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“The Immortal Traveler”: How Historiography Changed Judaism

Abstract: The historiography of Judaism as a scholarly enterprise primarily developed during the nineteenth century as the byproduct of a number of historical conditions that influenced Western culture at large. First and foremost, European society at the time was shaped by the dynamism and social change brought on by industrialization. Moreover, the nineteenth century’s culture held on to a romantic image of the past in its multifarious guises—the ancient or the medieval, and in some cases the age of the Renaissance—to which various currents of European thought had contributed. The past, and therefore history as a cultural practice, was particularly important in the age of nationalism and empires. In this article I analyze how certain religious topics such as the ‘historical Jesus’ and the relevance of the Kabbalah were elaborated in the early modern period and readdressed, with different religious and cultural agendas, in the nineteenth century.

1 Science and religion

The historiography of Judaism as a scholarly enterprise primarily developed during the nineteenth century, as the byproduct of a number of historical conditions that influenced Western culture at large. First and foremost, European society of the time was informed by the dynamism and social change brought on by industrialization. Moreover, the nineteenth century’s culture held a romantic commitment to the past in its multifarious guises—the ancient or the medieval, and in some cases the age of the Renaissance—which various currents of European thought had contributed to representing as a golden age. The past, and therefore history as a cultural practice, was particularly important in the age of nationalism and empires. In this article I engage with historiographical practices related to Judaism; specifically to the topic of “Judaism as a religion”, and more precisely, Judaism as a form of “modern religion” (Facchini 2008). I shall pay tribute therefore to the first coherent program of the historiography of Judaism, which was incorporated within the larger framework of *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, and analyze some of its early conceptions.

From its inception, *Wissenschaft des Judentums* (“Science of Judaism”) emerged within the German context as a cultural, religious, and scholarly project. It was driven by the concept that Judaism was to be evaluated according to the analytical tools of scientific inquiry and that it had to find methods of coping with the processes of modernization and secularization. Thus, *Wissenschaft des Judentums* may be seen as

The quote in the title refers to Abraham Geiger (Geiger 1985, 13).

a response to the challenges posed by modernization and its profound impact on the traditional structures of religious life. It endeavored to both preserve and reshape a religious system that had been despised by Gentiles and that belonged to an often-persecuted minority. To a lesser extent, *Wissenschaft des Judentums* inherited a scholarly tradition of serious commitment to Jewish topics that had characterized much of seventeenth and eighteenth century European cultural history.¹

In dating this scholarly enterprise, we can place it approximately at the beginning of the nineteenth century, as an outgrowth of the *Haskalah*, the Jewish Enlightenment.² Understanding Judaism within an historical frame became particularly critical for German Jews, as the notion of ‘history’ changed under the influence of the Enlightenment and then Romanticism.³ Although the history of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* is better understood as a network of scholars of different backgrounds, and should be extended to the European context, I here refer mainly to its inception, referring to some historiographical themes, which were instrumental in defining some tenets of Judaism as a “modern religion”.

In this article I wish to present a few questions that were explored by some of the most eminent members of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*; namely, Abraham Geiger and Heinrich Graetz. In particular, I shall focus on their treatment of different historical topics that were, at times, used to address contemporary religious questions. Specifically, I will analyze the debate over the “historical Jesus”, the representation of the Kabbalah, and the search for a rational religion rooted in the historical past as the outcome of a historiographical quest meant to support the change and a religious present.

2 Interconnections

In order to explore how the historiography of Judaism aimed to forge modern religion, I shall highlight two forms of interconnection. The *first* interconnection focuses on the real and symbolic relationship between Christian and Jewish culture. More precisely, I wish to underline how representations of Judaism were often *entangled* with representations of Christianity. This relationship takes place between the ab-

¹ Scholarship on *Wissenschaft des Judentums* has significantly increased in the last decade. Although there is a long tradition of history of scholarship dating back to the first half of the twentieth century, I shall refer here only to the most recent scholarly works devoted to well-known member of the network. As far as it concerns the German *Wissenschaft des Judentums* see Schorsch 1994; Heschel 1998; Wiese 2005; Wiese 2006; Gotzmann and Wiese 2007; Veltri 2013; von der Krone-Thulin 2013; Schorsch 2016; Leicht and Freudenthal 2012. As far as it concerns the early twentieth century research has been devoted to some of the leading scholars such as Gershom Scholem. See: Biale 1982; Wasserstrom 1999; Engel 2017. For the American context I shall refer mainly to Hughes 2013.

² For the periodization see Mendes-Flohr and Reinhartz 2010.

³ Mendelssohn in Brenner 2010.

stract and real worlds of the two religions and between the agents that are part of these worlds, Christian and Jews. I endeavor to unearth and understand the entanglement of Christians and Jews in their attempt to recover and interpret their religious pasts. It is an enterprise often based on ambivalent feelings, shifting between conflict and cooperation, respect and scorn, love and hatred.⁴

The second interconnection takes place at the crossroads between the early modern and the modern period. In the early modern period scholars who actively engaged in the inquiry of Judaism were more often Christians than Jews, and the descriptions they offered of Judaism were narratives crafted into polemical or scholarly discourses. These representations, the majority put forth by Christian scholars, were an attempt to redefine Christianity as well.

By mapping the early modern period, we are able to trace a wide array of historical and a-historical narratives of Judaism, and obtain a more precise view of some of their main features. Historiographical practices of the early modern period, spanning from the Renaissance to the radical Enlightenment, were sophisticated, erudite, and sometimes very insightful. My work is meant to offer some understanding of how notions of Judaism were transmitted to—or forgotten by—future generations. In connecting the early modern period to the modern one, it becomes possible to identify how certain representations of religious concepts changed, how some were transferred from one cultural setting to another, and ultimately, how certain notions were forgotten and lost. Projects about modern religion often depended, as I claim, both on scholarship of religion and the usable past to support modernity.

In the early modern period new interests emerged, in previously uncharted areas of Jewish culture. First and foremost, with the onset of Humanism, some Christians furthered their interest in Kabbalistic lore. Johannes Reuchlin and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola were only two of the scholars who opened up new paths in Christian perceptions and representations of Judaism, which in turn fostered more problematic types of cooperation between Christians and Jews. By the modern period, Christians were engaging with Jewish culture in a wide range of spheres, covering theological concepts, rituals and ceremonies, the interpretation of the Bible, juridical issues and political themes.⁵

A question I wish to mention, although I will not be able to deal with extensively, is linked to the role of the medium through which religious concepts were transmit-

4 Historiography of religion, and especially of Judaism, intersected with other religious traditions, among them ancient religions, Christianity, and Islam. From a methodological perspective the historical reconstruction of Judaism may work both from within and from without, in trying to avoid any essentialist narrative. Because historiography of religion was institutionalized during the nineteenth century in Europe, some of its main themes were built around powerful scholarly narratives of Protestant theologians and Christian historians. Some insights in Langton 2010.

5 The bibliography on Christian Hebraism is quite extensive, as it was a relevant research topic among members of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. I shall refer especially to: Katchen 1984; Manuel 1992; Stroumsa 2010; Burnett 2012; Coudert and Shoulson 2004; Coudert 1999; Sutcliffe 2003.

ted. By media I refer to every sort of device that can be used to produce, transmit, receive, and preserve messages. The information about Judaism was encoded in a varied typology of sources, which recalls the character of the medium and its materiality (printed books, manuscripts, marginalia, notebooks, images, newspapers, pamphlets and so on). This material evidence is critical, as it influenced both practices of writing and reading, while also indicating the imagined or probable audiences. Visual material was also important in disseminating images about Judaism that appeared in the form of art, broadsheet, and engravings, and functioned as a visualization of a specific issue or as a comment on the written texts. A typology of visual material is indicative of the wealth of images that were accessible to a public made up of literate and illiterate readers.⁶ In the early modern period the rise of the press greatly influenced the circulation of information, but the production of manuscripts did not disappear. In fact, despite the revolution triggered by the printing industry, a significant number of manuscripts continued to be produced. This was also a way to avoid censorship, something that constituted a problem for both Christians and Jews. Both Jews and Christians were required to be cautious about what they decided to print and how to phrase the content of their texts.⁷

When looking at the historiography of religion in the nineteenth century, one should pay attention both to technological innovation and the emergence of different media. For example, one should not dismiss literature that does not fit into the rubric of the ‘scientific type’, or the dominant media chosen to propagate a particular vision of the past. In this period, for example, historical novels were extremely important and played a key role in guiding the public opinion of the rising national states. Theatrical plays and lyric opera were pivotal in transferring certain representations and notions of the religious past into an arena of non-professional scholars, reaching a wider audience.⁸ These images were not created in a void, or just out of individual creativity, as they were the result of a culture that was engaged in an investigation of the religious past. Visual media were also used: as in earlier periods, artists depicted an abundance of historical images related to religion. Biblical stories were a privileged theme for art, and in the nineteenth century they were depicted according to a new sensibility linked to the rise of science and modern culture.⁹ Furthermore, photography and cinema contributed to the portrayal of religion—its past or present con-

⁶ Cohen 1998; Katz 2008; Berti 2005; von Wyss-Giacosa 2006; Hunt, Jacobs, Mijnhardt 2010.

⁷ It is still useful to refer to Strauss 1952 on “persecution and the art of writing”. For the relevance of manuscripts in the age of printing McKitterick 2003.

⁸ For a cultural history of Opera see Sorba 2015. For the relevance of the historical novel on Jewish culture see Skolnik 2014.

⁹ History and images is a topic explored by many historians: Huizinga 1993; Burke 2001; Freedberg 1989; Ginzburg 2015.

dition—through devices that combined narrative and visual style and provoked emotional reactions, while reaching a wider public.¹⁰

The typology of media, which were used in order to disseminate information, images, and narratives about religious themes is very relevant, and its differentiation between the early modern and modern period might shed light onto the ability to reach a wider public and innovate within a religious system.

3 Reconstructing the Jewish context of Jesus

In order to connect the early modern period to nineteenth century *Wissenschaft des Judentums* I will engage with a topic which was extremely controversial and at the core of the conflicting relationship between Jews and Christians: Jesus. “Before Reimarus, no one had attempted to form a historical conception of the life of Jesus”, stated Albert Schweitzer in his influential *The Quest of the Historical Jesus*.¹¹ However, in the last few decades a rising interest in early modern scholarship has opened up new paths of inquiry that reveal a world that was only relatively known to experts of specialized disciplines. Scholars of oriental languages, apocryphal literature, Second Temple Judaism, and early Christianity have always been interested in the history of scholarship of early Christianity and Second Temple Judaism, and recent research has turned to the early modern period, applying different methodological approaches to the study of early modern intellectual history. Luigi Salvatorelli had invited scholars to investigate this topic in 1929, when he claimed that there were important sources before Reimarus (*From Locke to Ratzenstein*).¹² The seminal work of the noted scholar Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine*, presented a set of methodological questions for scholars who deal with either the historical Jesus or “early Christianity”, where he suggests some important perspectives on the early modern period (Smith 1994).

More recently Anthony Grafton and Joanna Weinberg have thoroughly analyzed how late Renaissance scholars like Isaac Casaubon (1559–1614) and Cesare Baronio (1538–1607) endeavored to reconstruct the Jewish context of Jesus (Grafton and Weinberg 2011).¹³ Elsewhere, research groups have begun to investigate how during the Renaissance, a historical discourse on early Christianity took shape. The histor-

10 Religion and emotions is a relevant topic, because religious leaders and scholars of religion often dealt with the realm of emotions and feelings. For a general bibliography Febvre 1941; Rosenwein 2006; Plamper 2012.

11 Schweitzer 1911, 13 (I quote from the reprint of the second English edition published in 1911 and reprinted in 2005). For new approaches see Beilby and Eddy 2009; Bermejo Rubio 2012; Le Donne 2012.

12 Mulsow 2011; Salvatorelli 1929 and 1989. Before him see the important work of Labanca 1903.

13 On the relevance of Casaubon for Catholic scholarship see Canfora 2002; Cozzi 1978. On Baronio's historiographical work see Tutino 2014.

iography of early Christianity was practiced among Protestants especially, as it developed out of the theological need to accurately reconstruct the life of Jesus and the apostles, and to recreate Christianity as it was at its inception. The eminent Italian scholar of Church history, Paolo Prodi, boldly claimed that the post-Tridentine Church had no interest in the study of the history of early Christianity (Prodi 2012a, 2012b and 2013). However, another methodological perspective will show a wide spectrum of initiatives related to the understanding of early Christianity, even within the complex web of early modern Catholic culture (Tutino 2014).

As in the history of Jesus, a number of narratives offering biographical variations were created, meant to fulfill the religious needs of various communities. It is worth mentioning those written by Jesuits for their mission's purposes, or those that stemmed from the literary personality of the author, such as Pietro Aretino's *Humanità di Christo* or Blaise Pascal's *Abrégé*.¹⁴ Authors like Giordano Bruno had described Jesus as a “magician”, allegedly drawing from Jewish sources.¹⁵

If we turn to historical narratives composed by eminent scholars, we may begin, as Grafton and Weinberg recently observed, with Cesare Baronio, whose work was bitterly deconstructed by Isaac Casaubon. Baronio's massive historiographical work was backed by the decision of the Roman Curia to openly challenge the Magdeburg Centuries historiographical enterprise. The decision was made between 1576 and 1577, and was finally realized with the publication of *Annales Ecclesiastici* (Rome 1588–1608). The polemical tone of the opus was taken into serious consideration by one of the foremost enemies of the Roman Curia: the Venetian friar Paolo Sarpi, who was by that time the main legal expert of the Republic of Venice (Cozzi and Sarpi 1969; Wotton 2002; Frajese 1994). Baronio's diatribe conveys more than a confessional hatred; it reveals the backdrop against which we understand the rise of modern scholarship and the development of religious attitudes within European (Western) Christianity. The recovering of the past meant, for these scholars, *to live and experience Christianity* as it had originally appeared. Despite the violence of the confrontations and the frequent biased personal attacks, Baronio and Casaubon “agreed that Church historians needed to discuss Jewish institutions and rituals—as well as the Greek and Hebrew texts that described them—in detail” (Grafton-Weinberg 2011, 188–189). The reconstruction of the Jewish setting of the life of Jesus triggered enormous interest in Jewish ceremonies, rituals, Jewish law, and more broadly, ancient Jewish culture. Scholars had to construct the context of the Last Supper, decipher the mechanism of the juridical system, and the laws concerning the death penalty. Grafton and Weinberg have demonstrated in great detail the kind of meticulous knowledge that circulated among theologians and scholars of different faiths. Antiquarian knowledge of the biblical past—which was disseminated among Jews and

¹⁴ Aretino wrote a number of works on Jesus (1538, 1539, 1540), which were then forbidden.

¹⁵ Pesce 2011; Pesce 2013; Catto 2014; Motta 2014.

Christians alike—could prove extremely precise and fruitful in reconstructing the historical context.¹⁶

At stake were the methodology and the selection of sources: Flacius Illiricus, for example, emphasized the works of Josephus Flavius over Eusebius; Casaubon made ample use of rabbinical sources and was more literate in Hebrew and Greek, whereas Baronio was more selective and relied on translations or the help of collaborators. The ability to decipher ancient sources and detect forgeries could make a difference in the reliability of vital scholarship. Obviously, a scholar's honor and fame depended upon their philological capabilities and precision (Grafton and Weinberg 2011).

My interest here is not so much in the erudition and scrupulousness of Catholic and Protestant scholars in assessing the precise character of Jesus' life and the development of early Christianity. For both Catholics and Protestants Jesus was the Christ, even if his experience was informed by Jewish life. What I would like to emphasize is that methodological and philological refinements developed out of theological issues (Grafton and Weinberg 2011). Furthermore, the study of Jewish sources became increasingly pivotal as they contributed to a better understanding of the historical context, even though scholars were ambivalent about Jewish textual evidence. Casaubon used rabbinical evidence as an important testimony of the times of Jesus, whereas the Catholic faction was much more skeptical, though not unanimous in research practices. Robert Bellarmine (1542–1621) suggested that rabbinic literature was unreliable for the understanding of first century Christianity (Whealey 2003).

The use of rabbinical and Hebraic literature was a theme of great interest for scholars, because it involved agents, and not exclusively texts. Christians befriended Jews who, in turn, could search for Hebrew books and manuscripts. Jews would instruct, present introductory tools, and translate from Hebrew to Latin. At the same time, Christians often thought that Jews were as unreliable as their post-biblical literature. The ambivalence of this relationship was unsettling and would endure for centuries to come. The early modern period saw Christian scholarship contributing enormously to the development of the historiography of early Christianity, New Testament, and Jewish Studies. At the same time, Jewish scholars slowly started to revise their understanding of Jesus.¹⁷

4 The Jewish gaze on Jesus

At the beginning of the seventeenth century there existed a wide assortment of images and representations of Jesus that had been gleaned from Jewish literature.

¹⁶ Momigliano 1990. For recent analysis of biblical antiquarianism see Berns 2014.

¹⁷ There are many reasons for this change. Some are related to the presence of New Christians who wanted to convert and still had Christian families; other are related to cultural shifts that took place in the early modern period, and namely changes in the political setting and the outreach of Europeans to overseas territories.

This kind of literature surfaced throughout the Middle Ages especially, and became known from the great medieval disputes or through the discovery of sources written by Jewish converts.¹⁸ It was a literature that emerged out of deep conflict between the Church and the Jews. Moreover, it may well be linked to the earlier polemics written by Christians against the Jews, which were so central in shedding light on the theological confrontations of late antiquity.¹⁹

This literature is important because it offers a wealth of theological, biblical, and historical arguments against the major tenets of Christianity, and systematically challenged the truth of Christian revelation. Texts of this type circulated among both Jews and Christians, and they functioned as polemical tools throughout different periods. Moreover, in the seventeenth century a great deal of anti-Christian Jewish polemical literature written in Spanish and Portuguese appeared, whereas some of the most famous Hebrew texts were translated into Latin and introduced to a wider public of scholars. It is worth mentioning the *Tela ignea Satanae*, a book published by the Christian Hebraist Johann Christoph Wagenseil in 1681, who translated four Hebrew texts, including the notorious *Toledoth Yeshu*. The *Tela ignea Satanae* circulated widely, and presented, although with a disproving commentary, an enormous amount of Jewish arguments against Christianity and the interpretation of the Bible and New Testament.²⁰

In the meantime, a new type of literature dealing with Hebraic sources developed among Christian scholars. The *Judaica* catalogue increasingly became an important tool for research, and it slowly developed into a more structured and influential medium for the assembly and organization of knowledge. The bibliographical entries of Hebraic literature appeared simultaneous to the formation of the great collections of *Judaica*. There is unfortunately no space to follow this line of investigation; however, it is useful to think about the efforts that would have gone into organizing a type of knowledge that was backed by powerful patrons, diplomats, scholars, and individual agents. I will offer just one example of what this might mean: In the early nineteenth century the Christian Hebraist and abbot Giambernardo De' Rossi, a collector of manuscripts himself, published a short list of texts which had been recently incorporated into the *Judaica* collection of the *Palatina Library* of Parma. In his *Bibliotheca judaica antichristiana* De Rossi included a number of works, which were deemed anti-Christian in content. They were there to provide an image of Christianity from the perspective of the 'other'.²¹

De Rossi's list presented a large number of texts. De Rossi included new entries, which had appeared in the early modern period, such as texts written in Spanish and

¹⁸ Berger 1979; Lasker 2007; Krauss-Horbury 1995; Horbury 1998 (part 3).

¹⁹ Parkes 1934; William 1935; Blumenkranz 1963; Simon 1964; Stroumsa and Limor 1996.

²⁰ On *Toledoth Yeshu* see: Krauss 1902; Di Segni 1985; Osier 1984; Schäfer 2011 and 2014. On Wagenseil Mulsow 2015 (German version 2002).

²¹ The catalogue mostly resembles the Index of Prohibited Books, or at least parts of its revised version. See the list in Caffiero 2012.

Portuguese. One of these had had an enormously successful circulation since its first appearance in the market of religious polemics and was deemed quite dangerous; I refer to the *Hizzuk emunah* (The Strengthening of Faith) of the Karaite Isaac of Troki, composed around the end of the 1590s. In the list of the prohibited books of the Catholic Church it appeared under the title *Rafforzamento della fede* (Parente 1996; Cafiero 2012). The work circulated in many translations—some of which even included commentaries and annotations—even if it was never printed in the early modern period (Kaplan 2008).

This work demonstrates a strategy of polemics that specifically challenged the biblical passages that were used in the New Testament as proof of Jesus' salvific role, and justifications of Christian dogmas. Isaac's powerful criticism of Christian hermeneutics had the unintended effect of *historicizing* each Christian belief. Although this kind of literature was not framed into a historical narrative on the model of Josephus, for example, it nevertheless forged the historical setting for the life of Jesus. The *Hizzuk emunah*, and its extraordinary reception, played various roles in different communities: for Jews it provided a range of systematic tools to defend against conversion and religious polemics well into the nineteenth century; among radical enlighteners, the same critique of Christian biblical interpretation became a tool for uncompromising criticism of Christianity.²²

De Rossi also mentioned a far less famous manuscript written by the Italian rabbi Leon Modena (1571–1648). *Magen ve-herav* (The Sword and the Shield) is his last, and unfinished, work (De Rossi 1800). “According to Isaac Levi—his nephew—Modena claimed that no Jew since Isaac Abravanel had gone to such lengths to defend the Jewish faith against its Christian opponents”.²³ The authorial claim to originality is one of Modena's trademarks, suggesting an outstanding fashioning of the self (Facchini 2017). In this text, Modena aimed to offer a counter-narrative to the most obvious Jewish discourse that circulated among his peers, and namely to the *Toledoth Yeshu*, as he clearly indicated (Modena/Simonsohn 1960). In doing so he differentiated himself from Jewish polemical currents that he deemed too aggressive. At the same time, he endeavored to make sense of Jesus as a Jew, while offering a plausible narrative on the development of Christianity. In contrast to Isaac of Troki, Modena framed a sort of historical narrative, and made ample use of a type of “autoptic imagination”, when he declared that, “after a perusal of their [Christian] and our [Jewish] books I defined a norm, which is truthful and sound, as if I were of his generation, and I was with him” (Modena/Simonsohn 1960, 43–44). It is a methodological assertion that he often highlights: when he wrote his Italian book on Jewish rituals, Modena stressed his being “neutral”, as if he “were not a Jew”. In his po-

²² Deutsch 1853. For use of the Gospel, see Sievert 2005. Popkin 2007. See also for a general discussion Mulsow 2015 (2002).

²³ Geiger 1856; Modena/Simonsohn 1960; Dweck 2011, 45. On Leon Modena's biographical trajectory see Adelman 1988; Zemon Davis 1988.

lemics against Christianity he imagines himself *as if* he were a Jew living in the times of Jesus.²⁴

His depiction of the Nazarene is very sympathetic and warm, a truly new depiction even when compared to other sophisticated anti-Christian polemical works. Modena places Jesus at the core of ancient Jewish society, making him a peer of the Pharisees, one of the many Jewish sects of the Second Temple period. It is not clear why Modena would transform Jesus into a Pharisee, when, for example, in the other polemical work attributed to him, the *Kol sakhal* (The Voice of the Fool), which also incorporated a strong critique of rabbinical Judaism, Jesus is just a founder of another sect, among the many that flourished in the Second Temple period (Fishman 1997, 102–108). Though I shall not systematically describe this work, it is noteworthy to stress how Modena made clear that Christianity was an outgrowth of pagan practices and beliefs, which were borrowed from ancient religions and could not possibly be found in Judaism. The “partition of the ways” in Modena’s work was therefore referring to a cultural and religious process, which led to the rise of Christianity and that was set in motion by the followers of Jesus. The polemical Jewish gaze set forth a counter-narrative that aimed to historicize the rise of Christianity, either attributing to Paul or other followers the responsibility to forge a “new religion”.²⁵

5 Kabbalistic challenges

The vision of Judaism embedded in Modena’s various works was surely related to an implicit model of religion, which is detectable in all of his compositions. This model is particularly evident in his treatise on Jewish ceremonies and rituals, his criticism of the *Zohar*, and in the *Kol sakhal*, a tract which includes a chapter aiming to reform a number of Jewish practices (Fishman 1997). Both the critique of Judaism and the critique of Kabbalah were never printed, until they were *discovered* in the nineteenth century, as we shall see. While the Italian book on rites, *Historia de’ riti hebraici*, was widely acclaimed and translated into many European vernaculars,²⁶ some of his Jewish manuscripts remained unpublished and only circulated among Jews or reached some Christian Hebraists who were ardent collectors of such texts.

Yaacov Dweck has thoroughly analyzed Modena’s *Ari nohem* (The Roaring Lion) and has claimed that it was primarily focused on the legal use of Kabbalah and on

²⁴ These devices of “neutrality” might be referring to Flavius Josephus and other ancient historiographical sources. For this use see Padgen 1993, 51–87.

²⁵ To refer to some of his arguments see: *Magen*, chap. 9 (Modena/Simonsohn 1960). For recent scholarship on this topic see Guetta 2014, 134–152; Fishman 2003. On the “historicizing” process see Wilke 2016, 140–165.

²⁶ For the circulation of the printed text, which exerted enormous influence also on scholarship of early Christianity see Cohen 1992; Le Brun and Stroumsa 1998; Facchini 2002; Facchini 2011.

the antiquity of the Zohar. In pursuing his goal, Modena had to historicize the Zohar, a text that both Christians and Jews deemed ancient and part of the oral revelation. Modena convincingly analyzed the Zohar and ascertained that it was a medieval product, a result that the reluctant Gershom Scholem had to definitively acknowledge four hundred years later.

Modena did set up a de-mythologizing mechanism, meant to criticize the relevance of the mystical tradition both in Christian and Jewish realms.

At the same time, his younger colleague offered an alternative interpretation of kabbalistic lore. In the *Discorso circa il stato de' gli Hebrei* (1638), Simone (Simha) Luzzatto included, among other things, a long description of the Kabbalah (Luzzatto/Veltri 2013). The book was motivated by a strong conflict between the Jewish community and the Republic. Although its main goal—the story goes—aimed to plead for religious acceptance in Venice, Luzzatto's treatise reveals diverse theories of religious tolerance, and offers a counter-narrative to theological supersessionism by stressing that the Jews have retained sparks of their ancient wisdom and might, given their legacy of biblical times when they created culture and were great warriors (Facchini 2013). In chapter 16 of the book Luzzatto described Judaism through its protagonists, emphasizing *agency* more than structure. Jewish culture was preserved by the interaction of four agents who were by different means tied to the interpretation of the Bible: 1) rabbis and Talmudists; 2) theologians and philosophers, 3) Kabbalists; 4) Karaites (Ruderman 1995; Luzzatto/Veltri 2013). I focus here on his description of the Kabbalists, against the backdrop of Modena's *Ari nohem*. By comparing the two works one may easily observe that in regard to Kabbalah Modena and Luzzatto held opposite interpretations.

The rabbis were, according to Luzzatto, those who preserved Judaism in all its collective guises at all times and in all places (“l'universale degli Hebrei”) because they were those who implemented Jewish rituals and ceremonies. Though this line of argument may resemble Modena's representation of Jewish rituals and ceremonies, Luzzatto also stressed how rabbinical literature might shed light on important cultural issues, such as the computation of the calendar (Grafton and Weinberg 2011).

The second group was composed of religious philosophers and constituted a significant component of Jewish tradition. Luzzatto tied the history of this cultural undercurrent to both Philo of Alexandria and Josephus Flavius: the first, Philo of Alexandria, contributed to the development of Christian biblical exegesis (through Origen) and was soon lost within Jewish tradition. The second interpretative tradition, represented by Josephus Flavius' *Antiquitates*, provided an important interpretation of obscure biblical passages. Luzzatto offered examples of great scholars who had contributed to the history of philosophical thought and who had lived under Muslim rule; for example, Saadia Gaon and Maimonides, whose works were later translated into Latin. Egypt, according to Luzzatto, gave birth to the most important Jewish leaders and scholars: Moses, the prophet and lawgiver; Philo of Alexandria, and Maimonides, emphasizing the meaningful role played by the culture of the Dia-

spora. Furthermore, he underlines the importance of authors such as Levi ben Gershon, the commentator of Aristotle and Averroes; Hasday Crescas, the critic of Aristotle; Yoseph Albo and Ibn Ezra, all of whom contributed to defining the articles of faith and dogmas of Judaism. This section, devoted to the second group of interpreters of the Bible, is a concise but profound discussion on a number of significant issues surrounding the relationship between religious philosophy and Jewish law as it developed over time (Ruderman 1995). It is quite clear that Luzzatto wished to emphasize the cultural encounter between Jews and Gentiles by mentioning texts which were composed in either Greek or Arabic.

Luzzatto then described the third school of biblical interpreters, composed by the Kabbalists, whose doctrine disseminated—according to his interpretation—mainly throughout the Levant and Poland. He stressed that kabbalistic teachings were “not compulsory,” because they did not require the approval of the whole nation (Luzzatto/Veltri 2013).

Luzzatto offers a short historical outline of the esoteric Jewish tradition for a more general readership. In order to describe the Kabbalah to his audience, Luzzatto underlined the literal meaning of the term Kabbalah. The term itself implies both the act of “reception,” and the relationship between master and disciple. The kabbalists—he maintains—were imparted with a special wisdom regarding the hidden interpretation of the Holy Scripture (“così ad essi per la misteriosa esposizione della Scrittura”). Kabbalistic teachings are divided into a “practical doctrine,” associated with the permutation of the Hebrew letters and calculation of their numerical sum and meaning, which are mainly applicable to the names of God. A second doctrine, more theoretical and scientific (“scientifica”) is based on speculations on the relationship between the natural and the divine realms. The natural realm is connected to the celestial one by a system of channels. The supernal world therefore infuses the natural world with its energy through ten principles (*sefirot*), which in turn resemble the principles of the Pythagorean tradition. Furthermore, Luzzatto does not simply offer some remarks about theories of the soul, but rather, a succinct list of the canonical texts of this tradition, naming the “De creatione” (*Sefer Yetsirah*), “il Splendore” (*Zohar*), which is attributed to the ancient rabbis, and the works of Nahmanides. Luzzatto was one of the first Jewish scholars to describe the Kabbalah by utilizing a comparative approach. Following in the path of a number of Christian traditions, he was able to highlight the similarities between Kabbalah, Pythagoreans and Platonism. Moreover, he was one of the first to establish a nexus between the esoteric doctrines of the Kabbalah and early Christian heretical groups, such as Gnostics and Valentinians.

It is very likely that Luzzatto followed a certain line of interpretation, which was put forth by Christian scholars, even if he mentioned none of them, and just as likely he was aware of the works of Reuchlin, Postel, and Pico, who were committed to the study of Kabbalah (Secret 1964; Blau 1944). In *De arte cabalistica* Johannes Reuchlin (1455–1522) claimed that the ancient Jewish wisdom revealed to Moses also included Kabbalistic teachings, which were handed down to Pythagoras. This esoteric wisdom

was then transferred to Greek philosophy. In his genealogy of esoteric wisdom, Reuchlin placed the Jews and Moses at the very heart of the ancient philosophy, connecting it with Plato and Pythagoras (Reuchlin 1517 (1983); Hanegraaff 2012, 53).

Guillaume Postel (1510 – 1581) represented a subversive type of Christianity, both in terms of his prophetic convictions and his scholarship. He himself was a visionary prophet: diplomat, astrologer and kabbalist, Postel was a scholar of oriental languages and ancient chronology, and was convinced that the study of eastern languages could reveal a deeper truth.²⁷ Postel engaged with religions widely, and similarly to Pico della Mirandola, envisioned a form of universal Christendom, based on harmony. I cannot enter deeply into this idea, which revolves around the different strains of Christian culture and their fascination with the Orient. Suffice it to mention the enormous importance of these nuances of Christian thought, not exclusively from the perspective of an esoteric tradition, but as a cross-cultural phenomenon that influenced Jews, Catholics, and Protestants alike. It would be inappropriate to think of these scholars and diplomats as marginal or secluded. They were quite active and were seen as problematic only when they openly challenged the Church. Luzzatto seems to refer to their works when describing kabbalists, which might be explained by the fact that he himself was involved in this type of study. Moreover, one could also easily prove that encounters between Jews and Christian orientalists were taking place in the city of Venice.²⁸

But there is more. In listing these different traditions Luzzatto highlights some authors, thus designating a sort of literary canon, while also indicating his very notion of Jewish culture. Luzzatto even claimed that in regard to “human sciences” (“scienze umane”), Jews had no restrictions of any sort. In fact, religious norms oblige them (“tengono per precetto legale”) to investigate the laws of the natural world in order to glorify God (Luzzatto/Veltri 2013, 98).

The taxonomy of the interpreters of the Bible presented by Luzzatto constitutes a sort of concise assembly of canonical literature: the unnamed rabbis and Talmudists, Philo, Josephus, Saadia Gaon, Maimonides, Levi ben Gershon, Hasdai Crescas, Ibn Ezra and Yosef Albo. Among the kabbalists, he mentions only three famous authors and books. Luzzatto is cautious and he publicly cites works that circulated widely among a Christian readership, even if they were controversial. The strategy of quotations in this book is somewhat allusive and implicit, indicating the apologetic nature of his writing. Luzzatto seemed to oppose Modena’s criticism of the Kabbalah, preferring instead to offer a different interpretation based upon the similarities between the Kabbalah and neo-platonic philosophical tradition, as first elaborated on by a number of Christian scholars. This stance may have answered a profound cultural

²⁷ On Postel: Kuntz 1981; Secret 1988; Grafton and Weinberg 2011.

²⁸ The ghetto was visited by Gaffarel, Hirai 2014; Facchini 2011; Barbierato 2009; Campanini 2014.

need, which was meant to sustain and endorse the study of natural philosophy among Jews.²⁹

The few representative cases that I presented occurred in different forms. The *Discorso* appeared in 1638 in Venice, and accordingly, it was not particularly challenged by the Inquisition. It was printed in a few copies, as the famous Christian Hebraist, Johann Christian Wolf implied when he wrote that the book was very rare (*liber est rarissimus*) (Wolf 1713–33 III, 1551). It circulated among scholars of Northern Europe, although it is unclear how it reached them (Veltri 2015). Wolf translated chapter 16, discussed earlier, into Latin. He is the one to report that John Toland had prepared an English version of the text, which was discussed extensively in his *Reasons for Naturalizing the Jews in Great Britain and Ireland* (Toland 1714). Some references to the *Discorso* were to be found in the most important historical work of the early eighteenth century, written by the Huguenot exile Jacques Basnage, who also drew on the text of Leon Modena.³⁰ Furthermore, Basnage translated the last chapter of Luzzatto's *Discorso*, which is an attempt to describe the Jewish Diaspora of his period. Basnage was interested in this chapter for religious reasons, specifically because of his millenarian hopes (Sutcliffe 2003).

The craft of historical narratives about the Jews and historical depictions of Judaism increased exponentially during the first half of the eighteenth century, and they were mainly based on knowledge of textual and literary tradition.

6 Returning to the nineteenth century

In order to summarize my presentation and to offer some insight into the question of how historiography shaped religion, we must return to the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, keeping in mind that by the start of the nineteenth century the scholarly field of Judaism seemed to have shifted to Central Europe.

It is clear beyond all doubt that *Kol sakhal* is also the work of Judah Aryeh Modena [Leon Modena], and that this rabbi hated the sages of the Mishna and Talmud even more than the Karaites did, and that he was a bigger reformer than Geiger! And this was 220 years ago! And in Italy! Should you copy it and bring it to the Reform Rabbinical Conference which will be held in Breslau, they will give you good money for it and will print it as 'a sign for the children of rebelliousness' (Luzzatto 1891; Fishman 1997, 4).

This letter was sent from the Italian *maskil* Samuel David Luzzatto (1800–1865) to Solomon Gottlieb Stern (1807–1883) around 1846. Luzzatto lived in Padua, a city that by the early nineteenth century had become part of the Italian area of the Habs-

²⁹ This position is also detectable in other authors of the late seventeenth century, see Ruderman 1995. Cantarini's letters to Unger where he describes the work of Delmedigo in Facchini 2011.

³⁰ Basnage 1707, III, 497–912. For discussion on the reception of Modena in Basnage see: Cohen in Ruderman 1992, 471; Sutcliffe 2003, 79–99.

burg Empire, together with Venice and Milan. Luzzatto was one of the most learned scholars of Judaism in Italy, and a teacher at the newly founded Collegio rabbinico of Padua. His writing appeared in Hebrew, Italian and French, and his connections extended to many members of the *Wissenschaft*. Luzzatto was also a vocal critic both of the Kabbalah and of Reform Judaism.³¹

A few years earlier, another Italian *maskil* from the same area had written a book under the title *Torah ve-filosofiah*, which included a chapter arguing against the ancient origins of the Kabbalah. The chapter relied heavily on Modena's manuscript, and this information circulated among Jews through private correspondences. In short, Modena's criticism of Kabbalah first appeared in print in Julius Fürst's 1840 edition.³² Many of Modena's manuscripts were printed in the nineteenth century, accompanied by partial translations. The discovery of the text was not providential, as it was relatively known to the previous generation. But it now revealed a new level of meaning.

The rise of Jewish Enlightenment (*Haskalah*) in Central and Eastern Europe and the rise of the Reform movement developed alongside the "Science of Judaism".³³ The interest in and the sharp criticism of Kabbalah must be interpreted as a reaction against the popularity of the Hasidic movement that had spread since the eighteenth century. Certainly, the *Ari nohem* was an ideal text to belittle the centrality of the Zohar and the teachings related to the Kabbalah (Dweck 2011). It was a perfect ideological tool to fight against Hassidim and their form of Judaism.

German Jews, and particularly Abraham Geiger (1810–1874) and Leopold Zunz (1794–1886), made ample use of material from the early modern period, in order to identify a past that could be used to sustain the Reform movement's religious agenda. It is not surprising that Geiger himself wrote a portrait of Leon Modena and selected some excerpts from his body of work, especially those that dealt with Christianity, Judaism and the Kabbalah (Geiger 1856). Ever since, Modena is seen as a canonical author of Jewish historiography, either as a hero or as a villain. Romantic biographies of Modena became popular among the *maskilim* of Eastern Europe, especially in the early twentieth century, and his *Historia de' riti* was translated into Hebrew in 1863, to offer an enlightened form of Judaism to Russian Jews (Zinberg 1974).

The early modern period was very difficult to conceptualize and fully grasp, especially in narratives that were shaped into a linear, at times Hegelian pattern. Writing a comprehensive history of the Jews and Judaism was a tremendous challenge. It is no surprise that Heinrich Graetz (1817–1891), the most prominent historian of the Jews of the nineteenth century, framed his sweeping narrative with the trope of light and darkness, defining the moments of Judaism's decline and resurrection through

31 On Reform Judaism see Philipson 1907 and Meyer 1995. Luzzatto's criticism of Kabbalah was voiced in his *Wikkuah al ha-kabbalah*. Guetta 1998 and 2009.

32 Fuerst 1840; see Dweck 2011 for the debate over the text.

33 For Haskalah see Feiner 2011; for Mediterranean Haskalah see Bregoli 2014.

the ages. When dealing with the aforementioned scholars of seventeenth century Italy, he dubbed some of them “the skeptics”,³⁴ those who, according to his narrative, were heroes who stood alone against the evil spreading of the Kabbalah. These few champions he depicted were Uriel Acosta, Leon Modena, Yosef Shelomo Delmedigo, and Simone (Simha) Luzzatto. Although they were heroes against the Kabbalah, they were still unable to prevent the dissemination of Kabbalistic lore. Therefore it is no surprise that Graetz portrayed Modena as a “schizophrenic” rabbi, and harshly judged Delmedigo’s inability to set a clear path for the study of natural philosophy. He reserved a timid yet positive assessment of the cryptic Luzzatto. Graetz judgmental and clearly biased narrative is extremely important not only because it proved extraordinarily influential for future scholars, but because it clearly expressed where his ideal notion of Judaism stood, as well as somehow challenging Geiger’s portraits of the same protagonists.³⁵

Abraham Geiger, one of the most important representatives of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and a pivotal figure of the Reform movement in Judaism, wrote short biographies of Leon Modena and Solomon Delmedigo because, according to his understanding, these authors stood at the crossroads of modernity, as vocal critics of rabbinic Judaism (Geiger 1840; Geiger 1856; Saperstein 2013, 275–295). Not surprisingly, he also dealt with Isaac of Troki’s *Hizzuk emunah* in a short piece published in 1853 (Geiger 1853). All of these works were central to his own interpretation of certain aspects of Jewish history, especially vis-à-vis his depiction of Jesus and the rise of Christianity. In particular, Geiger tried to interpret some of Modena’s work as the literary and religious precursor of the reform. Talya Fishman has conclusively supported this idea in attributing the *Kol sakhal* to Modena, following in the footsteps of Geiger. Whereas for Graetz these rabbis and scholars were uninfluential skeptics, for Geiger they were critical thinkers. Unfortunately, Geiger wrote, Modena had no Lessing to praise his work, as had happened for the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn.³⁶ For the purposes of this paper, I cannot explore this comment further, but it speaks to something quite profound, having to do with strategies of acknowledgment and consecration, with power relations, and the Jewish-Christian dialogue.³⁷

The Reform movement was especially eager to emphasize the universal character of Judaism in order to extract those historical features that would—according to their understanding—enable Judaism to face the challenges amplified by modernity. The historiography of Judaism was extremely sensitive to this problem, and therefore each scholarly enterprise involved a specific vision of Judaism as a ‘religion’, whether defined by its universal call or its ethnic flavor. Geiger felt—as many other scholars of the period—the challenges of the time, as they stemmed both from Christianity’s

³⁴ Graetz 1895, vol. 5, chap. XXX.

³⁵ Graetz was more fond of medieval Judaism which slowly emerged as a model for modern religion: see Hughes 2013.

³⁶ Fishman 1997, 4; Saperstein in Wiese, Homolka, Brechenmacher 2013.

³⁷ For strategies of consecration see Bourdieu 1979.

sense of superiority or Jewish parochialism. He recognized that his was the endeavor of a “divided soul”: as a religious reformer and as a committed scholar (Meyer 1995; Facchini 2008). Geiger did not think of religion merely in terms of rationality and universalism, but also in emotional and aesthetical terms; that the source of religious feeling lay in poetry and in the medieval tradition. Knowledge of the Renaissance and appreciation of the complexities of the Baroque period were not fully developed in the historiographical discourse of the nineteenth century, therefore the use of these works were more implicit than explicit in supporting the Reform movement in Judaism, although some scholars detected the religious challenges launched during the late Renaissance. Furthermore, the scholars of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* became increasingly more inclined to work on religious literature in Hebrew: liturgy, poetry and philosophy. Somehow, they were inclined to follow the early attempt of Luzzatto, when he insisted upon the creative effort of the Jews even after the loss of their political independence, and emphasized the work of philosophers, given the relevance philosophy acquired during the nineteenth century. They left the Renaissance and embraced the golden Middle Ages.

The confrontation with Christianity was much more complicated, and it involved all Jewish scholars and intellectuals of the period, despite their religious affiliation and political conviction. If we look at Geiger’s image of Jesus and of early Christianity, the legacy of the early modern period is much more evident, as he definitely depended upon Isaac of Troki and Leon Modena. I believe that Geiger’s originality actually pays tribute to *Magen ve-herav*, a text he had translated himself. His portrayal of Jesus as a Pharisee shocked and offended Protestant theologians because it appeared as a strong counter-narrative to the mainstream accounts of the historical Jesus.³⁸ Geiger, like Modena before him, had highlighted that Jesus was a Jew and that he never meant to found a new religion. He was not a marginal Jew, but at the core of normative Judaism. Graetz, who was inclined to emphasize rational Judaism (although he was not fond of the Reform movement), described Jesus as a Jew and claimed that Jesus belonged to the sect of the Essenes, and was therefore influenced by certain ideas of Messianism and religious enthusiasm.³⁹ Graetz’s depiction of Jesus pays tribute to other authors, and in this regard it depends upon Joseph Salvador’s text on historical Jesus published in France, although for Salvador Jesus stood at the very center of Judaism.⁴⁰ Salvador’s book was quite influential and it offered theories about the rise of Christianity and the development of Judaism, which were rooted in his understanding of political and revolutionary French culture. Furthermore, as has been detected by other scholars, Graetz became close to Salvador, especially after the publication of *Rome et Jerusalem* (1862), a misunderstood text at

38 Heschel 1998. In her book on the Aryan Jesus, Heschel changed a bit her interpretation of Graetz and claimed that he depended upon medieval sources. For a cultural interpretation of the history of the historical Jesus Moxnes 2012; Priest 2015.

39 Heschel 1998.

40 Salvador 1838; Hyman 1972; Heschel 1998; Facchini 2005; Sofia 2004; Jaffé 2009; Sebban 2011.

tributed to ‘proto-Zionism’ (Hyman 1972; Facchini 2005). Therefore, after the publication of Ernest Renan’s *Vie de Jesus* (1863), Graetz published in French an expanded version of his chapter on Jesus, thanks to his French connection (Graetz 1867; Heschel 1998, 135–138). Graetz’s Jesus did not stand at the core of Judaic life, as he was to be supported by marginal and illiterate Jews from Galilee. Jesus emerged in Graetz’s narrative as a sort of counter-type to oppose Renan’s glorification of the Galilean,⁴¹ but he also resembled a bit more like the medieval trickster and magician, which appeared in medieval sources.

Susannah Heschel read Geiger’s reconstruction of the Jewish Jesus through the prism of Said’s *Orientalism*, and stressed that Jewish scholarship portrayed the voice of the colonized and challenged the dominant representation of religion forged by Christian scholars (Brenner 2010 [or. 2006]). But there is more. As a consequence of political and social changes, in the nineteenth century a wide variety of representations of Jesus and Christianity were offered by Christian, Jewish and non-religious scholars, and reached a wide audience. These depictions differed greatly, and some of them were cast in narratives that were not scholarly in their form, such as novels, pamphlets, or images and art. Although, at least since the early modern period, Jews proposed alternative interpretations and countered what they felt were inappropriate representations of Christianity, in the nineteenth century they published extensively on this topic. By the beginning of the twentieth century, Jewish scholars had become fully involved in the reconstruction of the historical Jesus and the rise of early Christianity. If the interest in Jesus and early Christianity arose primarily among Reformed Jewish scholars, it slowly became of greater relevance and became a key topic that Jews of different religious and political backgrounds aimed to engage with.⁴² The relevance of the topic, which would bring both fame and doom to those scholars and intellectuals who dealt with it, had gained a different function. If in the previous centuries dealing with Jesus and Christianity meant primarily to protect the community and offer a counter-narrative, now the incorporation of these themes were also aimed to change Judaism from within. From being defensive, scholarship on the historical Jesus, ancient Judaism, and early Christianity became a transformative tool, and a way to publicly confront the most powerful historical narratives of Christian and Gentile scholars.⁴³ The debate over the Kabbalah, the confrontation with Christianity, and the very religious meaning of Jesus were some of those themes that fueled inter-religious confrontation in the public arena, and intra-religious debates, especially between Reform and Orthodox Jews.

⁴¹ There is a strong emphasis on geography and ethnicity in these interpretations. On Renan’s Jesus see Priest 2015. See also Stroumsa 2010.

⁴² Very different in perspective were the works of Montefiore and Klausner. See Jaffè 2009; Stahl 2012.

⁴³ Some of which were also influenced by the rise of antisemitism, and the process that racialized the discourse of religion. See Gerdmar 2009; Heschel 2010; Connolly 2012; Nirenberg 2013; Junginger 2017.

In this article I have attempted to offer an alternative and more complex history of representations of religious themes, where multiple voices and different threads of entanglement provide a rich picture of how historical narratives of Judaism were produced and interpreted, how they were appropriated or misunderstood, and how they were forgotten. I wish to highlight how the heated religious confrontations of the early modern period contributed to create erudite and informative representation of Judaism (especially in its relationship to Christianity). These representations were both accurate and confrontational; they were both scholarly and confessional, aiming at recovering historical truth. In the nineteenth century new practices of scholarship on religion emerged, against the background of a new social and political context. In the rising period of ‘secularization’, the commitment to science contributed to recover old representations and craft them in new forms, aiming at new challenges, fueling new forms of religion through a new understanding and a selective use of the past.

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