitum.⁴⁸

The philosophers' doctrine of plurality, Bennett claims, is invalid; so too their proposed measurement of the diameter of the earth's orbit, and other whimsical and unproven hypotheses. Their only object is to reject the position of sacred Scripture, its authority with respect to creation, to annul revealed religion and the chronology laid out in Scripture, and miracles. This has been acknowledged by all nations to be a code and record to preserve the commonweal of mankind, and nothing is more important than to testify to its eternal truth.

Bennett mentions several authors who supported his vigorous critique of modern science but not Housman, even though his argument, which extends for several pages, appears to mirror hers in several of her publications, especially

⁴⁸ MS Jews College 105, vols. 1–2, corrections and annotations by Solomon Bennett of the Oxford standard edition of the Old Testament, 1824. The citation and summary is from 1:16–19, part of his introduction to the book of Genesis. His translation of Genesis is found in *The Hebrew and English Holy Bible* (London: printed for the family of the late Solomon Bennet, 1841). I consider this work more extensively in chapter 8, below.

her refutation of William Drummond. Was it merely a coincidence that their positions were so close? Had he read her writings as she had read his, and did they at least discuss these issues with each other? One is hard-pressed to answer these questions or even to imagine how an enlightened Jew, considered radical by some of his own co-religionists, shared identical views regarding biblical authority and contemporary science with a pious female fundamentalist of the Christian faith.⁴⁹

5.3 On the interactions between Bennett, Lee, and Housman

Would it be fair to describe the relationships Bennett had with Lee and Housman as friendships, or were their acquaintances simply built primarily on the artistic and literary services that Bennett provided both women? While I have hesitated to speak about “friendships” between the Jew and the two Christian women, their exchanges were certainly more than transactional. Bennett had long-term relationships with both of them, and they appeared to value his knowledge and his counsel. Of course, the case of each woman was different. While both displayed a deep attraction to biblical and Jewish studies, and especially the Hebrew language, Housman was more inquisitive and erudite, at least regarding the Bible and ancient history. Lee, of course, was capable of writing a serious book on political thought, although her personal meditation in Hebrew was less impressive. What both women had in common was their attraction to Bennett because he was a learned Jew willing to share his knowledge with Christians. This was in

⁴⁹ I should at least mention that although Bennett was probably familiar with Housman’s works and might have been affected by her views, he did not quote her directly. However, as we have seen, he had no hesitation in praising her publicly as a patron of his works.

One final question about the two women: How typical were their Hebraic and biblical pursuits? No doubt many Anglican and especially evangelical women in nineteenth-century Great Britain and elsewhere in Europe were fascinated by and engaged in Bible study and exegesis. The scholarship on Christian women students of the Bible is quite extensive. See, for example, Marion Ann Taylor, “Anglican Women and the Bible in Nineteenth-Century Britain,” *Anglican and Episcopal History* 75 (2006): 527–552; Marion Ann Taylor, “Women and Biblical Criticism in Nineteenth-Century England,” in *Faith and Feminism in Nineteenth-Century Religious Communities*, ed. Ruth Albrecht and Michaela Sohn-Kronthaler (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2019), 29–62; and Marion Ann Taylor and Agnes Choi, *Handbook of Women Biblical Interpreters: An Historical and Biographical Guide* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic Press, 2012). But Lee was hardly typical, given her life experiences and her singular Hebrew composition. And Housman’s knowledge of science, ancient history, archaeology, and art, as well as Hebraic studies, appears far more advanced than that of most other female biblical exegetes of her day.

sharp contrast, as I have argued, to the lack of appreciation, the indifference, even the hostility, that Bennett experienced from his fellow Jews.⁵⁰ Whether there was a close friendship between the Jew and the two Christians or not, their interactions were hardly superficial or casual. In their interfaith encounters, there was indeed a meeting of minds, if not hearts.

Finally, I pose the obvious question of whether the sex of these two exceptional women had any special impact on Bennett's relationship with each of them.⁵¹ Bennett, as I have mentioned, fashioned strong ties with a conspicuous number of Christian men of varied persuasions and denominations. For example, he corresponded with William Drummond, who was Housman's nemesis. Drummond even wrote him a flattering letter, publicly acknowledging his learned Jewish interlocutor.⁵² Bennett cherished these Christian social and intellectual connections with learned Christians because they were financially efficacious as well as intellectually invigorating. He genuinely believed, as we have seen, that the special Christians he encountered were admirable because of both their liberal Christian faith and their tolerance of minorities such as the Jews. Their religiosity was quite different from that of their counterparts in Poland and Germany, so he believed. It was genuinely exciting to live in a country where a Jewish intellectual had relative freedom and privilege far beyond the limited opportunities of the Continent.

Was Bennett's contact with these Christian women substantially different from those he nurtured with Christian men? The intensely felt needs of Lee and Housman to study Hebrew and Judaism with a Jew in order to deepen their own religious identities do appear, at first glance, to be like those of Bennett's male patrons. But perhaps one might argue that as women with more limited professional and intellectual opportunities than those of men, their encounter with Bennett and his accessible Jewish knowledge offered them unique paths both to elevate their own intellectual profile and to enhance their own spiritual lives. This dynamic seems more evident in the case of Lee, whose life and feelings are more accessible through her writings. As we have seen, her traumatic kidnapping and apparent rape, followed by the ridicule and notoriety that accompanied her all her life, left her a kind of tragic figure who had been victimized by men. Her need to compensate for her own feelings of illegitimacy and inferiority might

⁵⁰ See chapter 3, above.

⁵¹ My thoughts in the next few paragraphs are stimulated by the perceptive remarks of Professor Iris Idelson-Shein, who read and commented on an earlier version of this chapter. I am grateful to her although the mistakes that might follow are my own.

⁵² See chapter 4, above.

have motivated her to employ Jewish men, marginalized as she was her and seeking their own legitimacy in a Christian world.

Lee's relationship with Bolaffey seems to offer clearer evidence of a gendered interaction than her relationship with Bennett. Lee demanded loyalty from her entourage of Jewish men; they were there to testify and assure her how gifted she was as a scholar of the Hebrew language. When Bolaffey apparently tried to cheat her, she was deeply offended and felt compelled to punish him by publicly humiliating him while reminding him and others of her generous support for him. Did their odd arrangement, as she composed a Hebrew epistle while he translated her work into perfect English, not serve bizarrely to bolster both their images? He was elevating her as a scholar and author of prophetic passages in the holy language, while she was promoting him, a foreign Jew, to the status of a kind of British don with full command of the English language. That this relationship of mutual support was suddenly shattered by his apparent greed or desperate need to gain more advantage over her seems tragic. Lee learned once again the dire consequences of relying on untrustworthy men, a lesson reinforced by Bennett's testimony about his fellow Jew in his private letter to her.

In returning finally to Bennett and his attraction to these two women, I wish to underscore that the more he inhabited Christian spaces and engaged with English intellectuals, both male and female, the more Jewish he became in his own eyes and in those of his Christian associates. Rather than view this apparent paradox as the inevitable consequence of the Jew who wishes to assimilate into non-Jewish society but cannot, I would argue that in Bennett's case, we see someone consciously choosing to navigate an entrance into elite Christian society while remaining proudly and defiantly a Jew. Becoming a Jewish expert in those aspects of Judaism especially attractive to Christians—Hebrew language and biblical exegesis—was not only a strategy for earning a livelihood and gaining social acceptance. It became ultimately the way he could define his own cultural identity, express his devotion to the language and moral legacy of the Jews, and contribute meaningfully to English civilization.