

Afterword

A.1 The aftermath of Solomon's death

Solomon Bennett died on December 18, 1838, of unknown causes and was buried at the Brompton (Fulham Road) Jewish Cemetery of the Western Synagogue of which he was a member, in the presence of his widow Elizabeth and family. At his death, the couple had eight children, six boys and two girls. The youngest, Eve, was born in 1837.¹

Unfortunately, little evidence exists regarding Elizabeth, other than her birthplace in Middlesex in 1801, her marriage date in 1818, and the date of her death in 1864. She was indeed Solomon's silent partner until his death. That changed, however, months after Solomon's burial. Among the letters in the archives of the Royal Literary Fund about and from Solomon, which I have utilized above to reconstruct his social networks, are several penned by Elizabeth Bennett herself, sent in early 1839.

Mrs. Bennett first wrote to the Reverend W. H. Landon, secretary of the committee, on January 5, 1839, informing him of the death of her husband and applying for financial support for her and her eight living children. Two days later, in another letter to the committee, she specifies that of her eight children, only two were over fifteen years of age and able to support themselves; the others were fully dependent on her, including a baby of six months. She mentions that in the previous month her late husband had requested a stipend on which the committee took no action. She was writing to confirm his untimely death and to point out her added distress and critical needs:

My late husband, gentleman, as many of you may be aware had to seek his living in the pursuit of literature and was the author of many scriptural works but was most unfortunately unsuccessful of which I feel the distress at present with my very large family. I have therefore for the last time to petition your benevolent institution, from which he received during his life much valuable assistance, for any bounty your benevolence may bestow which will be gratefully received both by myself and family.²

1 Arthur Barnett, *The Western Synagogue through Two Centuries (1781–1961)* (London: Valentine Mitchell, 1961), 54. He adds that the Hebrew inscription on Bennett's tombstone declares him to be "a man full of wisdom in Mikra, Mishnah, and Gemara; the Law of Truth was in his mouth and in it he laboured all his days; he was the author of scholarly works." See also the useful entry in Cemetery Scribes, last updated in 2013: <http://www.cemeteryscribes.com/getperson.php?personID=12941&tree=Cemeteries>.

2 Archives of the Royal Literary Fund, British Library, London, Western Manuscripts: Loan 96 RLF 1/526, letters 33 and 34.

She signs her request “B [Beth] Bennett.” On February 14, 1839, she received twenty pounds from the committee (signing the receipt), and she acknowledged with gratitude their generous support in a letter written on February 20.³ Almost a year later, on February 4, 1840, she wrote her final letter to the committee:

Gentlemen, I again take the liberty of applying to you for any assistance your benevolence may afford me towards the assistance of my family. My late husband Mr. Solomon Bennett was well known both personally and by his works for many years to many gentlemen of your society and received several favors from your excellent institution during his life. My case is unfortunately well known, gentlemen, to you. I was left by the death of my husband thirteen months ago with eight children, six of whom are not capable of supporting themselves. I then applied and received from your goodness real and timely assistance. I, therefore, again being in need, take the liberty of applying to you. I have not forwarded to you any recommendations from gentlemen because I have kept my distress known only to myself and have struggled also twice[?] without applying to strangers. I can only, gentlemen, in that respect [refer] to the numerous recommendations which I made last year and my late husband then alive laid before you from other academics[?]. Any assistance which your kindness may think to bestow will confer a lasting obligation and a great assistance, gentlemen, to your most humble servant, Elizabeth Bennett.⁴

This last plea was rejected by the committee, after she had previously received a subvention as a widow.⁵ It is not clear how Mrs. Bennett managed to cope with the severe economic challenges she then faced. What is obvious is that at the age of thirty-eight, she took on the heavy burden of raising a large family, which she managed with considerable success until her death in 1864. Her letter, while not elegantly written, reveals an educated and determined woman courageously appealing for support for her husband’s progeny and for herself. She recognizes her husband’s intellectual accomplishments, and although she acknowledges his lack of economic success, she is proud of his legacy. She was not only Solomon’s silent partner but his heroic partner, fully assuming the awesome responsibilities of the household, raising a large family, and worrying about the necessities of life that her husband could not fully provide, especially after he had retired from engraving and was working exclusively on his scholarly books.

As late as 1897, it was reported that the Brompton cemetery had a mulberry tree, still yielding fruit. It was there that Elizabeth Bennett had been buried thirty-three years earlier at the age of sixty-four.⁶

³ Archives of the Royal Literary Fund, MS 526, letters 35 and 36.

⁴ Archives of the Royal Literary Fund, MS 526, letter 37.

⁵ The letter of February 4, 1840, was marked “inadmissible” on the top left-hand corner.

⁶ Barnett, *The Western Synagogue*, 83.

A.2 The value of Solomon Bennett's biography

I imagined what it might have been like to sit in a room with Solomon Bennett, perhaps together with several other interlocutors, and converse with him. It could not have been easy to break the ice with him. He seemed grumpy, arrogant or at least self-assured (perhaps masking his own insecurities), even abrasive, competitive, and contentious. He had high intellectual standards and he could not countenance pomposity in men of power and influence, especially clerics and theologians. These impressions are confirmed by the degree of animosity displayed toward him by some Jews, by the reports of Christians who testified on his behalf, and by the angry polemical style of some of his writings. Given his less than pleasing personality and his frequent verbal skirmishes with those with whom he disagreed, what were his redeeming qualities, and why is there value in reconstructing his life and thought, and recalling the faded memory of his own personal impact on the communities, both Christian and Jewish, in which he lived?

I begin with the obvious: his writings. These were not the work of a university-educated academic; they emerged at a later stage of Bennett's life and primarily in a language foreign to him until his adult years. As described above, Bennett wrote his first book in English, a language he had only recently mastered as an immigrant to England, at the age of forty-two. He trained to be a copper engraver after he exhibited a penchant to study the arts at a young age. This was his only formal education and it lasted for only a year, as his certificate indicates (although he remained in Copenhagen for several more years). Even his high level of competency in Hebraic studies and Bible was attained not through any formal training but within the confines of his synagogue and his own study. He was an autodidact, and his mastery of the Hebrew Bible, its grammar and literary style, its history and ethical message, seems to have emerged from his own reading and acquisition of knowledge, and from an innate ability to learn languages, especially Hebrew. Since he had never written a word before coming to London, we need to look for stimuli in his new surroundings that generated this new passion and this hidden and previously untapped talent. Ultimately, he turned to full-time scholarly writing after experiencing a deterioration of his eyesight and an inability to continue the intense and demanding work of an engraver. But in 1809, the year of the publication of *The Constancy of Israel*, he was still healthy and still preoccupied with his chosen profession.

The spur to write the first book and those that followed did not come from a Jewish community either indifferent or hostile to Bennett and to his literary and artistic bent. Rather it emerged from meetings with literate and affluent Christians fascinated with Bible study and eager to exploit his knowledge of Scripture for their advantage. It is no coincidence that the early sections of his first book

dealt directly with Jewish–Christian polemics—addressing, disputing, and correcting standard Christian readings of the Old Testament in the cause of an authentic, grammatically correct, and historically valid understanding of the Hebrew Bible. In pursuing this mission, Bennett needed to draw on more than his traditional Jewish background, relying also on a knowledge of biblical scholarship of early modern and contemporary Christian savants across the Continent, especially in England; he required an essential grounding in the history and cultures of the ancient Near East; and he had to discover and invent a way of communicating effectively in a style of discourse familiar and pleasing to Christian readers, especially clerical ones. Note as well how his conventional polemics led ultimately to a more expansive field of self-discovery: a reflection on the origins and continuity of Jewish existence among the nations, an articulation of the essence of the Jewish contribution to Western civilization, and even an open disclosure of his personal life, a kind of short autobiography, reminiscent of a new genre emerging in the eighteenth and nineteenth century.

With the modest success of this book, Bennett found a calling in writing on biblical subjects (such as the Molten Sea or the Temple of Ezekiel), where he could combine his mastery of the text with the visual image he created through his artistic and architectural abilities. This naturally led to his excursus on the origin and continuity of the Hebrew language and then to a deep commitment to undertaking his life work: revising the King James translation of the Hebrew Bible in the service of serving those Christian associates who had bolstered his own self-image and had given his life purpose and ultimate meaning.

The trajectory of his academic studies is directly linked to his social relations with Jews and Christians alike. He was never a traditional Jewish scholar, either by training or inclination. He displayed a fundamental mastery of rabbinic literature and praxis, but his real expertise was biblical language and literature. He was too impious, too intolerant of rabbinic “reptiles” who could do little more than become proficient in Jewish law in the narrowest sense and lacked a larger vision and insight into the texts they were studying. It was inevitable that he would fail to respect most rabbis, whom he perceived as hungry for power and prestige while lacking intellectual rigor and creativity. His ego would not allow him to feel inferior to such clergy; he in fact had been credentialed by a leading art school and by an academy of art that granted him more prestige than any rabbinic ordination, so he thought; and he therefore felt entitled to usurp their prerogatives if need be, as in the case of his performing a wedding deemed illicit by the local rabbis. It was also inevitable that he would find fault with spiritual leaders such as Rabbi Hirschell, because of what he perceived as both their meager intellectual achievements and their moral impoverishment. He always considered himself a Jew devoted to the legacy and mission of his people; but his background

and vision of Judaism left him an outsider, alienated by the mores and values of some rabbis and their affluent supporters.

At the same time, this peculiar orientation toward Judaism and the contemporary Jewish community made him particularly attractive to Christians. They respected his mastery of the text that they aspired to know more intimately; they tolerated and even enjoyed his forensic skill in defending the literal meaning of the Bible and preserving it from pretentious theological eisegesis, which often led to religious distortion and confusion; and they appreciated his deep commitment to furthering their understanding of their heritage and their own self-awareness of their common bonds with Judaism. Bennett's attraction as a Jewish exegete certainly had its limits, however. No self-respecting Protestant could ultimately accept Bennett's theological stance. The missionaries continued to manipulate the Jewish faith to demonstrate what they saw as the ultimate authenticity of the Christian message. And some Christians could never countenance the sheer self-righteousness of a Jew claiming that he understood their own Scripture better than they ever could. Nevertheless, it is quite remarkable, as we have seen, to chart the engagement of Bennett across a wide spectrum of well-known Christian literary, legal, and theological figures, several of whom explicitly demonstrated their appreciation for him and intimately conversed with and learned from him.

As I have argued already, these Christians helped shape Bennett's own Jewish identity. His integration into the upper echelons of the Christian literary establishment—dukes, jurists, theologians, and other scholars—did not diminish his loyalty to his faith. His intimacy with wealthy patrons and Christian intellectuals of all political and religious stripes did not engender on his part radical assimilation, any diminution of his self-awareness as a Jew, or any desire to enter the Christian fold, even its Unitarian strain. On the contrary, Bennett's Christian friends made him more Jewish, more convinced of Judaism's moral force, and more secure in his own skin as a member of a proud minority among Christian elites supposedly liberated, so he hoped, from the dark hostility of the Christian past. His supreme act of translating the Bible, as we have seen, constituted the ultimate payback he could offer the altruistic Christians he had met, open to tolerating him in their midst, indeed welcoming him not despite his Jewishness but because of it.

I would contend that as we try to grasp the significance of Solomon Bennett's life and thought for Jewish history, it is that apparent coalescence of unresolved contradictions and inconsistencies that makes him so interesting and worthy of notice. He loved books and textual study although his primary preoccupation was engraving and the arts, for which he trained and which enabled him to earn a living. He was first and foremost a student of the language of the Bible but chose to write in English for non-Jews. The first of his only two exceptions to this prac-

tice was a polemical work written primarily for Jewish readers on the Continent to justify himself before his detractors. Unhappy with the limited readership it found, he rewrote and expanded the work, airing the dirty laundry to readers of English. The second exception was his attempt to rewrite and translate his commentary on the Temple of Ezekiel in Hebrew, gearing it to the needs of traditional Jews in his homeland in Belarus. He failed to publish the work and it remained in manuscript. His book was read only by English speakers.

Perhaps because Bennett had grown up in countries with monarchical governments, such as Russia and Germany, he was infatuated with the democracy and limited monarchy of England. This passionate admiration eventually led him to find fault with the kings of Israel and Judea, even David and Solomon, and to regard the monarchical age of biblical history as a black mark on the pristine origins of ancient Jewish history. He not only hated monarchy; he displayed no special love for the land of Israel and the aspiration of Jews to live within their own borders and enjoy the sovereignty common to all other nations. Instead, he extolled the diaspora and saw it as neither a punishment nor the attenuation of divine grace but as a special opportunity bestowed on the chosen people to infuse their values and to inculcate their moral instruction into Western civilization—or, as he put it, he thought it preferable to be a stranger in a foreign land than a ruler of one's own. Despite the hostilities and persecutions inflicted by Christian societies on their Jewish minorities, the epoch in which Bennett was living was most opportune for Jews, so he believed, to instruct the world in their virtue.

Bennett could preach Jewish morality to his Christian associates while at the same time obfuscate his own moral failures—his apparent desertion of his first wife and children and his inability or unwillingness to reconnect with them as he built a new life and family in London, and perhaps his lack of transparency to the officials of the Russian government in leaving his homeland under false pretenses with little intention to return. He could also wax eloquent about the sagacity and moral vision of Jews while demonstrating a propensity for rather ill-tempered behavior, such as his protracted struggle with his adversary Rabbi Solomon Hirschell and even his public ridicule of his Jewish colleague Hyman Hurwitz.

Here is one more example of Bennett's seeming self-contradictions. Bennett, in his critique of the rabbis and traditional Jewish education, would appear to many as a liberal-minded *maskil*, a person of the Enlightenment eager to break out from the hermetically sealed walls of Jewish traditional life. In some respects, the label *maskil* might encapsulate his outward-looking stance to engage in a world beyond Judaism, to master all kinds of learning, and to enrich his life through the arts. At the same time, Bennett was a man of profound faith in the eternity of the Hebrew language and in the inerrancy of the Hebrew Bible. It is hard to reconcile his sharp critique of modern science, of heliocentricity and the

Newtonian solar system, with the image of a *maskil*. He was very conservative in some respects, an enlightened literalist,⁷ so to speak, despite the heretical image projected by his rabbinic detractors. I am at a loss to explain how Bennett could offer a sharp critique of Newtonianism and still name one of his sons Isaac Newton Bennett! Does this utter inconsistency reveal as well the ambiguity and imprecision of his self-understanding?

Further complicating this negative stance toward Newtonianism for its challenge to biblical truth is that Bennett apparently adopted it as a result of his exposure to Mrs. Housman and her like-minded Christian fundamentalists. It did not emerge, as best as I can ascertain, from traditionalist Jewish sources. On the contrary, many traditional Jews by Bennett's day had made their peace with Newton, heliocentricity, and the solar system.⁸

Once again, such discrepancies should caution the historian from neatly sorting Jewish intellectuals into clear-cut categories such as orthodox, reform, secular, *maskil*, moderate, radical, or whatever. Bennett, a self-made scholar and artist, cannot be defined so arbitrarily and neatly. His complexity is what makes him so fascinating a historical figure and provides much color and variety to the Jewish and interdenominational intellectual landscape of his day.

A.3 The biography of Solomon Bennett and its connection to my previous works

In bringing this study to a close, I consider this moment somewhat of a milestone in my professional life as a historian. I beg the indulgence of the reader in offering a short explanation of this feeling and in reflecting on the relationship between this present work and my earlier writings.

I completed my doctoral dissertation at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem in 1974, exactly fifty years ago as I write these words. Like my study of Solomon Bennett, it was also a biography of a Jewish intellectual: Abraham Farissol, a polemicist, scribe, and cantor in Ferrara, Italy, at the end of the fifteenth and the early sixteenth century. The dissertation, originally written in Hebrew, was published in English in 1981. Eight monographs have followed and this present volume is the tenth, completed in my eightieth year.

⁷ My thanks to Arthur Kiron for the designation.

⁸ See generally David B. Ruderman, *Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery in Early Modern Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995).

My preoccupation with Bennett's life surely constitutes a conscious return to biography, a genre to which I have been intensely drawn through much of my career. In addition to Farissol, I became fascinated with the life and thought of another Italian Jewish savant of the sixteenth century named Abraham Yagel and devoted two books to him. I wrote another work on the eighteenth-century Polish kabbalist, scientific writer, and bookseller Pinḥas Hurwitz, and still another on his contemporary Moses Marcus, the Anglo-Jewish convert. And even my more synthetic books on scientific discovery and Jewish thought, on the Jewish Enlightenment in England, and on missionaries, converts, and rabbis of the nineteenth century all constituted collections of biographical portraits of Jewish and some non-Jewish thinkers and their writings. The study of an epoch through the lens of one individual life or several lives has provided me with an anchor, a specific trajectory, a degree of depth to my subject, and a human connection with the past that has been profound.

It is not only historical biography that has appealed to me but biography coupled with intellectual and cultural history, with thinkers as well as doers. I also am fascinated by minor figures, at least those relatively ignored by earlier historians and usually viewed as outside the typical canon of Jewish thinkers of the early modern and modern eras. These individuals, in the main, stood at the interstices of Jewish and Christian civilizations, mediators between the two cultures, articulating a need to draw simultaneously from both in constructing an individual self whether they remained Jewish or not. My passion, from Farissol to Bennett, has always been consistent: to give voice to those who were relatively unnoticed, silent, and invisible from the perspective of past scholarship. Such individuals also demand their *go'el*, their redeemer, recoverer, or excavator of the past. I admire those scholars who have created fields of study around one outstanding figure such as Maimonides, Spinoza, or Mendelssohn, who can interpret and reinterpret every dimension of their lives and every line of their writings. But I have chosen a different path of discovery—to explore an intellectual life selected not only by the criterion of originality and brilliance but also for what it teaches about the cultural setting the thinker encountered, the social interactions in which they engaged, and the stimuli that motivated them to articulate their reflections about the world they inhabited. This kind of history is not specifically concerned with epigones or imitators of others; the thinkers I have considered did have fresh and unique observations about their worlds, about what they read and observed. But for whatever reason, historians have not given them serious enough attention. To discover interesting figures previously underresearched by previous scholars has therefore been my quest. The late Natalie Zemon Davis described her role as a historian and biographer with the metaphor of giving birth. I might describe my own as a kind of reviver of the dead [*meḥayah matim*], a process usually reserved for the Almighty in Jewish tradition. But

perhaps the historian participates in some modest way in a sacred task of remembering, of restoring the dead to life, at least partially and with many gaps. On the few occasions when a younger colleague or student mentions in passing figures I have previously researched as if they belong to a well-acknowledged list of luminaries usually mentioned in survey courses, I am surprised and most grateful for having had some limited role in generating such notice.

Solomon Bennett now joins the company of my previous subjects of history—Farissol, Yagel, Hurwitz, Marcus, along with Alexander McCaul, the missionary, or Moses Margoliouth, the convert, or David Nieto, the Sephardic rabbi of London, or Tobias Cohen, the doctor and medical graduate of Padua, and so many more. Some were mediators between Jewish and Christian cultures, others between their ancestral faith and the natural world, and still others between mysticism and rationalism. They lived transient lives as emigrants and immigrants, were familiar and identified with multiple cultures and languages, and found a profound and personal link with Judaism, even if they converted or were simply transformed to appreciate Judaism through their textual study alone. Bennett is far removed from my earliest biographical subjects in time and place but they might have been recognizable to each other, or at the very least a contemporary student of history might recognize the resemblance among them. Solomon Bennett's memory, like the memory of the others I have studied over this half century, have truly been a blessing to me.

Merion, Pennsylvania, May 29, 2024

