

Jerusalem

Religious Power and Judaism

Moses Mendelssohn

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[Brackets] enclose editorial explanations. Small ·dots· enclose material that has been added, but can be read as though it were part of the original text. Occasional •bullets, and also indenting of passages that are not quotations, are meant as aids to grasping the structure of a sentence or a thought. Every four-point ellipsis indicates the omission of a brief passage that seems to present more difficulty than it is worth. Longer omissions are reported between brackets in normal-sized type. – When a sentence (like this one) is preceded by – followed by a space, that is supplied by Mendelssohn, who uses it as a kind of quasi-paragraph-break. The division into subsections with titles is added in this version. So are the titles of the two Sections, though they are obviously what Mendelssohn intended. Many occurrences of italics are added in this version, to aid comprehension; but a remarkable number of them are Mendelssohn's.

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Glossary

beliefs: This is usually a translation of *Gesinnungen*. See also **thoughts** and **frames of mind**. The choice among these three translations is dictated by context.

benevolence: Most occurrences of this in the present version would go better with 'beneficence' (i.e. *doing* good rather than merely *wanting to do* good); but if this is a mistake it is Mendelssohn's, because there's no other possible translation of his *Wohlwollen*.

Children of Israel: The Jewish people.

eternal: See entry on 'temporal'.

frames of mind: This translates *Gesinnungen*. See also **beliefs** and **thoughts**. On page 5 all three translations of the word occur within a couple of consecutive paragraphs.

House of Jacob: The Jewish people.

luxury: This meant something like: *extreme* or *inordinate* indulgence in sensual pleasures. A 'luxurious' person was someone wholly given to the pleasures of the senses—mostly but not exclusively the pleasures of eating and drinking.

moral person: An entity that counts as a person in the context of rights, wrongs, blame, and so on.

science: In early modern times this word applied to any body of knowledge or theory that is (perhaps) axiomatised and (certainly) conceptually highly organised. That is what lies behind Mendelssohn's implying on page 40 that Maimonides wanted religion to be one of the 'sciences'.

Sitten: A plural noun that can be translated by a variety of English words, which boil down to something like 'a people's morality, basic customs, ingrained attitudes and expectations about how people will behave, ideas about what is decent etc. or any subset of those'. It is left untranslated here because no good English word does that job.

temporal: It means 'having to do with this world as distinct from the heavenly world of the after-life'. The underlying thought is that this world is in time ('temporal') whereas the after-life is **eternal** in some way that puts it outside time. These English words had those meanings at the time when Mendelssohn wrote, and they are inevitable translations of his *zeitlich* and *ewig*. Note that on page 4 Mendelssohn clearly implies that what is eternal *is* in time.

thoughts: This is usually a translation of *Gesinnungen*, a word with a very broad meaning. See also **beliefs** and **frames of mind**.

SECTION II: JUDAISM

1. Some good people

This contention of mine that no church should excommunicate anyone flatly contradicts a principle that everyone else accepts. I presented the essential point of it on a previous occasion. Dohm's excellent work *On the Civil Improvement of the Jews* led to the inquiry:

To what extent should a settled colony be permitted to retain its own jurisdiction in ecclesiastical and civil matters in general and in the right of excommunication and expulsion in particular?

Legal power of the church—the right of excommunication—if a colony is to have these it must have been given them by the state or by the mother church. Anyone who has this right by virtue of the social contract must have relinquished or ceded to the colony the part of it that concerns the colony. But what if no-one can have such a right? What if neither the state nor the mother church herself can claim any right to use coercion in religious matters? What if according to the principles of sound reason (whose divine status we must all acknowledge) neither state nor church has

- any right in matters of faith except the right to teach,
- any power except the power to persuade,
- any discipline other than the discipline of reason and principles?

If this can be proved and made clear to common sense, nothing can have the power to maintain a right that runs

counter to it. . . . All ecclesiastical coercion will be unlawful, all external power in religious matters will be violent usurpation; and if this is so, the mother church can't bestow a right that doesn't belong to it, or give away a power that it has unjustly grabbed. It may be that this abuse, through some common prejudice or other, has become so widespread and so deeply rooted in the minds of men that it wouldn't be feasible—or anyway wouldn't be advisable—to abolish it all at once, without wise preparation. But in that case, we should at least oppose it from afar, setting up a dam against its further expansion. When we can't eradicate an evil completely, we should at least cut off its roots.

That is where my reflections took me, and I ventured to submit my thoughts to the judgment of the public⁵ although I could not at that time state my reasons as fully as I have done in Section I above.

I have the good fortune to live in a state in which these ideas of mine are neither new nor particularly striking. The wise monarch by whom this state is ruled has from the beginning of his reign worked to put mankind in possession of its full rights in matters of faith. He is the first monarch in this century who has never lost sight of the whole scope of the wise maxim: 'Men were created for each other. Instruct your neighbour, or tolerate him!'⁶ He did indeed leave intact the privileges of the external religion that he found to be in place when he came to the throne; but this was

⁵ In the Preface to Manasseh Ben Israel's *The Deliverance of the Jews*.

⁶ These are the words of my friend the late Isaak Iselin, in one of his last papers in *Journal of Mankind*. . . . It is incomprehensible to me how I could have overlooked this truly wise man when mentioning the beneficent men who first tried to propagate the principles of unlimited tolerance in Germany. It was he who taught these principles to their fullest extent, earlier and more clearly than anyone else in our language. In order to do belated justice to a man who was so just to everyone in his lifetime, I quote with pleasure from his review in *Journal* for October 1782 of my Preface to Rabbi Manasseh's book, where this subject comes up: [footnote continues on the next page]

wise moderation on his part. It may still take centuries of cultivation and preparation before men get it: privileges on account of religion are unlawful and indeed useless, and it would be a real blessing if all civil discrimination on account of religion were totally abolished. Nevertheless, under the rule of this wise monarch the nation has become so used to tolerance and forbearance in matters of faith that coercion, excommunication and the right of expulsion are no longer things that the ordinary populace talk about.

But what must bring true joy to the heart of every honest man is how earnestly and zealously some worthy members of the local clergy try to spread these principles of reason—i.e. principles of the true fear of God— among the people. Some of them have boldly given full approval to my arguments against the universally worshipped idol Ecclesiastical Law, applauding their conclusions in public. What a splendid notion these men must have of their vocation if they show such readiness to disregard all secondary considerations! What a noble confidence they must have in the power of truth if they are willing to set it squarely on its own pedestal without any other prop! Even though otherwise we differ

greatly in our principles, I couldn't help expressing my wholehearted admiration and respect for them on account of these sublime convictions.

2. A reviewer who missed the point

Many other readers and reviewers behaved quite strangely in this matter. Rather than challenging my arguments they let them stand. No-one tried to show the slightest connection between doctrinal opinions and rights. No-one discovered any flaw in my argument that someone's assenting or not assenting to certain eternal truths gives him no right over things, no authority to dispose of goods and minds as he pleases. And yet the immediate conclusion of my argument startled them as though it were an unexpected apparition. What? So there's no ecclesiastical law at all? So there's no basis for anything that so many authors—perhaps including ourselves—have written, read, heard and argued regarding ecclesiastical law? – This, struck them as going too far; but there must be some hidden flaw in the argument if the result is not necessarily true.

The editor of *Journal of Mankind* [i.e. Iselin himself] agrees entirely also with what Mendelssohn says about the legislative rights of the authorities concerning the opinions held by the citizens, and about the agreements that individuals may enter into among themselves with regard to such opinions. And he [Iselin] adopted this way of thinking not only since Dohm and Lessing wrote, but professed it more than thirty years ago. He also acknowledged long ago that so-called 'religious tolerance' is not a favour but a duty on the part of the government. It couldn't have been stated more clearly than he did in his book *Dreams of a Friend of Mankind*: "If one or more religions are introduced into a state, a wise and just sovereign won't infringe on their rights to the advantage of his own. The sovereign owes protection and justice to every church or association that has divine worship for its aim. To deny this to them, even for the sake of favouring the best religion, would be contrary to the spirit of true piety."

'With respect to civil rights, the members of all religions are equal, with the sole exception of those whose opinions run counter to the principles of human and civil duties. Such a religion can't lay claim to any rights in the state. Those who have the misfortune to belong to it can expect tolerance only as long as they don't disturb the social order by unjust and harmful acts. If they perform such acts, they must be punished, *not for their opinions but for their deeds.*'

[The footnote continues with some clearing up of a misunderstanding (not a quarrel) that had occurred between Mendelssohn and Iselin, followed by some temperate and forgiving remarks on Iselin's tendency to anti-semitism.]

A reviewer in the *Göttingen News* quotes my assertion that no •right to persons and things is connected with •doctrinal opinions, and that all the contracts and agreements in the world can't make such a right possible; and to which he adds: 'All this is new and harsh. First principles are negated, and all dispute comes to an end.'

Indeed, it is a matter of refusing to recognise first principles. – But should that put an end to all dispute? Must principles never be called into question? If so, men of the Pythagorean school could argue forever about how their teacher happened to come by his golden hip, with no-one daring to ask: Did Pythagoras actually have a golden hip?

Every game has its laws, every contest its rules, according to which the umpire decides. If you want to win the prize you must submit to the principles. But anyone wanting to think about the theory of games is certainly free to examine the fundamentals. Similarly in a court of law. A criminal court judge who had to try a murderer induced him to confess his crime. But the scoundrel maintained that he knew no reason why it shouldn't be just as permissible to murder a man as to kill an animal, for his own advantage. To this fiend the judge could fairly have replied: 'You deny the basic principles, fellow! There's no more arguing with you. But you'll at least understand that *we* are permitted, for our own advantage, to rid the earth of such a monster.' But that's not the answer he should have got from the priest charged with preparing him for death. *He* was obliged to discuss the principles with him and to remove his doubts, if he seriously had any. It's the same in the fine arts and the sciences.

Each of them presupposes certain basic concepts, of which it gives no further account. Yet in the entire sum of human knowledge there's not a single point that is beyond question, not the least speck of anything that can't be investigated. If my doubt lies beyond the limits of *this* tribunal, I must be referred to another. Somewhere I must be heard and directed along the right path.

The case that the reviewer cites as an example against me completely misses the mark. He says:

'Let us apply them (the denied principles) to a particular case. The Jewish community in Berlin appoints a person who is to circumcise its male children according to the laws of its religion. This person's contract assigns him an agreed income, a particular rank in the community, etc. After a while he acquires doubts concerning the doctrine or law of circumcision; he refuses to fulfill the contract. Does he still retain the rights he acquired by contract? . . .

. . . . The case is admittedly possible, though I hope it will never occur.⁷ What is this example, aimed as it is directly at me, supposed to prove? Surely not that according to reason •rights over persons and goods are connected with—indeed, based on—•doctrinal opinions? Or that man-made laws and contracts can make such a right possible? [Mendelssohn presumably meant '. . . make such a connection possible'.] The reviewer says that those two points are his chief concern here, but neither of them is relevant to the case he invented: the circumciser would have the benefits of his income and rank not because he accepts the doctrinal opinion, but because

⁷ Among the Jews, no-one receives pay or a specific rank in the community in return for the office of circumcision. Rather, anyone who has the skill for it performs this meritorious act with pleasure. Indeed the father, who strictly speaking is obliged to perform the duty of circumcising his son, usually has to choose among several competitors who apply for it. The only reward the circumciser can expect for his work is being seated at the head of the table at the festive meal following the circumcision, and saying the blessing after the meal. – According to my seemingly 'new and harsh' theory, all religious offices ought to be filled in this way.

of the operation he performs in place of the fathers. If his conscience prevents him from continuing this work, he will of course have to give up the agreed-upon salary. But what does this have to do with granting a person privileges because he assents to this or that doctrine. . . .? – For a ·real· case that has some resemblance to this fictitious example you need something like this: the state hires and pays teachers to propagate certain doctrines in a specified way, and the teachers later find themselves conscience-bound to depart from the prescribed doctrines. I dealt at length with this case in Section I; it has so often has led to loud and heated disputes, and I wanted to discuss it in accordance with my principles. It seems to me not to fit your view of this matter ·any better than did your damp-squib circumcision example·. You may recall how I distinguished •actions that are demanded as actions from •actions that merely signify convictions. ·Of the following pair, (a) is clearly right, and (b) is not significantly different from it·:

(a) A creditor is paid what he is owed, by court order; the debtor can think what he likes about whether the order was fair.

(b) A foreskin is cut off; the circumciser can think and believe anything he likes about this practice.

But how can one bring this to bear on a teacher of religious truths, whose teachings can't do much good if his mind and heart don't agree with them, i.e. if they don't flow from inner conviction? – In the Section I discussion that I have mentioned I said •that I wouldn't venture to tell such a hard-pressed teacher how to behave as an honest man, or to reproach him if he acted otherwise, and •that in my opinion everything depends on the time, the circumstances, and the state in which he finds himself. In a case like this, who can judge how conscientious his neighbour is? Who can force him to use a criterion that he mightn't think appropriate for

such a critical decision?

However, this investigation doesn't lie squarely on my path, and has almost nothing to do with the two questions on which everything depends, and which I now repeat:

(i) Are there, according to the laws of reason, rights over persons and things that are connected with doctrinal opinions, and are acquired by giving assent to them?

(ii) Can contracts and agreements produce perfect rights and enforceable duties where there aren't already imperfect rights and duties independently of any contract?

If I'm to be found guilty of error, ·an affirmative answer to one of these propositions must be shown to follow from natural law. Finding my assertion 'new and harsh' is irrelevant if the assertion doesn't contradict the truth. I haven't yet found any author raising these questions and examining them in relation to ecclesiastical power and the right of excommunication. They all start from the point of view that there is a political right over holy matters; but everyone shapes it in his own way, and gives it sometimes an invisible person, sometimes this or that visible person. Even Hobbes, who in this matter ventured further than anyone else from the established concepts, couldn't completely disengage himself from this idea. He concedes such a right, and only searches for the person who can least harmfully be entrusted with it. All believe that the meteor is visible, and put their efforts only into trying by different systems to fix its altitude. It wouldn't be a shocking event if an unprejudiced person with much less ability were to look straight at the place in the sky where it was supposed to appear and convince himself of the truth: *no such meteor can be seen*.

3. Fidelity to the Mosaic religion

I come now to a far more important objection that has been raised against me, and that has chiefly caused me to write this work. Again without refuting my arguments, critics have brought against them the sacred authority of the Mosaic religion that I profess. What are the laws of Moses but a system of religious government, of the powers and rights of religion? An anonymous author in relation to this topic writes:

‘Reason may endorse the view •that all ecclesiastical law and the power of an ecclesiastical court by which opinions are enforced or constrained is absurd; •that it’s inconceivable that such a law should be well-founded; and •that human skill can’t create anything for which nature hasn’t produced the seed. But though everything you say on this subject may be reasonable [he is addressing me], it directly contradicts •the faith of your fathers, strictly understood, and •the principles of the ·Jewish· church, which aren’t taken from scholars’ commentaries but are explicitly laid down in the Books of Moses themselves. Common sense says that there can’t be worship without conviction, and that any act of worship resulting from coercion ceases to be worship. Obeying divine commands out of fear of punishment is slavery which. . . . can never be pleasing to God. Yet Moses does connect coercion and positive punishment with the nonobservance of duties related to the worship of God. His statutory ecclesiastical law decrees the punishment of stoning and death for the sabbath-breaker, the blasphemer of the divine name, and others who depart from his laws.’⁸

And in another place he says this:

‘The whole ecclesiastical system of Moses, along with its instruction in duties, was tied in with the strictest ecclesiastical laws. The arm of the church was provided with the sword of the *curse*. “Cursed be he”, it is written, “who does not obey all the words of this law” etc. And this curse was in the hands of the first ministers of the church. Ecclesiastical law armed with power has always been one of the chief cornerstones of the Jewish religion itself, and a primary article in the belief-system of your forefathers. So how can you, my dear Mendelssohn, remain an adherent of that faith while shaking the entire structure by removing its cornerstones, which is what you do when you contest the ecclesiastical law that has been given through Moses and purports to be founded on divine revelation?’

This objection cuts me to the heart. I have to admit even many of my coreligionists would regard that account of Judaism as correct, apart from some of the terminology. Now, if this were the truth and I were convinced of it, I would indeed shame-facedly retract my propositions and bring reason into captivity under the yoke of faith—but no! Why should I pretend? Authority can humble but it can’t instruct; it can suppress reason but it can’t put it in fetters. If it were true that the word of God so obviously contradicted my reason, the most I could do would be to *silence* my reason. But my unrefuted arguments would still reappear in the secret recesses of my heart and be transformed into disquieting doubts, and the doubts would resolve themselves into childlike prayers, into fervent pleas for illumination. I would cry out with the Psalmist:

⁸ *The Search for Light and Right in a Letter to Moses Mendelssohn*, Berlin, 1782.

Lord, send me Thy light, Thy truth,
that they may guide and bring me
unto Thy holy mountain, unto Thy dwelling place!

It is in any event harsh and offensive to credit me with having the odious intention of overthrowing the religion I profess and of renouncing it surreptitiously but not openly. That is what I am accused of by the anonymous *Searcher for Light and Right* and by Daniel Mörschel, the non-anonymous author of a postscript to the work of the 'Searcher'. This sort of coming-to-conclusions ought to be banished forever from interchanges between learned men. Not everyone who holds a certain opinion is prepared also to accept all its consequences, however strictly they follow from it; so a person's not accepting a consequence shouldn't be automatically taken as evidence that he doesn't sincerely accept the opinion. Such imputations of bad faith are malevolent, and lead only to bitterness and strife from which truth rarely gains anything.

4. Judaism and Christianity

[Regarding 'the wishes that Lavater addressed to you': Johann Lavater did a German translation of a book called *Evidence for Christianity*, in his Preface to which he challenged Mendelssohn to refute the book or, if he couldn't do that, to 'do what wisdom, the love of truth and honesty must bid him', meaning 'convert to Christianity'.]

Indeed, the Searcher goes so far as to address me thus:

'Might the remarkable step you have now taken actually be a step towards fulfilling the wishes that Lavater addressed to you? After that appeal, you have surely reflected further on the subject of Christianity and, with the impartiality of an incorruptible searcher after truth, weighed more exactly the value of the Christian

systems of religion that lie before your eyes in various forms and versions. Perhaps you have come nearer to the Christian faith, having •torn yourself from the slavery of your church's iron grip, and •started teaching the liberal system of a more rational worship of God, which constitutes the true character of the Christian religion, thanks to which we •have escaped coercion and burdensome ceremonies and •no longer link the true worship of God either to Samaria or Jerusalem, but •see the essence of religion, in the words of our teacher, wherever the true worshippers worship the Father in spirit and in truth [*John* 4:24].'

This suggestion is presented with a good deal of solemnity and pathos. But, my dear fellow, should I take this 'step' without first thinking about whether it really will extricate me from the confusion you think I am in? If it's true that the cornerstones of my house are dislodged and the structure threatens to collapse, would it be wise for me to remove my belongings from the ground floor to the top floor for safety? Am I more secure there? As you know, Christianity is built upon Judaism, and if that falls Christianity has to collapse with it in *one* heap of ruins. You say that my arguments undermine the foundation of Judaism, and you offer me the safety of your upper floor—mustn't I suppose that you're making fun of me? When there seems to be a contradiction between truth and truth, between Scripture and reason, surely a Christian who is in earnest about 'light and truth' won't challenge the Jew to a fight! Rather, he'll join him in an effort to discover the source of the trouble. For this is their common concern. Whatever else they have to settle between them can be postponed to a later time. Right now they must join forces to avert the danger, and either discover the logical mistake or show that what has frightened them is only a *seeming* contradiction.

I could in this way have avoided the trap without engaging in any further discussion with the Searcher. But what good would that do me? His associate, Mörschel, without knowing me personally, has seen all too deeply into my game! In my Preface to Manasseh Ben Israel's book, he reports, he has found signs leading him to believe that I am as far removed from the religion into which I was born as from the one that he received from his fathers. To back this up, after referring to a passage **(a)** where I mention—all in one line—pagans, Jews, Moslems, and adherents of natural religion, and ask for tolerance for all of them, and another. . . **(b)** where I speak of *eternal truths* that religion should teach, he quotes some of my actual words:

(c) Reason's house of worship needs no locked doors. It doesn't have to guard anything inside, or prevent anyone from entering. Anyone who wants to observe quietly or to participate is most welcome to the devout person in his hour of spiritual renewal.'

I gather that in Mörschel's opinion no adherent of revelation would **(a)** plead so openly for toleration of naturalists, or **(b)** speak so loudly of eternal truths that religion should teach, and that **(c)** a true Christian or Jew should hesitate to call his house of prayer 'reason's house of worship'. I have no idea what could have led him to these ideas; yet they •contain the whole basis for his conjecture •that I have drifted away from Judaism• and •induce him, as he says,

not to invite me •as Lavater did• to accept the religion he accepts or if I can't join it to refute it, but rather to beg me in the name of all who have the cause of truth at heart to express myself clearly and definitely on the topic that must always be the most important thing for man.

He assures me that he doesn't aim to convert me; nor does he want to arouse objections against the religion from which

he expects contentment in this life and unlimited happiness thereafter; but he would very much like—What do I know of what the dear man wouldn't like and nevertheless would like? For a start, then, to calm the kindhearted author of this letter:

I have never publicly contested the Christian religion, and I'll never engage in dispute with its true adherents. So that I won't be accused of hinting that

- I have in my hands triumphant weapons with which to combat Christianity, if I were so inclined; and that
- the Jews have secret information, hidden documents that put the facts in a different light from the one in which the Christians present them,

or other pretences of the sort that we have been considered to be capable of inventing or have actually been accused of—to remove any such suspicion once and for all I hereby testify before the eyes of the public •that I *at least have nothing new* to advance against the faith of the Christians; •that as far as I know we •Jews• don't know of any accounts of the historical facts (and can't present any documents) except the ones that everyone knows; •that I therefore have nothing to advance that hasn't already been stated and repeated countless times by Jews and naturalists and replied to by the Christians time and again.

It seems to me that in the course of so many centuries, and especially in our own bookish century, enough has been said and repeated on this topic. Since the parties have run out of new things to offer, it's time to close the file. If you have eyes, see. If you have reason, examine—and live by your conclusions. What's the use of champions standing by the roadside and offering battle to every passer-by? Too

much talk about something doesn't make it any clearer; rather, it makes the light of truth even fainter. Take any proposition you please and go on for long enough talking, writing or arguing about it—for or against—and you can be sure that it will continue to lose more and more of any convincingness that it had to start with. Too much detail obstructs the view of the whole. So Mörschel has nothing to fear. He certainly won't become, *through me*, the cause of objections against a religion from which so many of my fellow-men expect 'contentment in this life and unlimited happiness thereafter'.

5. Revealed religion

I must, however, also do justice to his searching eye. What he saw was partly right. This is true: *I recognize no eternal truths except those that can be not only grasped by human reason but also established and verified by human powers* [Mendelssohn's italics]. But when Mörschel supposes that I can't maintain this without departing from the religion of my fathers he's being led astray by a wrong idea of what Judaism is. I regard this ·thesis about eternal truths· as an essential point of the Jewish religion, conspicuously marking it off from Christianity. In short: I believe that Judaism knows of no 'revealed religion' in the Christian sense of the phrase. The Israelites have a divine *legislation*. What Moses revealed to them in a miraculous and supernatural manner were

- laws,
- commandments,
- ordinances,
- rules of life,
- instruction in God's will regarding how they should conduct themselves in order to attain temporal [see Glossary] and eternal happiness.

But they didn't receive any revelation of

- doctrinal opinions,
- saving truths, or
- universal propositions of reason.

The Eternal ·God· reveals these to us and to all other men, always through *nature* and *thing*, never through *word* and *script*.

I fear that this may be found astonishing, and again strike some readers as 'new and harsh'. Not much attention has been given, ever, to this difference: *supernatural legislation* has been seen as *supernatural revelation of religion*, and Judaism has been spoken of as though it were simply an earlier revelation of religious propositions and doctrines necessary for man's salvation. So I'll have to explain myself more fully; and to avoid misunderstandings I'll have to go back to some underlying concepts, so that you and I can start out from the same position and stay in step with one another.

Truths are called *eternal* if they are propositions that aren't subject to time and remain the same for ever. They are of two kinds:

- (i) **necessary** truths, which are in themselves unalterable; their permanence is based on their essence—they are true in this and no other way because this is the only way in which they are *conceivable*;
- (ii) **contingent** truths, whose permanence is based on their reality—they are universally true in this and no other way because they became real in this and no other way, this being *the best* of all the possibilities.

In other words, necessary as well as contingent truths flow from a common source, the wellspring of all truth: the former (i) from God's intellect, the latter (ii) from God's will. The propositions of necessary truths are true because God represents them to himself in this and no other way; the

contingent ones because God approved them and considered them to be in conformity with his wisdom in this and no other way. Examples of **(i)** are the propositions of pure mathematics and of the art of logic; examples of **(ii)** are the general propositions of physics and psychology, the laws of nature according to which this universe—bodies and spirits—is governed. The former are unchangeable even for the Omnipotent, because God himself can't make his infinite intellect changeable; but the latter are subject to God's will and are immutable only to the extent that it pleases his holy will to keep them so, i.e. to the extent that they fit in with his intentions. His omnipotence could introduce other laws in their place, and it can allow exceptions to occur whenever there's a need for them.

Besides these eternal truths, there are **(iii)** *temporal, historical* truths; things that occurred once and may never occur again; propositions that came true through a confluence of causes and effects at one point in time and space, and are therefore to be thought of as true only in respect to that point in time and space. All the truths of history—using 'history' in its broadest sense—are of this kind: events of remote ages that once happened and are reported to us, but which we can't ever observe for ourselves.

Just as these classes of propositions and truths differ by nature, so too they differ in respect of...how men convince themselves and others of them. **(i)** The necessary truths are founded upon **reason**, i.e. on an unchangeable coherence and essential connection of ideas, according to which they either presuppose or exclude one another. All mathematical and logical proofs are of this kind. They all show the possibility or impossibility of thinking certain ideas in association with certain others. If you want to instruct someone in them what you must do is not commend them to his belief but force them on his reason, so to speak. Don't

cite authorities and appeal to the credibility of men who have maintained them, but dissect the ideas into their essential elements and present them to your pupil one by one, until his internal sense perceives their joints and connections. The instructions we can give others regarding such truths is, in Socrates' apt phrase, merely a kind of midwifery. We can't put into their minds anything that isn't actually already there; but we can make it less of an effort to bring to light what was hidden, making perceptible and evident what was previously unperceived.

(ii) Contingent truths require not only reason but also **observation**. If we want to know what laws the Creator has prescribed for his creation, and what general rules govern the changes that occur in it, we must first

experience, observe, and test individual cases, thus making use of the evidence of our senses;

and then next

determine by means of reason what many particular cases have in common.

In this context we'll have to accept many things—on faith and authority—from others. We don't live long enough to experience everything ourselves, so we must often rely on credible fellow-men, assuming that the observations and experiments they say they have made were correct. But we trust them only when we know and are convinced that the subject-matter still exists, so that their experiments and observations could be repeated and tested by ourselves or by competent others. And if the thesis in question is important, having a considerable import for our happiness or that of others, we are far less willing to rely on even the most credible witnesses' reports of their observations and experiments. In such a case we seek an opportunity to repeat them ourselves, becoming convinced of them by their own showing...

Historical truths, however—passages that occur only once in the book of nature, so to speak—must

the rest of that clause: *durch sich selbst erläutert werden, oder bleiben unverstündlich;*

straightforwardly translated: be explained through themselves, or else remain unintelligible;

what Mendelssohn may mean: be understood purely in terms of what happened *then* and *there*; you won't be helped to grasp what happened by bringing in •events at other times and/or places or •general rules of nature;

that is, they can be sensorily perceived only by those who were present at the time and place of their occurrence in nature. Everyone else must accept them on authority and testimony. . . . The event itself and the direct observation of it. . . .no longer exist in nature. The senses can't convince them—i.e. those who weren't there at the time—of the truth. In historical matters, the authority and credibility of the narrator are the only evidence. Without testimony we can't be convinced of any historical truth. Without authority, the truth of history vanishes along with the event itself.

So whenever it fits with God's intentions that men be convinced of some particular truth, his wisdom grants them the most appropriate means of arriving at it. **(i)** If it's a necessary truth, God gives them the required degree of reason. **(ii)** If a law of nature is to be made known to them, he gives them the spirit of observation; and **(iii)** if a historical truth is to be preserved for posterity, God confirms its historical certainty and places the narrator's credibility beyond all doubt. [Strictly speaking, Mendelssohn writes of these things as being done (not by God but) by God's wisdom.] Only where historical truths are concerned, I should think, is it fitting for supreme wisdom •to instruct men in a human manner, i.e. through words and writing, and •to cause extraordinary

things and miracles to occur in nature where this is required to confirm authority and credibility. But eternal truths, when they are useful for men's salvation and happiness, are taught by God in a manner more appropriate to him; not through sounds or written characters that are understood by some individuals in some places, but through creation itself and its internal relations, which can be read and understood by all men. And he doesn't confirm them by miracles, which affect only historical belief; but he awakens the mind that he has created, and gives it an opportunity to •observe the relations of things, to •observe itself, and to •become convinced of the truths that it is destined to understand here below.

So I do not believe this:

P: The powers of human reason are insufficient to persuade men of the eternal truths that are indispensable to human happiness, so that God had to 'reveal' them in a supernatural manner.

Those who do believe this think they are magnifying God's goodness, but really they are doing less than justice to his goodness or his omnipotence: he is good enough to reveal to men the truths on which their happiness depends, but he isn't omnipotent; or else he isn't good enough to make them able to discover these truths themselves. Moreover, according to P, the need for a supernatural revelation spreads wider than revelation itself. If mankind must be corrupt and miserable without revelation, why has the far greater part of mankind lived from time immemorial without any *true revelation*? Why must the two Indies wait until it pleases the Europeans to send them a few comforters to bring them a message without which—according to P—they can't live either virtuously or happily? a message which in their circumstances and state of knowledge they can't rightly comprehend or properly use?

6. Mankind and progress

According to the concepts of true Judaism, all the earth's inhabitants are destined for happiness; and the means of attaining it are as widespread as mankind itself, as generously distributed as the means of dealing with hunger and other natural needs. **There** men are left to their own raw nature, which inwardly feels its powers and uses them, without being able to express itself in words and speech except very defectively, stammeringly so to speak. **Here** they are aided by science and art, shining brightly through words, images, and metaphors by which the perceptions of the inner sense are transformed into a clear knowledge of signs and established as such. [In those two sentences, 'here' and 'there' are reversed, to keep them in line with what comes later in the paragraph.] As often as it was useful, Providence caused wise men to arise in every nation on earth, and gave them the gift of looking with a clearer eye into themselves as well as all around them—to contemplate God's works and pass their knowledge on to others. But this isn't always necessary or useful. Very often, as the Psalmist says, *the babbling of children and infants will confound the enemy*. The man who lives simply hasn't yet cooked up the objections that give the sophist so much trouble. For him the word 'nature', the mere sound, hasn't yet become a being that seeks to supplant the Deity. He doesn't know much about the difference between direct and indirect causality; and he hears and sees instead the life-giving power of the Deity everywhere—in every sunrise, in every rain that falls, in every flower that blossoms and in every lamb that grazes in the meadow and rejoices in its own existence. There's something not quite right in this way of conceiving things; but still it leads directly to the recognition of an invisible, omnipotent being, whom we have to thank for all the good we enjoy. But as soon as an

Epicurus or a Lucretius, a Helvetius or a Hume criticises the inadequacy of this way of conceiving things and (blame this on human weakness!) strays too far in the other direction, playing a deceptive game with the word 'nature', Providence again raises up from out of the populace men who separate prejudice from truth, correct the exaggerations on both sides, and show that truth can endure even if prejudice is rejected. Basically, the material is always the same—**there** endowed with all the raw but vigorous juices that nature gives it, **here** with the refined good taste of art, easier to digest though only for the weak. On balance, men's doings and allowings, and the morality of their conduct, can perhaps expect just as good results from **that** crude way of conceiving things as from **these** refined and purified concepts. Many a people is destined by Providence to wander through this cycle of ideas—some to wander through it more than once—but the mass and weight of its morals may be over-all about the same during all these various epochs.

Speaking for myself, I can't conceive of the upbringing of the human race in the way that my friend the late G. E. Lessing imagined it under the influence of who-knows-what historian of mankind. It goes like this:

The collective entity of the human race is to be regarded as an individual person whom Providence sent to school here on earth, in order to raise it from childhood to manhood.

If this child/adult metaphor is to be used at all, then really the human race is in almost every century, child, adult, and greybeard at the same time though in different regions of the world. Here in the cradle, it sucks the breast or lives on cream and milk; there it stands in manly armor, eating beef; in another place it leans on a cane and reverts to being toothless. Progress is for the individual man whom Providence destines to spend part of his eternity here on

earth. Each person goes through life in his own way. One man's path takes him through flowery meadows, another's takes him across desolate plains, or over steep mountains with dangerous gorges. Yet they all progress in their journey towards the happiness for which each of them is destined. But I can't see that Providence intended to have mankind as a whole advance steadily here below and eventually perfect itself; at any rate that's not as well established or as necessary for the vindication of God's providence as is usually thought.

We repeatedly resist all theory and hypotheses, and want to speak of facts, to hear about nothing but facts; and yet we pay the least attention to facts precisely where they matter most! You want to guess what designs Providence has for mankind? Don't work up hypotheses; just look around you at what actually happens and (if you can survey history as a whole) at what always has been happening. This is *fact*, this must have been part of the design, this must have been decreed or at least allowed by Wisdom's plan. Providence never misses its goal: whatever actually happens must always have been part of its design. As regards the human race as a whole, what do we find if we actually *look*? Not a steady progress towards perfection! Rather, we see that the human race as a whole slightly oscillates—that it has never taken a few steps forward without soon afterwards sliding back, *faster*, to its previous position. Most nations of the earth spend many centuries at the same cultural level, in a twilight that seems much too dim for our pampered eyes. Now and then a dot blazes up in the midst of the great mass, becomes a glittering star, and follows an orbit—short in some cases, longer in others—that brings it back to its starting point, or not far from it. Individual man advances, but mankind continually fluctuates within fixed limits, while maintaining over-all about the same moral level in all periods—the same

amount of

- religion and irreligion,
- virtue and vice,
- happiness and misery;

if like is compared with like, the bottom line is the same. The amounts of these goods and evils are what is needed for the individual man to be educated here below, and to come as close as possible to the perfection for which he is destined.

7. More about revelation

I return to what I was saying late in subsection 5. Judaism boasts of no *exclusive* revelation of eternal truths that are indispensable to salvation—no 'revealed religion' in the usual sense of that phrase. Revealed *religion* is one thing, revealed *legislation* is another. The voice that let itself be heard on Sinai on that great day did not proclaim

'I am the Eternal, your God, the necessary, independent being, omnipotent and omniscient, that recompenses men in a future life according to their deeds.'

This is the universal religion of mankind, not Judaism; and the universal religion of mankind, without which men are neither virtuous nor capable of happiness, was not to be revealed there. Actually, it *couldn't* have been revealed there, for who would have been convinced of these eternal doctrines of salvation by the voice of thunder and the sound of trumpets? Surely not the unthinking animal-man who hadn't thought his way through to the existence of an invisible being that governs the visible. The miraculous voice wouldn't have given him any concepts, so it wouldn't have convinced •him—let alone •the sophist, whose ears are buzzing with so many doubts and ruminations that he can't hear the voice of common sense any more. *He* demands rational proofs, not miracles. And even if the teacher of religion raised from

the dust all the dead who ever trod the earth, in order to establish an eternal truth, the sceptic would say:

‘The teacher has awakened many dead, but I don’t know any more about eternal truth than I did before. I do know now that someone can do and say extraordinary things; but there may be several such beings, who aren’t ready to reveal themselves just yet. And all this ·raising-the-dead routine· is so far removed from the infinitely sublime idea of a *unique and eternal* Deity that rules the entire universe according to its unlimited will, and detects men’s most secret thoughts in order to reward their deeds according to their merits, either here or in the hereafter!

Anyone who didn’t already know this, anyone who wasn’t saturated with these truths that are so indispensable to human happiness, and ·therefore· wasn’t *prepared* to approach the holy mountain, might have been bowled over by the wonderful manifestations but he couldn’t have learned anything from them. – No! All this was presupposed; perhaps it was taught, explained, and placed beyond all doubt by human reasoning during the days of preparation. And now the divine voice proclaimed: ‘I am the Eternal, your God, who brought you out of the land of Mizraim, delivered you from slavery’ and so on. An historical truth, on which *this* people’s legislation was to be based, was to be revealed here, along with laws—commands and ordinances, not eternal religious truths. ‘I am the Eternal, your God, who made a covenant with your fathers, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and promised to make of their seed a nation of my own. The time has finally come for this promise to be kept. To this end I rescued you from Egyptian slavery with unheard-of miracles and signs. I am your Redeemer, your Sovereign and King; I also make a covenant with you, and give you laws by which you are to live and become a happy nation in the land that

I shall give you.’ This is all a set of historical truths which by their very nature •rest on historical evidence, •*must* be verified by authority and •*can* be confirmed by miracles.

According to Judaism, miracles and extraordinary signs are not evidence for or against *eternal* truths of reason. That’s why Scripture itself instructs us

- to refuse a hearing to any prophet who teaches or counsels things that are contrary to established truths, even if he supports his mission with miracles; and
- to condemn the performer of miracles to death if he tries to lead us astray into idolatry.

For miracles can only verify testimonies, support authorities, and confirm the credibility of witnesses and passers-on ·of tradition·. But no testimonies or authorities can upset any established truth of reason, or put a doubtful one out of reach of doubt and suspicion.

Although the right way to take this divine book that we have received through Moses is as a book of laws containing ordinances, rules of life and prescriptions. But it’s well known to include also a bottomless treasure of truths of reason and religious doctrines, which are so intimately connected with the laws that together they make up a single entity. All laws •refer to eternal truths of reason, or •are based on them, or •remind us of them and •arouse us to ponder them; so that our rabbis rightly say that *the laws and doctrines relate to one another as body relates to soul*. I’ll return to this later. . . . The experience of many centuries teaches that a large part of the human race has used this divine law-book as a source of insight from which to derive •new ideas and •standards by which to correct old ones. The more you search in it, the more amazed you’ll be by its depths of insight. Admittedly, at first glance the truth appears there in its simplest attire, with no attempt to look

important. Yet the closer you come to it, the more you look at it in a pure, innocent, loving and longing way, the more it will unfold before you its divine beauty, lightly veiled so as not to be profaned by vulgar and unholy eyes. But all these excellent propositions are merely •presented to our understanding, •submitted for us to think about, and *not* •forced on our belief. Among all the prescriptions and ordinances of the Mosaic law, not a single one tells us what to believe or not believe; they all tell us what to do or not do. Faith isn't commanded; the only commands it listens to are those that reach it by way of conviction. All the divine law's commandments are addressed to man's will, to his power to act. In fact, the word in the original language that is usually translated as 'belief' means in most cases *trust, confidence, firm reliance on pledge and promise.*

- 'Abraham trusted in the Eternal and it was accounted to him for piety' (*Genesis 15:6*);
- The Israelites saw and 'trusted in the Eternal and in his servant Moses' (*Exodus 14:31*).

Whenever the topic is the eternal truths of reason, the talk is not of 'believing' but of *understanding* and *knowing*:

- 'In order that you may know that the Eternal is the true God, and there is none beside Him'. . . (*Deuteronomy 4:39*).
- 'Therefore, know and take it to heart that the Lord alone is God, in heaven above and on the earth below, and there is none else' (again *Deuteronomy 4:39*).
- 'Hear, O Israel, the Eternal, our God, is a unique eternal being!' (*Deuteronomy 6:4*).

Nowhere does Scripture say: Believe, O Israel, and you will be blessed; do not doubt, O Israel, or this or that punishment will befall you.' Commandment and prohibition, reward and punishment are only for actions, acts of commission and omission that are subject to a man's will and are guided

by ideas of •good and •evil and therefore also by •hope and •fear. In contrast with that, belief and doubt, assent and opposition, are determined not by our faculty of desire, by our wishes and longings, or by fear and hope, but by our knowledge of truth and untruth.

So ancient Judaism has no symbolic books, no *articles of faith*. No-one has to swear to symbols or subscribe under oath to certain articles of faith. Indeed, we have no concept of so-called 'religious oaths', and the spirit of true Judaism makes us hold them to be invalid. Maimonides was the first to think of reducing the religion of his fathers to a set of principles. He explained that this was in order that religion—like all other sciences [see Glossary]—would have its basic concepts from which all the others would be derived. This thought that Maimonides merely *happened* to have gave rise to the *thirteen articles* of the Jewish catechism, to which we owe the morning hymn *Yigdal* and some good writings by Chisdai, Albo, and Abarbanell. These are the only results the 'articles' have had up to now. They haven't yet been forged into shackles of faith, thank God! •Chisdai disputes them and proposes changes; •Albo limits their number, wanting to recognize only *three* basic principles—ones that are pretty much like the ones that Herbert of Cherbury proposed for the catechism at a later date; and still others, especially •Lorja and his neo-Kabbalist disciples, aren't willing to recognize any fixed set of basic doctrines, and say: 'In our doctrine everything is basic.' This debate was conducted as all such controversies should be: with earnestness and zeal, but without animosity and bitterness. And although Maimonides's thirteen articles have been accepted by the greater part of the •Jewish• nation, I don't know of anyone's branding Albo as a heretic because he wanted to reduce their number and lead them back to far more universal propositions of reason. In this respect, we haven't yet forgotten the important dictum

of our sages: 'Although this one loosens and that one binds, both teach the words of the living God. . . .

. . . . All human knowledge can indeed be reduced to a few basic concepts, which are laid down as the foundation; and the fewer they are, the more stable the structure will be. But laws can't be abridged. In them everything is basic; so we can rightly say: 'To us all words of Scripture, all of God's commandments and prohibitions, are basic.' But if you want to obtain their quintessence, listen to how Hillel the Elder, that great teacher of the nation who lived before the destruction of the second Temple in 70 CE, handled this matter. A heathen said: 'Rabbi, teach me the entire law while I am standing on one foot!' He had previously approached Samai with the same unreasonable request, and had been dismissed contemptuously; but Hillel, renowned for his unshakable calm and gentleness, said: 'Son! *Love thy neighbour as thyself*. This is the text of the law; all the rest is commentary. Now go and study!'

8. Speaking versus writing

I have sketched the basic outlines of ancient, original Judaism, as I conceive it to be: doctrines and laws, beliefs and actions. The doctrines weren't tied to words or written characters that are the same for all men at all times, amid all the revolutions of language, *Sitten* [see Glossary], manners, and conditions; if they were, we would be presented with rigid forms into which we couldn't force our concepts without disfiguring them. The doctrines were entrusted to living, spiritual instruction that can keep in step with all changes of time and circumstances, and can be varied and shaped to fit a pupil's needs, ability, and power of comprehension. The demand for this one-on-one kind of instruction was found in the written book of the law and in the ceremonial acts

that the adherent of Judaism had to observe incessantly. From the beginning it was explicitly forbidden to write more about the law than God had revealed to the nation through Moses. 'What has been passed down orally', say the rabbis, 'you are not permitted to put in writing.' It was with great reluctance that the heads of the synagogue in later periods gave permission—which had become necessary—to write about the laws. They called this permission a 'destruction' of the law, and said with the Psalmist: 'There is a time when, for the sake of the Eternal, the law *must* be destroyed.' According to the original constitution, however, it was not supposed to be like that. The ceremonial law itself is a kind of living script, arousing the mind and heart, full of meaning, continuously inspiring thought, and providing the occasion and opportunity for oral instruction. What a student *did* and saw being *done* from morning till night pointed to religious doctrines and convictions and drove him to follow his teacher, to watch him, to observe all his actions, and to get from this all the instruction that his talents made him capable of and that his conduct made him worthy of. The spread of writings and books, which have now been infinitely multiplied through the invention of the printing press, has entirely transformed man. The great upheaval in the whole system of human knowledge and beliefs that it has produced does indeed have some effects that are good for the improvement of mankind, and we can't thank beneficent Providence enough for them. But it has been like every good that can come to man here below in also having many bad upshots—some because of misuse of the benefits of printing but also some because of the necessary condition of human nature. We teach and instruct one another only through writings; we learn to know nature and man only from writings. We work and relax, edify and amuse ourselves through scribbling. The preacher doesn't

talk to his congregation; he reads or recites to it something he has written. The teacher reads his written lectures from the podium. Everything is dead letter; the spirit of living conversation has vanished. We express our love and anger in letters, quarrel and become reconciled in letters; all our personal relations are by correspondence; and when we get together, we know of no other entertainment than playing or reading aloud.

This has brought it about that man has almost lost his value for his fellow-man. We don't try to meet with the wise man because we find his wisdom in ·his· writings. If we think he still hasn't published enough, all we do is encourage him to write. Grey-bearded age is no longer venerable because the smooth-chinned youth knows more from books than the old man knows from experience. Understands it or misunderstands it? It doesn't matter! It's enough that he knows it, has it on the tip of his tongue and can off-load it more boldly than can the honest old man who may have the ideas rather than the words at his command. We no longer understand how the prophet could have thought it such a shocking evil for *a youth to look down on an old man*, or how a certain Greek could prophesy the downfall of the state because a mischievous youngster had made fun of an old man in public. We don't need the man of experience; we need only his writings. In short, we are *literati*, men of letters. Our whole being depends on letters; and we can scarcely comprehend how a mortal man can, *bookless*, educate and perfect himself.

In ancient times things were different—perhaps not better, but different. . . . Man was more necessary to man; teaching was more closely connected with life, contemplation more intimately bound up with action. The beginner had to follow in the footsteps of the experienced man, the student in those of his teacher; he had to seek his company, to observe him,

to *sound him out* so to speak, if he wanted to satisfy his thirst for knowledge. To be clear about how this affected religion and morals, I must again permit myself a digression; my subject-matter borders on so many others that I can't always keep to the main road, avoiding detours. But I'll soon get back on track. [He will do so at the start of subsection 15 on page 50.]

9. Abstraction and signs

The cultural changes in written characters throughout the centuries seem to me to have played a very important part in the revolutions of human knowledge in general and in the versions of men's opinions and ideas about religious matters—perhaps not produce them unaided, but at least cooperated in a remarkable way with other contributing causes. When a man stops being satisfied with the first impressions of the external senses (and what *man* can remain content with them for long?), feeling the urge implanted in his soul to form concepts out of these external impressions, he becomes aware that he has to attach them to perceptible signs—not only so as •to communicate them to others but also so as •to hold fast to them himself and have them available for further consideration when needed. His first steps towards sifting out the general characteristics of things are ones that he *can* and indeed *must* take without help from signs. ·*Must?* Yes.: even now all *new* abstract concepts must still be formed without the help of signs, and are given names only later on. It's our power of attention that we must use to separate the common characteristic from the fabric into which it is interwoven and to make it prominent. We're helped in this from two sides: •the objective power of the impression this characteristic can make on us, and •the subjective interest we have in it. But the soul has to put in some effort thus to

make the common characteristic separate and conspicuous; and it doesn't take long for the light that our attentiveness has focused on this point of the object to disappear again, and then the object sinks back into the whole mass with which it is united, and is lost in the shadows. The soul won't get far if this effort has to be continued for some time and to be repeated often. It has begun to set things apart, but it can't ·yet· *think*. What should it be advised to do? – Wise Providence has placed within the soul's immediate reach a means that is always available, namely

linking the abstracted characteristic to a perceptible sign which, whenever it is seen or heard, recalls and illuminates this characteristic in its pure and unalloyed form. The 'link' is an association of ideas, and can be either natural or chosen.

It's well known that this is how human languages originated, with natural and arbitrary signs. Without these, man wouldn't be very different from the irrational animals, because without the aid of signs he can take barely one step away from the sensual [i.e. away from having a mental life that consists solely in sensory intakes].

Those first steps that must have been taken towards rational knowledge are still being taken today when the sciences are expanded and enriched by inventions; that's why the invention of a new scientific *term* is sometimes very important. The man who first invented the word 'nature' doesn't seem to have made much of a discovery; but his contemporaries were indebted to him for enabling them to •expose the stage 'magician' who showed them an apparition in the air, and •to tell him that his trick was nothing supernatural but 'an effect of nature'. Granted, they didn't yet have clear knowledge of the properties of refracted light rays and how they can be used to produce an image in the air, but they at least knew they could refer a particular phenomenon

back to a universal law of nature, and weren't compelled to attribute a special arbitrary cause to every trick. (·In saying 'they didn't yet have clear knowledge' etc. I wasn't condescending·. How far does our own knowledge of this subject extend today? Scarcely one step further, because we know very little about the nature of light itself and about its component parts.) This is also true of the more recent discovery that air has weight. Even though we can't explain weight itself, we can at least relate the observation that fluids will **rise** in airtight tubes to the universal law of gravity which at first glance is all about making them **sink**. We can't explain sinking, but we can understand how in this case it must also have caused a rising; and this is another step forward in knowledge. So we shouldn't rush to declare a scientific term an empty sound if it can't be derived from prior elementary concepts. If it denotes a universal property of things in its true extent, that's enough. The term *fuga vacui* [Latin, 'flight from a vacuum', more often expressed as 'abhorrence of a vacuum'] wouldn't have been objectionable if it hadn't gone beyond what is observed; cases were found where nature doesn't rush to fill a vacuum immediately; so the term had to be rejected, not as empty but as incorrect. – Thus, the terms 'cohesion of bodies' and 'general gravitation' are still of great importance in the sciences, although we still don't know how to derive them from prior fundamental concepts.

Before Haller discovered the law of irritability [i.e. of actively responding to physical stimuli], many an observer will have noticed the phenomenon itself in the organic nature of living creatures. But it vanished in an instant, and didn't stand out from the surrounding phenomena strongly enough to hold the observer's attention. Whenever he—i.e. the pre-Haller observer—noticed it again, he •saw it as an isolated natural event, and •couldn't be reminded of the multitude of cases in which he had noticed the same thing before. So it was

quickly lost again, like its predecessors, leaving no distinct memory in the soul. Haller alone succeeded in •lifting this phenomenon out of its context, •perceiving its universality and •giving it a verbal label; and now he has put our attention on the alert, and we know to relate individual instances of it to a universal law of nature.

Thus, labels for concepts are doubly necessary: **(i)** as vessels, so to speak, in which to preserve the concepts and keep them near at hand for our own use; and **(ii)** as enabling us to communicate our thoughts to others. When we want **(ii)** to communicate our thoughts to others, the concepts are already present in the soul, and we have only to produce the signs by which they are denoted and made perceptible to our fellow-men. But that's not what happens within ourselves. If at a later time I want to **(i)** reawaken an abstract concept in my soul, recalling to my mind by means of its label, the label must present itself of its own accord and not wait to be summoned by my will—because it already presupposes the idea that I want to recall. [The point Mendelssohn is making here is this: I can't command my mind to come up with the right label for (say) carbon, as an aid to thinking in general terms about carbon, because the command would have to be 'Produce the label for *carbon*', and if I can issue that command I am already thinking in general terms about carbon.] Visible signs are best for **(i)** because they are permanent, and don't have to be reproduced every time we use them. Sounds or audible signs are best for **(ii)**, •for obvious reasons of convenience.

10. The invention of alphabets

The first visible signs that men used to designate their abstract concepts were presumably the things themselves. Since everything in nature has some characteristic of its own that distinguishes it from everything else, the sense-

impression that this thing makes on us •will draw our attention chiefly to this distinctive feature, •will arouse the idea of it, and •can therefore serve very well to designate it. In this way the lion may have become a sign of courage, the dog a sign of faithfulness, the peacock a sign of proud beauty; and that's what was going on when the first physicians carried live snakes with them—as a sign that they knew how to make harmful things harmless.

In the course of time, it may have been found more convenient

to use images of the things (either three- or two-dimensional) rather than the things themselves;

then later

for the sake of brevity to make use of outlines;

and after that

to let a part of the outline stand for the whole;

and then finally

to compose out of heterogeneous parts a whole that •didn't look like anything in particular but •was *meaningful*.

This system of labelling is called *hieroglyphics*, and each meaningful unit in such a system is called a *hieroglyph*.

You can see that all this could have developed quite naturally; but the switch from hieroglyphics to our alphabetical writing seems to have required a leap, and the leap seems to have required more than ordinary human powers.

Some people think that our alphabetical writing consists merely of signs of sounds, and can be applied to things and concepts only *through* sounds, but there is no basis for that. For those of us who have a more lively conception of audible signs, the route from •written word to •thing runs through •speech; but there's no necessity about this. To a congenitally deaf person, written words immediately designate things; and if he ever became able to hear, written

signs would first bring to his mind the things immediately connected with them, and then through those things the corresponding sounds. What I see as the real difficulty in the move from hieroglyphics to alphabet was this: without preparation and without being pushed into it, they had to conceive a plan for using a •few elementary signs and their possible combinations to designate a •multitude of concepts—a multitude that couldn't be brought together by being surveyed or by falling into classes.

Here again the understanding had some guidance in the path it had to follow. After often transforming writing into speech and speech into writing, and thus comparing audible and visible signs, they must soon have noticed that the sounds recurring in the spoken language match the recurring parts in different hieroglyphs—in each case the recurrences involve different combinations, by means of which the words or hieroglyphs multiply their meanings. They must eventually have realized •that producible and perceptible sounds are nowhere near as numerous as the things denoted by them, and •that they could easily round up the entire range of all perceptible sounds and divide it into classes. And this initially incomplete division could be extended and steadily improved, eventually assigning to each class a corresponding hieroglyph. Even this •still-hieroglyphic written system• was one of the noblest discoveries of the human spirit. We can at least see from it how men may have been led *gradually*, with no flight of inventiveness, to think of the immeasurable as measurable—as though they were dividing the starry firmament into regions and thus assigning to every star its place, without knowing how many stars there are! It was easier with audible signs, I think,

to discover the traces one had to follow in order to perceive the 'regions' in which the immeasurable horde of human concepts were to be contained; and then it won't have been so difficult to re-apply the procedure to written characters, carving them up into classes. So I think that a people born deaf would have needed greater inventive powers to get from hieroglyphics to alphabetical writing; because with written characters it's harder to see that they have a graspable range and can be divided into classes.

I use the word 'classes' whenever I'm talking about the elements of audible languages; for even today, in our living, developed languages, writing is nowhere near as variegated as speech: a single written sign is read and pronounced differently in different combinations and positions. Yet it is evident that our frequent use of writing has levelled out the differences of tone and pitch in our spoken languages, and our obedience to the rules and requirements of written language has made our spoken language more elementary. (For this reason, nations that don't have writing have much more diversity in their spoken language, and many of the sounds in these languages are so indeterminate that we can't come close to matching them in writing.) In the beginning, therefore, they had to take things clumps, designating a multitude of similar sounds by a single written character. As time went on, however, finer distinctions were perceived, and more letters were invented to designate them. Our alphabet was borrowed from some kind of hieroglyphic writing; you can see this still, in most of the shapes and names of the letters of the Hebrew alphabet,⁹ which was, as history clearly shows, the source of all other known ways of writing. It was a Phoenician who taught the Greeks how to write.

⁹ [Mendelssohn has a footnote here in which 14 Hebrew letters appear, each paired with a general word: Aleph with *Rind* = 'ox', Bet with *Haus* = 'house', Gimel with *Kamel* = 'camel', and so on. It isn't practicable to present the Hebrew letters here. It is in any case extremely unclear what this footnote is supposed to show.]

11. Uses and misuses of language

All these different kinds of writing and designating must also have had different effects on the progress and improvement of concepts, opinions, and knowledge. On the one hand there were changes for the better: the observations, experiments, and reflections in astronomy, economics, and moral and religious matters were multiplied, propagated, facilitated, and preserved for posterity. These are the cells in which the bees collect their honey, saving it for their own enjoyment and that of others. – But it always happens in human affairs that what wisdom builds up *here* folly tries to tear down *there*, using the very same means and tools. What should have been an improvement of man's condition was turned into corruption and deterioration, this being done by **(i) misunderstanding** and by **(ii) misuse**. What had been simplicity and ignorance now became corruption and error. **(i) Misunderstanding**: the mob had little if any instruction in the notions that were to be associated with these perceptible signs. They saw the signs not as mere signs ·of things· but rather as the things themselves. Back when they were still using the things themselves or their images and outlines, instead of ·conventional· signs, this was an easy mistake to make. The things had a reality of their own, in addition to the meaning that was being given to them. A coin was, ·as well as being a signifier·, also a piece of merchandise with its own use and utility; so an ignorant person could easily misjudge and wrongly specify its value as a coin. Hieroglyphic script. . . didn't encourage this error as much as the outlines did, because each hieroglyph was composed of heterogeneous and mis-matched parts, misshapen and preposterous figures that had no existence of their own in nature and therefore, you'd think, couldn't be taken for anything but writing. [Mendelssohn wrote *nicht für*

Schrift genommen werden konnten—'couldn't be taken for writing'—but this must have been a slip.] But this enigmatic and strange character of the composition itself provided •superstition with material for all sorts of fictions and fables. **(ii) Misuse**: Hypocrisy and willful misuse busily provided •it with tales that it wasn't clever enough to invent. Anyone who had ever acquired importance and authority wanted. . . to preserve them. Anyone who had ever given a satisfying answer to a question never wanted to be remiss in his responses. There's no nonsense so absurd, no farce so farcical, that it won't be resorted to; no fable so foolish that a credulous person won't be urged to believe it; merely so as to be ready with a *Because. . . for every Why?* [That goes even better in German: with a *Darum* for every *Warum?*] The answer *I don't know* sticks in a man's throat once he has claimed to be very well informed (if not to know everything), especially when his rank, office, and dignity seem to demand that he should know. Many a man's heart must pound when he is at the point of either •losing importance and authority or •becoming a traitor to truth. And few have the intelligence to follow Socrates in saying at the outset 'I know nothing', even when they do know a little more than the next man; so as to make it less embarrassing and humiliating if later on 'I don't know' becomes necessary.

12. How idolatry began

We can see how this could have given rise to •the worship of animals and images, •the worship of idols and human beings, •fables and fairy tales. I don't present this as the only source of mythology, but I think it may have contributed greatly to the origin and propagation of all these inanities. Especially, it will help to explain something that Christoph Meiners says somewhere in his writings, namely that among the original nations—i.e. the ones that formed themselves

and don't owe their culture to any other nation—the worship of animals was more in vogue than the worship of men, and that inanimate objects were deified and worshipped more readily than human beings were. I'll assume that he is right about this, leaving the verification of it to the philosophic historians. What I'll try to do is to explain it!

If men want to use the things themselves or their images and outlines as signs of ideas, they can't find, as signs of moral qualities, anything more convenient and meaningful than *animals*. Why? For the same reason that my friend Lessing gave, in his treatise on fables, to explain why Aesop chose animals to be the actors in his fables. Every animal has its definite, distinctive character, and this can be seen in it at first glance, because its features as a whole largely point to this special mark of distinction. This animal is agile, that one sharp-sighted; this one is strong, that one is calm; this one is faithful and obedient to man, that one is treacherous or loves freedom, etc. . . . At first glance, man doesn't **tell** you anything, or rather he tells you everything. He isn't completely lacking in any of these qualities, and the degree to which he has each isn't immediately clear on his surface. So his distinctive character doesn't strike the eye; and for the designation of moral ideas and qualities he is the least suitable thing in nature!

Even today, the characters of the gods and heroes can't be better indicated in the plastic arts than through the animal or inanimate images associated with them. Even if a Minerva and a Juno already look different from one another, they are far better distinguished by the animal characteristics that are given to them. The poet, too, if he wants to speak of moral qualities in metaphors and allegories, usually brings in animals. Lion, tiger, eagle, ox, fox, dog, bear, worm, dove—they all **speak**, and the meaning leaps to the eye. So they tried to use such animal characteristics

as a way of referring to the attributes of the beings they thought most worthy of worship—referring to them and making them perceptible. They needed to relate the highly abstract concepts of those attributes to perceptible things with no ambiguity in them, and that must be what led them to choose images of animals or of composites made up of several animals. This was an innocent thing, a mere *writing* style; but we have seen how quickly it degenerated in the hands of man, becoming idolatry. So it was natural for all primitive idolatry to be more animal-worship than worship of man. Men flatly *couldn't* be used to designate divine attributes; their deification must have come from an entirely different source. What happened must have been something like this:

Heroes and conquerors—or sages, lawgivers, and prophets—arrived from some happier region of the world, one that had been educated earlier; they distinguished themselves so greatly through extraordinary talents, and showed themselves to be so exalted, that they were revered as messengers of the Deity or as the Deity itself.

It's easy to believe that this was more likely to happen in nations that owed their culture not to themselves but to others, for a prophet seldom acquires extraordinary authority in his own country—as they say. Meiners's remark [see the first paragraph of this subsection] would thus be a sort of confirmation of my hypothesis that idolatry first arose from the need for written characters.

13. How to think about a foreign religion

In judging the religious ideas of a nation that we don't know anything else about, we must take care not to see everything through our own *home-grown* eyes, so that we don't identify

as idolatry something that may really be merely *writing*. Imagine this course of events: [Background to this indented passage: A follower of Rousseau founded the ‘Temple of Providence’ which was to serve the cause of natural religion. That was in Dessau, where he also founded a school, the ‘Philanthropinum’.]

A Polynesian islander who knows nothing of the secret art of writing, and hasn’t been gradually introduced to our ideas, is suddenly removed from his part of the world to one of the most image-free temples of Europe; and to make the example more striking, let it be the Temple of Providence. He finds everything empty of images and ornaments; but there on the white wall he sees some black lines,¹⁰ which he at first thinks might have put there by chance. But no! All the members of the congregation look at these lines with reverence, fold their hands and direct their adoration to them. Our Polynesian is now suddenly whisked back to his home island, where he reports to his curious fellow-countrymen on the religious ideas of the Philanthropinum in Dessau.

Won’t they mock and pity the *dull* superstition of their fellow-men who have sunk so low as to offer divine worship to black lines on a white surface? – Our own travelers may often make similar mistakes when telling us about the religion of distant peoples. Before he can say with certainty whether •a nation’s images are still being used as script or rather have degenerated into idolatry, the traveller has to get intimate knowledge of •its thoughts and opinions. When the conquerors of Jerusalem plundered the Temple, they found the cherubim on the Ark of the Covenant, and took them to be idols of the Jews. They saw everything with the eyes of barbarians, and from their own point of view. Faced

with an **image of divine providence and prevailing grace** they interpreted it according to *their* customs and took it to be meant as an **image of the Deity**, or as the Deity itself; they were delighted with their discovery! In the same way, readers today laugh at the Indian philosophers who say that this universe is borne by elephants, place the elephants on a large turtle, which they maintain is upheld by an enormous bear, which in turn rests on an immense serpent. Perhaps the good people haven’t thought to ask what the immense serpent rests on! [Mendelssohn means that last sentence to express the condescending, slightly sneering attitude of people who hear about the pile-up of animals but don’t actually *know* what it was all about.]

Now read for yourselves in the *Shasta of the Gentoos* the passage describing a symbol of this kind which probably gave rise to this legend. I take it from the *Reports from Bengal and the Empire of Hindustan* by J. Z. Hollwell, who had been instructed in the holy books of the Gentoos and could see with the eyes of a native Brahmin. [The passage that Mendelssohn quotes is fairly long; it does include the pile-up of animals in a manner that seems different from—or at least more complex and deeply meaningful than—the story that westerners sneer at. Exactly how this legend *is* meant to work is extremely unclear, and we can spare ourselves the details.]

All this can be found depicted in images, and it’s easy to see how easily such symbols and hieroglyphics could lead outsiders into error.

We know that the history of mankind went through a period, many centuries long, when real idolatry became the dominant religion nearly everywhere. The images lost their value as signs. The spirit of truth that was to have been preserved in them evaporated, leaving an empty vessel that

¹⁰ The words: ‘God, all-wise, all-powerful, all-good, rewards the good.’

was transformed into a pernicious poison. The concepts of deity that still survived in the folk religions were so distorted by superstition, so corrupted by hypocrisy and priest-craft, that there was reason to suspect that atheism might be less harmful to human happiness—that *godlessness* might be *less ungodly* (so to speak) than such a religion. Men, animals, plants, the nastiest and most contemptible things in nature were worshipped and revered as deities, or rather *feared* as deities. For the recognised folk religions of those times had no idea of the Deity except that of a dreadful being, more powerful than us earth-dwellers, easily provoked to anger and hard to make peace with. To the shame of the human intellect and heart, superstition knew how to combine the most incompatible ideas, permitting •human sacrifice and •animal worship to exist side by side. In the most magnificent temples, constructed and decorated according to all the rules of art, if you •looked. . . .for the deity worshipped there you would find on the altar a hideous long-tailed monkey; and youths and maidens in their prime were slaughtered for this monster. That's how far down human nature had been dragged by idolatry! *Men were slaughtered*—I'm adopting the prophet Hosea's emphatic antithesis—*Men were slaughtered as sacrifices to the cattle that were worshipped*.

14. The failed Pythagorean attempt

Philosophers sometimes dared •to oppose the universal depravity and—openly or by secret devices—•to purify and enlighten concepts. They aimed to restore to the images their old meaning, or to give them a new one, thereby putting the soul back into a dead body, as it were. But in vain! The philosophers' rational explanations had no influence on the folk religion. The uneducated man seems to be eager to get explanations, but when they are given to him in their

true simplicity he isn't satisfied. When he understands an explanation, he soon comes to regard it as boring and contemptible, and he continues the hunt for new, mysterious, inexplicable things that he takes to heart with enormous pleasure. . . . So public instruction didn't get a hearing from the populace: it met with obstinate resistance by the forces of superstition and hypocrisy, and received its usual wages—•contempt or •hatred and persecution. Some of the secret devices and procedures by which the rights of truth were to have been upheld also went down the road of corruption, and became nurseries for every superstition, every vice, and every abomination. – A certain school of philosophers [the Pythagoreans] had the bold idea of distancing men's abstract concepts from everything pictorial or image-like, attaching them instead to written signs that couldn't be taken for something else—namely, to numerals. Because numerals in themselves don't represent anything, and aren't naturally related to any sense impressions, you'd think they couldn't be misinterpreted •in the way the animal images had been•; they would have to be •taken to be arbitrary *written signs* of concepts or else •dismissed as unintelligible. Here, you would think, not even the rawest intellect could confuse signs with things, and this subtle device would prevent every abuse. To anyone who doesn't understand numerals, they are empty shapes; people who aren't enlightened by them at least won't be led astray. [In this paragraph, 'numeral' translates *Zahl*, whose dominant meaning is 'number'. But it's clear that Mendelssohn's topic is a certain kind of meaningful *sign*, i.e. numerals, not numbers. In the next paragraph, the first *Zahl* is 'numeral', but the second has to be translated as 'numbers' because the central Pythagorean doctrine was about numbers, not numerals. Mendelssohn wasn't the first or the last to tend to smudge that distinction.]

That may be how the great founder of this school, •Pythagoras•, saw the matter. But even in this school it didn't

take long for folly to start up in the usual way. Dissatisfied with what was so intelligible, so graspable, they looked for •a secret power in the numerals themselves, for •an inexplicable reality in the signs, depriving them of their value as signs. They believed, or at least made others believe, that all the mysteries of nature and of the Deity were concealed in these numbers; they were credited with miraculous power, and to be the means to satisfying not only

- men’s curiosity and eagerness for knowledge, but also
- their vanity,
- their striving for high and unattainable things,
- their meddlesome curiosity,
- their greed,
- their meanness, and
- their madness.

In short, a word, folly had yet again •frustrated wisdom’s plans and •again annihilated—or even perverted for its own use—what wisdom had provided for a better purpose.

15. The purpose of Jewish ceremonial law

And now—picking up the thread dropped at the end of subsection 8 on page 42—I am in a better position to explain my surmise about what the ceremonial law in Judaism was *for*. – Our nation’s founding fathers—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—remained faithful to the Eternal, and tried bring it about that their families and descendants would have pure religious concepts, free from all idolatry. And then their descendants were chosen by Providence to be a *priestly* nation, i.e. a nation that would continually call attention to sound and unadulterated ideas of God and his attributes, doing this through its internal arrangements and its constitution, and through its laws, actions, ups and downs, and changes. It was incessantly to teach, proclaim, and try to preserve these

ideas among the nations, doing this by means of its mere existence, as it were. They lived under extreme pressure among barbarians and idolaters; and •misery had made them nearly as insensitive to the truth as •arrogance had made their oppressors. God liberated them from this state of slavery by extraordinary miracles; he became the Redeemer, Leader, King, Lawgiver, and Judge of this nation that he had fashioned, and he designed its entire constitution so as to fit in with the wise purposes of his providence. Weak and shortsighted is the eye of man! Who can say: ‘I have entered God’s sanctuary, seen the whole of his plan, and can determine the measure, goal, and limits of his purposes’? But it’s all right for the modest searcher to form conjectures and draw conclusions from them, so long as he always remembers that surmising is all that he *can* do.

We have seen how hard it is to preserve the abstract ideas of religion among men by means of permanent signs. Images and hieroglyphics lead to superstition and idolatry, and our alphabetical script makes man too speculative—or, more exactly, it makes it too easy and tempting for people to come up with glib theories. It displays the symbolic knowledge of things and their relations too openly and superficially; it spares us the effort of probing and searching, and puts doctrine out of touch with life. It was to remedy these defects that the lawgiver of this nation gave the *ceremonial law*. Religious and moral teachings were to be connected with men’s everyday doings and not-doings. The law didn’t require them to engage in reflection; it prescribed only behaviour, only doings and not-doings. The great maxim of this constitution seems to have been: *Men must be **impelled** to perform actions and only **induced** to engage in reflection.* Therefore, each of these prescribed actions, each practice, each ceremony had its meaning, its genuine significance, which •was precisely fitted to the theoretical knowledge of

religion and the teachings of morality, and •would lead a man in search of truth to reflect on these sacred matters or to seek instruction from wise men. The truths useful for the happiness of the nation and of each of its members were to be utterly removed from all imagery—because this was the governing purpose and basic law of the constitution. The truths in question were to be connected with actions and practices, which were to play the part of signs of them (without signs they can't be preserved). Men's actions are transitory; there's nothing lasting about them; and that protects them from leading to idolatry through abuse or misunderstanding, in the way that ·durable· hieroglyphic script did. And men's actions also have an advantage over alphabetical signs, namely that they don't isolate man, don't turn him into a solitary creature brooding over writings and books. Instead, they drive him to social exchanges, to imitation, and to living instructions given by voice. That's why there were only a few written laws, and even these couldn't be entirely understood without oral instruction and tradition; and it was forbidden to go on writing about them. But the •unwritten laws—the oral tradition, the living instruction from man to man, from mouth to heart—were to explain, enlarge, limit, and define more precisely things that had wisely been left undetermined in the written law. In everything a youth saw being done in all public as well as private dealings, on all gates and doorposts, in whatever he turned his eyes or ears to, he was prompted to •inquire and reflect, to •follow in the footsteps of an older and wiser man, observing his minutest actions and doings with childlike attentiveness and imitating them with childlike docility, to •inquire into the spirit and purpose of those doings, and to •seek such instruction as his master thought he was able and willing to receive. Thus an intimate connection was established between

- teaching and life,
- wisdom and activity,
- theorising and sociability.

Well, anyway, it was the initial plan and purpose of the lawgiver that such connections were to exist. But the ways of God are inscrutable! With this system—as with animal images, hieroglyphics and so on—after a short period things started down the road of corruption. It was not long before this brilliant circle had been completed, and matters again returned to a point not far from the low level from which they had emerged as, alas! has been evident for many centuries. [The “brilliant circle” is the period of ·Jewish· statehood' (A. Altmann, in the Brandeis U.P. edition of this work, p. 227).]

In the first days after the miraculous law-giving, the nation relapsed—*already!*—into the sinful folly of the Egyptians, and clamoured for *an animal-image*. By their own account they didn't want to worship it as a deity. If they *had* wanted that, ·Aaron· the high priest and brother of ·Moses· the law-giver would have forbidden it, even at the risk of his own life. – All they were asking for was a god-like being who would lead them, taking the place of Moses whom they believed to have deserted his post. Aaron couldn't go on resisting the people's pressure; he moulded them a calf, and he cried out *Tomorrow we'll have a feast in honour of the Eternal!*, wanting to hold them to their resolution to offer divine worship not to that image but to the Eternal alone. But on the feast-day, the dancing and banqueting rabble uttered quite different words: *These are your gods, Israel, who have brought you out of Egypt!* With that, the fundamental law was transgressed, the bond of the nation was dissolved. When an excited mob has become chaotic, it's not likely that they can be brought around by *reasonable* reproaches; and we know what hard measures the divine law-giver had to adopt to restore the rebellious rabble to

obedience. [He ordered Moses to •sort out the people who had not rebelled (they turned out to be 'the sons of Levi'), and to •order them to put all the others to the sword; three thousand men were killed (*Exodus* 32:27–8).] Still, we should notice and admire the way God's Providence knew how to take this wretched event and turn it to entirely worthy purposes.

16. God's power, God's love

I have mentioned that paganism had a more tolerable conception of God's •power than of his •goodness. The common man regards goodness and proneness to reconciliation as weakness. He envies everyone the least pre-eminence in power, wealth, beauty, honour, etc., but not pre-eminence in goodness. And how *could* he envy goodness, given that it is mostly up to him whether he has the degree of gentleness that would make him good? [Mendelssohn writes '...den er beneidenswert findet' = '... that he finds enviable'—obviously a slip.] If we're to grasp that hatred and vengefulness, envy and cruelty are basically nothing but *weakness*, miserable effects of fear, we have to *think*. Fear, combined with superiority that •is produced by circumstances and •can't be relied on, is the mother of all these barbaric frames of mind. Fear alone makes us cruel and implacable. Someone who is conscious of his superiority and sure of retaining it finds much greater happiness in indulgence and pardon.

When you have seen this, you can't any longer hesitate to •regard love as being at least as sublime a pre-eminence as power, to •credit the supreme being with being not only all-powerful but also all-good, and to •recognize the God of might also as the God of love. But what a distance there was between •paganism and this refinement! In all •its theology, in all the poems and other testimonies of earlier

times, you won't find any trace of •its having credited any of its deities with having love and mercy towards the children of man. Writing about 'Athens', the wisest of the Greek states, Christoph Meiners says:

'Both the people and most of their bravest generals and wisest statesmen surely regarded the gods they worshipped as being more powerful than men, but also as sharing in men's needs, passions, weaknesses, and even vices. – To the Athenians and the other Greeks, all gods appeared to be so malicious that any extraordinary or long-lasting good fortune would attract the anger and disfavour of the gods and would be upset by their devices. And they considered these gods to be so touchy that they saw all misfortunes as divine punishments—not for a general depravity of morals, or for individual great crimes, but because of trivial (and usually unintentional) failures in the performance of certain rites and ceremonies.'¹¹

Homer himself, that gentle and loving soul, didn't have the glowing thought that the gods forgive out of love, and that without benevolence they wouldn't be happy in their heavenly home.

And now we can see how wisely the law-giver of the Israelites made use of their terrible offence against 'God's' majesty in order to teach •the human race this important doctrine, opening up to •it a source of consolation from which our souls draw refreshment still today. – What sublime and terrifying preparation! The revolt had been subdued, the sinners had been made to recognize their punishable offence, the nation was in dismay, and God's messenger, Moses himself, had almost lost heart: 'O Lord, as long as your displeasure is not allayed, don't let us leave this place.

¹¹ *History of the Sciences in Greece and Rome*, vol. 2.

For how will it be known that I and your nation have found favour in your eyes? Isn't it when you go with us? Only then shall we, I and your nation, be distinguished from all others on the face of the earth.'

God: I shall comply with your request, because you have found grace in my eyes and I have singled you out by name as the one favoured by me.

Moses: Encouraged by these comforting words, I dare to make a still bolder request! O Lord, let me behold your glory!

God: I shall let all my goodness pass before you, and. . . shall let you know in what way I am gracious to those to whom I am gracious, and merciful to those to whom I am merciful. – You will see this appearance of me from behind; for my face can't be seen.¹²

With that, the appearance of God passed before Moses, and a voice was heard: *The Lord is, was and will be*

- the eternal being, all-powerful, all-merciful and all-gracious;*
- long-suffering, kind and true; he will*
- preserve his lovingkindness down to the thousandth generation; he*
- forgives transgression, sin and rebellion, yet*
- allows nothing to go unpunished.'*

What man's feelings are so hardened that he can read this with dry eyes? – Whose heart is so inhuman that after reading this he can still hate his brother and remain unreconciled with him?

¹² What a great thought! You want to see all my glory; I will let my goodness pass before you. – *You will see it from behind. From the front it is not visible to mortal eyes.*

17. God's punishments

[Biblical passages in this section and the next follow Mendelssohn's German with some influence from the latest English translation of *Tanakh*, the Hebrew Bible.]

It's true that the Eternal says he will allow *nothing to go unpunished*, and these words have famously given rise to all sorts of misunderstandings and misinterpretations. But when they are understood so that they don't completely cancel what was said before, they lead directly to the great thought that our rabbis discovered in them, namely: *the fact that for man nothing is allowed to go entirely unpunished is a quality of divine love.*

A venerable friend with whom I once had a conversation on religious matters asked me whether I wouldn't wish to be assured by a direct revelation that I would not be miserable in the future. We both agreed that I didn't have to fear eternal punishment in hell, for God can't let any of his creatures suffer unceasing misery. And no creature can act in such a way as to *deserve* the punishment of being eternally miserable. As for the hypothesis that

the punishment for sin must be proportionate to the offended majesty of God, and must therefore be infinite,

my friend had given this up long ago, as many great men of his church had likewise done—and we had no more dispute about that. The semi-legitimate concept of *duties to God* has given rise to the equally wobbly concept of *offence against God's majesty*; and the latter, understood in a literal way, has led to the inadmissible idea of the eternalness of punishment in hell—an idea the misuse of which has made about as many men •actually miserable in this life as it •theoretically

makes unhappy in the next! My philosophical friend agreed with me that God created man for man's happiness, and that he gave him laws for man's happiness. If the slightest breach of these laws is to be punished in proportion to the lawgiver's majesty and is therefore to result in eternal misery, God has given these laws to man for his perdition. Without these laws of such an infinitely exalted being, man wouldn't have to become eternally miserable. Oh, if men could be less miserable without divine laws, who doubts that God would have spared them the fire of his laws, since it must consume them so irretrievably? – This being stipulated, my friend's question became more precise:

'Don't you wish to be assured by a revelation that in the future life you will be exempt even from finite misery?'

I answered:

'No. This misery must be a well-deserved punishment, and in God's paternal household I will gladly undergo the punishment I deserve.'

'But what if the All-merciful was willing to remit man's well-deserved punishment?'

He will certainly do so as soon as punishment is no longer needed for the improvement of man. I don't need any direct revelation to be convinced of this. When I break God's laws, the moral evil ·of that· makes me unhappy; and God's justice, i.e. his *all-wise love*, seeks to guide me to moral improvement through my physical misery. As soon as this physical misery, the punishment for sin, is no longer needed for getting my mind into order, my Father will remit the punishment—with no help from revelation. I'm as sure of this as I am that I exist. – And if this punishment still contributes to my moral improvement, I don't want to be exempt from it in any way. In the kingdom of this paternal ruler, the transgressor receives only the punishment he would *want* to suffer if he

saw its workings and consequences in their true light.

'But', replied my friend, 'can't God think it right to let a man suffer as an example to others? And isn't it desirable to be spared this exemplary punishment?'

'No', I answered. 'In God's state no individual suffers merely for the benefit of others.' If it were to happen, this sacrifice for the benefit of others must confer a higher moral worth on the sufferer himself: having promoted so much good by his suffering must be an important contributor to the growth of his own inner perfection. And if that's how things stand, I can't *fear* such a state of affairs, and I can't *wish* for it to be revealed to me that I'll never be placed in this situation of magnanimous benevolence that brings happiness to my fellow-creatures and myself. What I have to fear is ·not punishment for my sins but· sin itself. If I do commit a sin, God's punishment is a benefit to me, an effect of his infinite fatherly compassion. As soon as it ceases to be a benefit to me—I'm sure of this—it will stop. Can I want my Father to withdraw his chastising hand from me before it has done what it was meant to do? If I ask God to let a transgression of mine go entirely unpunished, do I really know what I am requesting? Oh, surely it's another quality of God's infinite love that he allows no transgression of man to go entirely unpunished! – Surely

All-power is God's alone;
and love also is yours, O Lord!
when you treat everyone according to his deeds.
(*Psalm* 62: 12–13)

It was on this important occasion that the doctrine of God's mercy was first made known to the nation through Moses. The Psalmist says this explicitly in another place where he quotes from the writings of Moses the words that are my present topic:

He showed His ways to Moses,
 His deeds to the Israelites;
 The Lord is compassionate and gracious
 Patient and of great goodness.
 He will not contend for ever,
 or nurse his anger for all time.
 He does not treat us according to our sins,
 or punish us according to our iniquities.
 As the heavens are high above the earth,
 so does his love reign over those who revere him.
 As far as morning is from evening,
 so far does he remove our sins from us.
 As fathers have compassion on their children,
 so does the Lord have compassion on those who
 revere Him.
 For he knows how we are formed;
 he does not forget that we are dust. . . .etc.
 (Psalm 103)

This entire psalm is enormously important. Readers who care would do well to read it all, carefully, and compare it with what I have been saying. . . .

18. A summary account of early Judaism

[In this subsection, all the occurrences of italics are Mendelssohn's.]
 Now I can summarize my conceptions of the Judaism of the early days, and bring them into a single focus. Judaism consisted, or was intended by its founder to consist, of three elements.

(1) Religious doctrines and propositions, i.e. *eternal truths* about God and his government and providence, without which man can't be enlightened and happy. These aren't forced on the nation's faith under a threat of eternal or temporal punishments; rather, they were recommended for

rational consideration in the manner appropriate to eternal truths. They couldn't have been given by direct revelation in **words** and **scripts**, because those are intelligible only *here* and *now* and so are useless as vehicles for eternal truths. The Supreme Being has revealed these truths to all rational creatures through **things** and **concepts** and inscribed them in the soul with a **script** that is legible and comprehensible always and everywhere. For this reason our much-quoted poet sings:

The heavens declare the glory of God,
 and the sky proclaims his handiwork;
 one day gives this doctrine to the next,
 and night gives instruction to night.
 No teaching, no words,
 whose voices are not heard.
 Their shout resounds over all the earth,
 their message goes out to the ends of the world,
 to the place where he has set a tent for the sun
 (Psalm 19)

Their effect is as universal as the beneficent influence of the sun, which, as it hurries through its orbit, sheds light and warmth over the whole globe. . . .

(2) Historical truths, i.e. records of the happenings of former ages, especially in the lives of the nation's forefathers:

- their coming to know the true God,
- their conduct in relation to God,
- their transgressions and the fatherly punishment they received for them,
- the covenant that God concluded with them, and
- the promise that he so often repeated to them to make a nation consecrated to him out of their descendants.

These historical records contained the basis for the nation's holding together as a single nation; and it's in their very

nature as historical truths that they can't be accepted in any way except *on faith*. They get from authority all the evidentness that they need; ·but· they were also confirmed to the nation by miracles, and supported by an authority that was sufficient to place the *faith* beyond all doubt.

(3) Laws, precepts, commandments and rules of life, that were to be special to this nation, whose observance of them would bring happiness to the nation and also personally to each of its members. The lawgiver was God—
not •God as creator and preserver of the universe, but
•God as their ancestors' protector and sworn friend,
as liberator, founder and leader, as king and head of
this people

—and he gave •his laws the most solemn sanction, publicly and in a wholly new and miraculous manner, through which
•they were imposed on the nation and all their descendants as an unalterable duty and obligation.

These laws were *revealed*, i.e. made known by God through *words* and *script*. Yet only the most essential of them were entrusted to written words; and even these written laws are mostly incomprehensible (or at any rate they would inevitably become so in the course of time) if there weren't also unwritten devices—viva voce instructions—to explain and delimit them and make them more precise. That is because no words or written signs preserve their meaning unchanged throughout a generation.

The written as well as the unwritten laws, as *prescriptions for action* and rules of life, have the ultimate aim of producing public and private happiness. But they are also, in large part, to be regarded as a kind of writing style, and they have significance and meaning as ceremonial laws. They guide the inquiring intelligence to divine truths, partly to eternal truths and partly to historical ones on which the religion of *this* people was based. The ceremonial law was the bond that was to

connect action with contemplation, life with doctrine. It was to create personal converse and social contact between pupil and teacher, inquirer and instructor, and to stimulate and encourage competitiveness the following of good examples. It actually did this in the early period before the constitution degenerated and human folly again interfered to change, through misunderstanding and misdirection, the good into evil and the useful into the harmful. [The phrase 'between pupil and teacher' involves reading Mendelssohn's *Schule* = 'school' as a slip for *Schüler* = 'pupil'.]

In this original constitution, state and religion weren't conjoined—they were *one*. They weren't connected, but identical. Man's relation to society and his relation to God coincided and could never come into conflict. God, the creator and preserver of the world, was *also* the king and administrator of this nation; and his *oneness* is such that there isn't the slightest division or *manyness* in either the political or the metaphysical sense. And this administrator doesn't have needs. Everything he demands from the nation serves its own welfare and advances the happiness of that state; just as the state couldn't demand anything that •was opposed to its duties towards God—indeed, that •wasn't commanded by God, the lawgiver and supreme magistrate of the nation. In this nation, therefore, civil matters acquired a sacred and religious aspect, and every service to the state was also a true service to God. The community was a community of God, its affairs were God's, state taxes were an offering to God, and everything down to the smallest bit of crowd-control was *service to God*. The Levites, who lived off the public revenue, received their livelihood from God. They were to have no property in the land, for *God is their property*. Anyone who has to live somewhere else must serve *foreign gods*. This last statement occurs several times in Scripture, but can't be taken literally; basically it means only that

the expatriate is subject to alien political laws which, unlike those of his own country, are not also a part of the service to God.

The same can be said of crimes. Every sacrilege against the authority of God, as the lawgiver of the nation, was high treason and therefore a state crime. Whoever blasphemed against God was insulting the monarch; whoever desecrated the Sabbath was setting himself against a fundamental law of civil society, for the establishment of this day was the basis for an essential part of the constitution. *Let the Sabbath be an eternal covenant between myself and the children of Israel* [see Glossary], said the Lord, *a perpetual sign that in six days the eternal...etc'*. Under this constitution these crimes could be—indeed *had to be*—punished by the state: not as wrong opinion, not as *unbelief*, but as *misdeeds*, outrageous crimes against the state, aimed at abolishing or weakening the lawgiver's authority and thereby undermining the state itself. And yet how leniently even these high crimes were punished! With what overflowing indulgence for human weakness! According to an unwritten law, corporal and capital punishment could not be inflicted *unless two credible witnesses testified that the criminal had been warned with the citation of the law and the threat of the prescribed punishment*; indeed, for corporal or capital punishment the criminal had to have *explicitly acknowledged the punishment, accepted it and committed the crime immediately afterwards in the presence of those same witnesses*. How rare must executions have been under such stipulations, and how many an opportunity must the judges have had of avoiding the sad necessity of pronouncing a sentence of death over their fellow-creature and fellow-image of God! *An executed man is, according to Scripture, a reproach to God* [apparently referring to *Deuteronomy 21:23*]. How the judges must have hesitated, investigated, and thought of excuses before

they signed a death-sentence! Indeed, as the rabbis say, any court that is concerned for its good name must see to it that in a period of *seventy* years not more than *one* person is sentenced to death.

According to some people *ecclesiastical law* and *ecclesiastical power* are authorized, and temporal punishments are to be inflicted for unbelief or wrong belief. What I have said up to here shows how little they must know of the Mosaic law and the constitution of Judaism to believe this! The *Searcher for Light and Right* as well as Daniel Mörschel [see above pages 31–32] are therefore far removed from the truth when they believe I have abolished Judaism by my rational arguments against ecclesiastical law and ecclesiastical power. Truth can't be in conflict with truth. What divine law commands can't be abolished by reason, which is equally divine.

What was punished was not unbelief, not false doctrine and error, but outrageous offences against the majesty of the lawgiver, impudent misdeeds against the state's basic laws and the civil constitution. And even these were punished only •when the sacrilege exceeded all bounds in its unruliness, and came close to rebellion; •when the criminal wasn't afraid to have the law quoted to him by two fellow-citizens, to be threatened with punishment and, indeed, to accept the punishment and commit the crime in their presence. Here the religious villain becomes an outrageous desecrator of majesty, a state criminal. Moreover, as the rabbis expressly state, *With the destruction of the Temple, all corporal and capital punishments ceased to be legal, and so did monetary fines that are only national*. Perfectly in accordance with my principles, and inexplicable without them! •With the destruction of the Temple• the civil bonds of the nation were dissolved; religious offences were no longer crimes against the state; and the religion itself knows of no penalty

except the one the repentant sinner *voluntarily* imposes on himself. It knows of no coercion; the staff it works with is *leniency*, and it works only on mind and heart. Thus the rabbis; try to explain this rationally without help from my principles! [In that passage ‘staff’ translates *Stab*. This echoes a German idiom that Mendelssohn used two paragraphs back, in which *über x den Stab brechen*—literally ‘to break the staff over x’—means ‘to sentence x to death’.]

19. Judaism and civil law

I hear many readers asking:

‘Why do you go on at such length about something that is very well known? Judaism was a hierocracy [= ‘a government by priests’], an ecclesiastical government, a priestly state—a theocracy, if you will. We already know the arrogance of such a constitution.’

No! All these technical terms—‘theocracy’ etc.—put the topic in a **false light** that I must avoid. We always want to classify, to sort things into pigeonholes. Once we know what pigeonhole a thing goes into, we’re satisfied, however incomplete our concept of it may be. But why do you want a generic label; for an individual thing that •has no genus, •refuses to be stacked with anything, •can’t be put under the same rubric with anything else? This constitution existed only once; call it the *Mosaic constitution*, i.e. by its proper name. It has disappeared, and only God knows where and when there will again be something like it.

Just as according to Plato there is an earthly and also a heavenly love, there is also an earthly and a heavenly politics, so to speak. Take a womaniser, a seducer, such as are met with in the streets of every big city, and speak to him of •Solomon’s *Song of Songs* or of •the love of Adam and Eve before the Fall, as Milton describes it. He’ll think you

are raving, or that you are getting practice in overwhelming the heart of a prude by means of Platonic caresses. And a typical worldly politician won’t understand you either, if you speak to him of the simplicity and moral grandeur of that original constitution. Just as the ‘lover’ knows nothing of love but the satisfaction of common lust, the politician discusses statesmanship purely in terms of power, liquidity, trade, the balance of power, and population; and religion is to him the lawgiver’s means for keeping the unruly man in check, and the priest’s means to suck him dry and consume his marrow.

I had stop you adopting the **false point of view** from which we customarily look at the true interest of human society.

the next sentence: That’s why I haven’t named the object to you, but have tried to represent it with its properties and details.

what Mendelssohn is probably getting at: That’s why I haven’t brought Judaism—the object of my present discussion—under any of the labels that theorists of politics use, but have simply tried to tell you what it is like.

If we look at true politics directly, we shall see God in it. . . .

I have said that the Mosaic constitution didn’t last long in its original purity. As early as the time of the prophet Samuel, the edifice developed a crack that widened more and more until the whole thing fell to pieces. The nation asked for a visible flesh-and-blood king as its ruler, perhaps •because the priesthood had already begun to abuse its authority among the people (as Scripture reports about the sons of the High Priest), or perhaps •because they were dazzled by the splendor of some neighbouring royal household. Anyway, they demanded *a king such as all other peoples have*. The prophet •Moses•, aggrieved by this, pointed out to them •the

nature of a human king who had his own requirements and could enlarge them at will, and •how hard it would be to satisfy an infirm mortal to whom the rights of the Deity have been transferred. In vain! The people persisted in their resolution, got their wish and experienced what the prophet had threatened them with. With that the constitution was undermined, the unity of •religious and governmental• interests was abolished. State and religion were no longer the same, and a conflict of duties was no longer impossible. Such conflicts can't have happened often, as long as the king himself a native of his land and also obeyed the fatherland's laws. But now track the events through all sorts of ups and downs and changes, through many good and bad regimes, God-fearing and godless ones, down to the sad period in which the founder of the Christian religion gave the cautious instruction: Give to Caesar what is Caesar's and to God what is God's. Obvious opposition—a conflict of duties! The state was under foreign dominion, and received its orders from foreign gods, as it were, while the home religion still survived, keeping some of its influence on civil life. Here is demand against demand, claim against claim. 'To whom shall we give? Whom shall we obey?' Bear both burdens—went the advice—as well as you can; serve two masters with patience and devotion. Give to Caesar, and give to God too! To each his own, since the unity of interests is now destroyed!

Even now that is the best advice that can be given to the House of Jacob [see Glossary]. Adapt yourselves to the *Sitten* [see Glossary] and the constitution of the land in which you have been placed; but hold fast to the religion of your fathers too. Bear both burdens as well as you can! It is true that on the one hand

the burden of civil life is made heavier for you because
of the religion to which you remain faithful,
and on the other hand

the climate and the times make the observance of
your religious laws in some respects more irksome
than they need to be.

Nevertheless, persevere; remain unflinchingly at the post assigned to you by Providence, and endure everything that happens to you as your lawgiver foretold long ago.

In fact, I don't see how anyone born into the House of Jacob can conscientiously free himself from the law. [In the following great sentence, it is Mendelssohn who twice italicises *vielleicht* = 'perhaps'.] We're allowed to •reflect on the law, to •inquire into its spirit, and in odd places where the lawgiver gave no reason to •surmise a reason which *perhaps* depended on that time and place and those circumstances, and which *perhaps* may open the way to a change •in the law• for a different time, place, and circumstances—if the Supreme Lawgiver consents to tell us His will on this matter, making it known

- in as clear a voice,
- in as public a manner, and
- as far beyond all doubt and ambiguity

as He did when He first gave the law. As long as this doesn't happen—as long as we can't point to any such clearly genuine exemption from the law—we can't *argue* our way out of the strict obedience we owe to the law. •However glitteringly good an argument or theory may seem to be•, reverence for God draws a line between theory and practice that no conscientious man may cross. So I repeat my earlier [page 50] exclamation:

Weak and shortsighted is the eye of man! Who can say: 'I have entered God's sanctuary, seen the whole of his plan, and can determine the measure, goal, and limits of his purposes'?

I may conjecture, but not pass judgment or act according to my conjecture. – If in human affairs I am not allowed to act

contrary to the law on the strength of my own conjectures and legal web-spinning, without the authority of the lawgiver or the legal authorities, how much less am I allowed to do so in divine affairs? Laws that are necessarily connected with •the possession of the land •of Israel• and with •the institutions governing it

the final clause: carry their exemption with them.

probably meaning: If you take a law of that sort to Germany (say), you thereby free yourself of any obligation to obey it. The law has, as it were, carried its exemption with it to Germany.

Without temple and priesthood, and outside Judea, there's no place for •sacrifices or •laws of purification or •religious taxes, because these all depend on the possession of the land. But personal commandments, duties imposed on a son of Israel without regard to the Temple service and property-ownership in Palestine, must—as far as we can see—be observed strictly according to the words of the law, until it pleases the Most High to set our conscience at rest and tell us in a clear voice and publicly that those laws have been rescinded.

This is obviously a case of: Man can't pull apart things that God has joined together. Even if one of us converts to the Christian religion, I don't see how he can believe that he is setting his conscience free and ridding himself of the yoke of the law. Jesus of Nazareth was never heard to say that he had come to release the House of Jacob from the law! Indeed, he explicitly said the opposite, and what's more he *did* the opposite. He obeyed not only the law of Moses but also the ordinances of the rabbis. Some of the speeches and acts ascribed to him •seem to contradict this, but this is merely an at-first-glance •seeming. When his speech and conduct are closely examined, they turn

out to agree completely with Scripture and also with the tradition. If he came to remedy entrenched hypocrisy and sanctimoniousness, he surely wouldn't have given as his first example of sanctimoniousness a law that •he thought• should be repealed and abolished. •Why not?• Because by highlighting the law in that way he was authorizing it. Rather, his entire conduct as well as that of his disciples in the early period is illuminated by the rabbinic principle: *He who is not born into the law need not bind himself to the law; but he who is born into the law must live according to the law, and die according to the law.* If his followers later on thought differently, believing that Jews who accepted their teaching could be released from the law, this surely happened without his authority.

20. The unity trap

And you, dear brothers, dear fellow-men, who follow the teachings of Jesus—should you find fault with us for doing what the founder of your religion did himself, and confirmed by his authority? Should you believe that you can't love us in return as brothers and unite with us as citizens as long as we •are outwardly distinguished from you by the ceremonial law, •don't eat with you, •don't marry you—which as far as we can see the founder of your religion wouldn't have done himself nor allowed us to do? – We can't suppose this regarding Christian-minded men, but if this *is* and *continues to be* your true conviction; if you won't allow civil union unless we depart from the laws that we still consider binding on us; then

- we're sorry to have to tell you that we would rather do without civil union;
- that friend of mankind Dohm [see page 27] will have written in vain, and

•everything will remain in the melancholy condition in which it is now, or in which your love of mankind may think it proper to place it.

We can't yield on this matter; but if we are honest we can still •love you as brothers and •beseech you as brothers to lighten our burdens as much as you can. Regard us, if not as brothers and fellow-citizens, at least as fellow-men and fellow-inhabitants of the land. Help us to become better men and better fellow-inhabitants, and let us—as far as the times and the circumstances permit—be partners in enjoying the rights of humanity. We can't in good conscience depart from the law; what good would it do you to have fellow-citizens without conscience?

'But how in this way will the prophecy come true that some day there will be only *one shepherd and one flock*?'

[That question quotes *John* 10:16. Its display as a separate paragraph is Mendelssohn's.] Dear well-meaning brothers, don't let yourselves be fooled! For the entire flock to be under the care of this omnipresent shepherd it doesn't have to graze in •one pasture or enter and leave the master's house through •one door. This isn't what the shepherd wants and it isn't good for the thriving of the flock. Has there been a conceptual error here or was it a deliberate attempt to confuse? You're told that a •union of faiths is the shortest way to the brotherly love and brotherly tolerance that you kindhearted folk so ardently desire. There are people who want to persuade you that if only we all had •one faith we would no longer hate one another for reasons of faith, reasons of difference in •religious• opinion; that then religious hatred and the spirit of persecution would be torn up by their roots and destroyed; that the lash would be taken from the hand of hypocrisy and the sword from the hand of fanaticism, and the happy days would arrive, in which it is said that *the wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard beside the kid* etc. – The gentle

souls who make this proposal are ready to go to work; they want to come together as negotiators and make the humane effort

- to bring about a *compromise between the faiths*,
- to bargain for *truths* as if they were *rights* or mere merchandise,
- to demand, offer, bribe, bluster and apologise, surprise and outwit,

until the parties shake hands and the contract for the happiness of the human race can be written down! Of those who reject such an enterprise as fanciful and impracticable, many still speak of the union of faiths as a desirable state of affairs, and deplore the human race's inability to scale this pinnacle of happiness through its own efforts. – Friends of mankind, beware! Don't listen uncritically to such sentiments. They could be snares that enfeebled fanaticism wants to set for freedom of conscience. You know that this enemy of the good has many forms—the lion's fury and the lamb's meekness, the dove's simplicity and the snake's cunning—it can take any shape it likes in order to achieve its bloodthirsty purposes. Since your beneficent efforts have robbed fanaticism of overt power, it may be putting on the mask of meekness so as to deceive you; it puts up a show of brotherly love and human tolerance while secretly making the chains with which it intends to hold down •reason, preparatory to hurling •it back into the cesspool of barbarism from which you have begun to pull it up.

[This paragraph was a footnote.] Atheism, too, has its fanaticism, as sad experience teaches. True, it might remain harmless unless inner atheism is mixed in with it. But external, overt atheism can also become fanatical—a fact that is as undeniable as it is hard to understand. An atheist who wants to be consistent must always act out of selfishness; and selfishness won't lead him to propagate atheism rather

than keeping the secret to himself; and yet atheists have been seen to preach their doctrine with the fanatical zeal, raging and persecuting when their preaching didn't get a favourable reception. And zeal is frightful when the zealot is an avowed atheist, when innocence falls into the hands of a tyrant *who fears everything except God*.

Don't see this as a merely imaginary fear, born of hypochondria [here = 'a pathological tendency to see minor symptoms as serious']. If a union of faiths did ever come about, its only consequences would be disastrous for reason and freedom of conscience. Suppose that people *do* come to terms with one another about what formula of faith to introduce and establish, devising symbols that none of the religious parties now dominant in Europe could find fault with. What would that accomplish? Everyone thinking alike concerning religious truths? No-one who has *any* conception of the nature of the human mind would draw that conclusion. The only agreement would be in the words, in the formula. That's what the unifiers of faiths join forces to achieve: they want to squeeze something out of the concepts in some places, to broaden the web of words in other places, making the words so uncertain and broad that intrinsically different concepts can be forced into them, just barely. Everyone would then be attaching his own meaning to the agreed-upon words; would *this* be the proud achievement of uniting men's faiths, bringing the flock under a single shepherd? Oh, if this universal hypocrisy had any purpose, I'm afraid it would be intended as a first step towards putting the now liberated spirit of man back into prison. The shy thing would be sure enough to let itself be captured and bridled. Tying the faith to symbols, belief to words, doing this as modestly and pliantly as you please but finally getting the thing written down and established, once and for all: then woe to the poor man who comes the next day and who finds something to criticise even

in these *modest, purified* words! He's disturbing the peace! To the stake with him!

Brothers! If you care for true piety, let us not pretend to agree where Providence's aim is obviously diversity. None of us thinks and feels exactly like his fellow-man; so why do we want to deceive each other with delusive words? We already do this alas! in our daily doings, in our conversations, that aren't especially important; why would we also do it in matters concerning our temporal and eternal welfare, our whole destiny? Why in the most important concerns of our life should we put on masks to make ourselves unrecognizable to each other, given that God for his own reasons has stamped everyone with his own features? Doesn't this amount to doing our best to resist Providence, to frustrate if possible the purpose of creation? Isn't this to deliberately contravene our calling, our destiny in this life and the next? – Rulers of the earth! If an insignificant fellow-inhabitant of the earth is allowed to lift up his voice to you: don't trust the advisers who try to sweet-talk you into undertaking something so harmful. They are either blind themselves, and don't see the enemy of mankind lurking in ambush, or they are trying to blind you. If you listen to them we'll lose our noblest treasure, the freedom to think. For the sake of your happiness and ours, *a union of faiths is not tolerance*; it is the exact opposite of true tolerance! For the sake of your happiness and ours, don't use your powerful authority

- to turn some *eternal truth* that isn't essential to civic happiness into a *law*,
- to turn some *religious opinion* that is a matter of indifference to the state into *an ordinance of the land!*

Pay heed to men's •doings and •allowings; bring them before the tribunal of wise laws, and leave us •thought and •speech. The Father of us all gave us thought and speech as an inalienable heritage, granting them to us as an immutable

right. If the link between •the legal system and •opinion is too deeply dug in and the time is not yet ripe for abolishing it completely without great risk, try at least to mitigate as much as you can its pernicious influence, and to put wise limits to prejudice that has grown gray with age.¹³ At least pave the way for a fortunate posterity to move to that height of culture, that universal tolerance of man for which reason still sighs in vain! Don't reward or punish any doctrine, don't tempt or bribe anyone to adopt any religious opinion! If

someone doesn't disturb public happiness and acts properly towards the civil laws, towards you and his fellow-citizens, let him •speak as he thinks, •call on God in his own way or that of his fathers, and •seek eternal salvation where he thinks he will find it. Let no-one in your states be a searcher of hearts and a judge of thoughts; let no-one assume a right that the Omniscient has reserved to himself alone! If we *give to Caesar what is Caesar's* then you should *give to God what is God's! Love truth! Love peace!*

¹³ Alas, we already hear the Congress in America striking up the old tune and speaking of a *dominant religion*. [This refers to a bill submitted to the American Congress in 1783–84 saying: 'The Christian religion shall. . .be the established religion of this Commonwealth.' James Madison caused the bill to fail. (Source: A. Altmann, in the Brandeis U.P. edition of this work, p. 240)]