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Review of Adam Sutcliffe, *Judaism and Enlightenment*

Abstract

Adam Sutcliffe's book represents an important new synthesis, offering novel and insightful readings of both familiar and less-known thinkers. Since no one before him has attempted to examine so broadly European intellectual life in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries from the perspective of attitudes toward Jews and Judaism, Sutcliffe's monograph represents a major contribution to Jewish and Enlightenment studies alike. What is especially remarkable is the range of erudition and mastery of sources on the part of a youthful author of a first book. Based on his doctoral dissertation written at University College London, the work shows immense learning, elegant prose, and a nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the Enlightenment project as well as the place of Judaism in the consciousness of its primary and less primary exponents.

Disciplines

History | History of Religion | Intellectual History | Jewish Studies

ADAM SUTCLIFFE. *Judaism and Enlightenment*. Ideas in Context 66.
Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003. Pp. xv + 314.

DAVID B. RUDERMAN

ADAM SUTCLIFFE'S BOOK represents an important new synthesis, offering novel and insightful readings of both familiar and less-known thinkers. Since no one before him has attempted to examine so broadly European intellectual life in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries from the perspective of attitudes toward Jews and Judaism, Sutcliffe's monograph represents a major contribution to Jewish and Enlightenment studies alike. What is especially remarkable is the range of erudition and mastery of sources on the part of a youthful author of a first book. Based on his doctoral dissertation written at University College London, the work shows immense learning, elegant prose, and a nuanced and sophisticated understanding of the Enlightenment project as well as the place of Judaism in the consciousness of its primary and less primary exponents.

Sutcliffe's thesis is clear and straightforward: Judaism was "a key site of intellectual contestation, confusion, and debate" (p. 5) among European thinkers in this period. Through a systematic examination of the reflections on Judaism by thinkers conventionally associated with the Enlightenment, but also those outside its usual purview, Sutcliffe attempts to show how ambiguous and ambivalent responses by these thinkers point to the larger question of the limits of Enlightenment rationalism and tolerance in general. Although Sutcliffe mentions the well-known postmodernist critiques of the Enlightenment of recent years and openly situates his discoveries within their context, he is very cautious about joining the postmodernist bandwagon. He strives to balance negative assessments of Judaism in his sources with more sympathetic and positive ones. He is neither ideological nor stridently polemical in his judgments but opts for the more neutral language of "ambivalence," "incongruity," or the "intricate mix" of attraction to and repulsion from Judaism (p. 9). For example, in contrast to Arthur Hertzberg's earlier characterization of Voltaire's attitude toward Jews as anti-Semitic,¹ Sutcliffe judiciously

1. Arthur Hertzberg, *The French Enlightenment and the Jews: The Origins of Modern Anti-Semitism* (New York, 1968).

eschews any essentializing anti-Semitic or philo-Semitic labels in offering a more nuanced treatment of the vast array of thinkers he considers.

The book is divided into three broad parts treating various aspects of European thought on Judaism in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, although Sutcliffe mentions earlier premodern views and concludes the book by following his theme into the nineteenth century and beyond. The first part, called "The Crumbling of Old Certainties," deals primarily with the flourishing of Christian Hebraism in early modern Europe until its alleged decline by the early eighteenth century. In this useful section (more useful than the late Frank Manuel's survey because of its citations of primary and secondary literature and because of its less idiosyncratic readings of individual thinkers),² Sutcliffe surveys the explosion of biblical and rabbinic studies by Christians from the Renaissance and Reformation into the eighteenth century, along with Christian political thought inspired by biblical models of government, and the fate of biblical chronology in relation to competing classical and world historical schemes. He concludes with a special chapter on the important contributions of Jacques Basnage and Pierre Bayle. In the second section, "Judaism and the Formation of Enlightenment Radicalism," he studies the place of Judaism in the so-called radical Enlightenment, focusing especially on Sephardic Amsterdam, Spinoza and his image, the place of the kabbalah in Enlightenment thought, and the manifold ways in which Judaism was deployed in the Enlightenment's general critique of religion. The final part, "Judaism, Nationhood, and the Politics of Enlightenment," moves to wider social and political concerns of utopianism, cosmopolitanism, and tolerance and asks how the discourse on Judaism impinged on these larger issues. Voltaire is finally considered not so much as a departure from what had preceded him but as an embodiment of trends in Enlightenment thought fully explored in earlier chapters.

In view of the wide range of topics and thinkers Sutcliffe tries to read and absorb, and notwithstanding his competent and perspicuous readings throughout, one might legitimately raise questions about his general perspective as well as his specific interpretation of individual thinkers. I offer here some of my own questions provoked by my profitable reading of this book not so much to undermine Sutcliffe's conclusions but in the hope that Sutcliffe's bold survey will stimulate others to pursue each of the many themes of the book in greater depth, confirming, arguing against, or revising his initial inquiries, and thus opening up the field even more.

2. See Frank Manuel, *The Broken Staff: Judaism through Christian Eyes* (Cambridge, Mass., 1992).

My first question concerns the problem of defining the period and the particular group of thinkers he is writing about. Is his study properly titled “Judaism and the Enlightenment” when in fact it considers a much wider group of thinkers than those usually associated with the Enlightenment? Are Christian Hebraists like Spenser, Lightfoot, and Bartolucci usually treated as part of the Enlightenment? How do they fit in with more conventional Enlightenment figures such as Voltaire, Diderot, and Bayle? In fact, given the variegated mix of characters Sutcliffe does treat—Seldin, Marsham, Perron, Vico, Koebach, Meyer, Wachter, Bekker, Wagenseil, Toland, and Giannone, to name only a few—it seems obvious that his panoramic tour of intellectual life in these two centuries moves far beyond the more specific community of Enlightenment writers.

Sutcliffe also refers constantly to the early Enlightenment, by which he means the intellectual developments primarily associated with the radical Enlightenment in the Netherlands and in England during the seventeenth century. In this he seems to follow the well-trodden steps of Paul Hazard, Margaret Jacob, and his own teacher, Jonathan Israel, who have pushed back the conventional eighteenth-century Enlightenment to the preceding century in arguing for a more radical cultural and political break in European society long before Voltaire’s generation.³ Sutcliffe seems to follow this trend. The thinkers he discusses, especially Spinoza, are central to this revisionist approach. But he never offers any clear distinctions between this earlier period of Enlightenment and the later one, and, given the continuous threads he traces in both periods, it remains unclear what is different and what remains the same over the course of two centuries.

Sutcliffe argues strongly that the Sephardic Jews of Amsterdam should be given greater consideration in the narrative of the early Enlightenment. At one point he claims that it is widely assumed that until the late eighteenth century, European Jewry was largely oblivious to the wider intellectual climate of Europe (p. 103). Does Sutcliffe mean by this that seventeenth-century Amsterdam Jewry is not only pivotal to the Dutch Enlightenment but is also critical in instigating a radical break in the consciousness of European Jewry itself? In other words, does Sutcliffe claim that the Jewish Enlightenment, commonly associated with Moses Mendelssohn and the late eighteenth century, actually begins a century earlier in Amsterdam? If this is the case, how are we to weigh as

3. See especially Paul Hazard, *The European Mind, 1680–1715* (London, 1953); Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans* (London, 1981); Jonathan I. Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650–1750* (Oxford, 2001).

well the remarkable cultural interactions of Italian Jewry with its surrounding culture from the Renaissance on? Are the intellectual stirrings among Dutch Jews totally unconnected to the cultural dialogues Italian Jews had been conducting with the non-Jewish intellectual world decades earlier? This question might be similarly raised with respect to Jonathan Israel's own reconstruction of the radical Enlightenment since he too minimizes the impact of the Italian Renaissance and the Reformation on the "general process of rationalization and secularization" of the modern world; rather, he focuses exclusively on its purported beginnings in the seventeenth century.⁴ In short, the imprecise categories of Enlightenment and early Enlightenment, of early modern and modern, as well as the question of who is actually an Enlightenment thinker, seem to muddle Sutcliffe's analysis of so many thinkers over several centuries.

No one would object to the claim that Sephardic Jewish intellectual life requires more attention by historians of Western thought. But what does this claim really mean? Does the Sephardic Jewish community really deserve all the attention Sutcliffe claims it deserves in accounting for the early Enlightenment? With the exception of Spinoza and perhaps Orobio de Castro—who, Sutcliffe demonstrates, was read in manuscript by certain Christian intellectuals—did other Jewish intellectuals in Amsterdam play a significant role in the evolution of Western thought? Despite Menasseh ben Israel's important social and political connections with the non-Jewish world of his time, his intellectual impact remained highly circumscribed and unoriginal. Since Sutcliffe's book is primarily a study of European thought on Jews, not on the economic, social, and political relations of contemporary Jews with their society (a subject which is intimately connected with intellectual production although relatively ignored in this book), one wonders what he actually is insisting upon in calling for a more prominent place for Sephardic Jewry in the accounts of the Enlightenment.

Even more problematic is Sutcliffe's depiction of the Enlightenment's attitudes toward Jews with little reference to previous views located within Christian medieval and early modern Europe. Do medieval and Renaissance views of Jews and Judaism have any legacy in the period of the early Enlightenment? What is actually new about the later period in relation to the earlier? Certainly one can easily maintain that ambiguity toward Judaism is a staple of Jewish-Christian relations in previous centuries, that the love-hate entanglement, the simultaneous attraction to and repulsion from Jews generally defines the *longue durée* of Christian atti-

4. See especially, Israel, *Radical Enlightenment*, 3–4.

tudes toward the Jewish Other from the patristic period to the Enlightenment. So what then is novel about the period treated in this book? Is it that the thinkers of this period are more knowledgeable about Judaism, more expert in its sources, more rational, and therefore seemingly more capable of exhibiting greater tolerance toward Jews but nevertheless do not? Is it that the force of their Christian upbringing, despite their relative secularity, does not allow them to overcome traditional prejudice or at least ambivalence?

Perhaps Sutcliffe's argument is a variation on Carl Becker's classical view of the Enlightenment as "The Heavenly City": namely, that the assumptions of the Enlightenment were not as novel as we had once imagined, that the burden of the medieval Christian past weighed heavily on Enlightenment thinkers, and that patristic and medieval stereotypes about Jews and Judaism still retained their potency even in an increasingly secularized age.⁵ As Justin Champion has persuasively argued, even the radical Deists, while contesting the issue of religious authority, were ultimately believers who recognized their belief as a form of Christian faith.⁶ Their complex relation to Judaism was likewise shaped within the parameters of their own Christian traditions. Be that as it may, the issue of how Enlightenment attitudes toward Jews are continuous or discontinuous with the past is not sufficiently addressed in Sutcliffe's analysis.

Despite these aforementioned continuities, Sutcliffe emphasizes that the ambivalence he perceives in the Enlightenment emerges under radically new circumstances: a new republic of letters, the power of the printing press, and especially the unprecedented accessibility of Jewish knowledge to Christian scholars and, even more, to popular writers. The intellectual world of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries knew more about Jewish beliefs and customs than ever before, more about Christian origins, more about ancient Jewish sects, more about textual variants of the Old Testament, and more about other religions in general. Such an explosion of new information was bound to lead to messiness, confusion, uncertainty, and instability. In the end, the ambiguity of past Christian attitudes toward Judaism was made even more ambiguous by the intense debates over the meaning of that new knowledge for the present.

Still another issue Sutcliffe's book raises regards the phenomenon of Christian Hebraism and its own indeterminate relationship to the En-

5. See Carl Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth-Century Philosophers* (New Haven, 1932).

6. J. A. I. Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken: The Church of England and its Enemies, 1660–1750* (Cambridge, 1992).

lightenment project. Sutcliffe assumes throughout the book that while Christian Hebraism reached its acme in the seventeenth century, by the eighteenth century it was in full decline. He is certain that after 1650 it lost its intellectual vitality and self-confidence, becoming a more marginal form of erudition, devalued by the Enlightenment itself. While Sutcliffe offers nothing more than anecdotal evidence to sustain this assumption, his view is probably the accepted one among the handful of scholars who have studied the phenomenon in any depth, especially Frank Manuel. But I would at least raise the possibility that this seemingly definitive conclusion needs to be examined more closely. A good example of how uncertain Sutcliffe's verdict might be is his treatment of Christian assaults on the authority of the Masoretic text, the text considered by Jews to be the most authentic version of divine revelation. In the so-called heyday of Christian Hebraism in the early seventeenth century, Louis Cappel and others armed themselves with impressive erudition to refute Jewish claims about the Masorah, even enlisting the Jewish authority of Elijah Levita, among others (pp. 30–31). The same assault returns with new vigor in the eighteenth century surrounding the project of creating a new Christian text of the Old Testament by Benjamin Kennicott, supported by Robert Lowth in England and Johann David Michaelis in Germany. In the first instance, for Sutcliffe, Cappel's probings are considered innovative and significant; in the second instance, the debates over the Kennicott enterprise were "so far from the cutting edge of Enlightenment thought that they can scarcely be encompassed under that rubric" (p. 248). Instead, Sutcliffe pronounces, biblical scholarship was relegated to the distant margins of intellectual life. One wonders how Kennicott and Lowth might be characterized as being on the distant margins of intellectual life in Enlightenment England when both enjoyed not only the enthusiastic support of a large segment of the high clergy but the direct political and financial patronage of the English king himself. The Kennicottians surely evoked much acrimony about their strongly held positions, but this would appear to me to be more a sign of intellectual vitality than atrophy. Anyone who has read the elegant prose of Lowth in either Latin or English would find Sutcliffe's contrast between the dry erudition of the Christian Hebraist and the wit and polemic of the Enlightenment writers thoroughly misplaced (p. 41). Lowth and his colleagues not only wrote with eloquence; they fought passionately and polemically with their intellectual adversaries as if their lives depended on it.⁷ Biblical scholarship

7. On Kennicott, Lowth, and Michaelis, see David Ruderman, *Jewish Enlightenment in an English Key: Anglo-Jewry's Construction of Modern Jewish Thought* (Princeton, 2000); Edward Breuer, *The Limits of Enlightenment: Jews, Germans, and the Eighteenth-Century Study of Scripture* (Cambridge, Mass., 1995).

was hardly inconsequential in the cultural world of the eighteenth century.

The above example might cause us to reconsider the supposed demise of Christian Hebraism despite the negative press it received from some Enlightenment writers. It is clear that Christian fascination with Hebrew texts passes through several phases from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment. In the later period, however, the amateurish and naive purveyors of Hebraic learning give way to the more professional and linguistically proficient academic scholars. Whether there is less originality or excitement in the work of a later group of Hebraic experts remains to be seen. Such late seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century scholars as Wolfe, Carpzov, Surenhusius, Prideaux, Lowth, Michaelis, and many more can hardly be dismissed as “Twilight Hebraists” (p. 37). My own recent reading of Surenhusius’s rabbinic scholarship and a glimpse at his massive Hebraic library suggests a degree of erudition and sophistication about Judaism far surpassing that of any of his earlier seventeenth-century counterparts.⁸ Before Sutcliffe’s impression becomes the final word on this subject, the field requires much more careful scrutiny regarding not only the quality of the work produced but the number of scholars working with Hebrew materials, their institutional backing, their publications, and their readership. Sutcliffe’s overview of Christian Hebraism should thus be seen as a tentative and imperfect appraisal of a field of academic study still very much in its infancy.

In his concluding chapter, Sutcliffe acknowledges the obvious fact that despite the “schizophrenic view” (p. 254) of Judaism articulated in the Enlightenment, despite “the historical legacy of its [Judaism’s] conflicted relationship with a sequence of European hegemonic ideologies up to and including the Enlightenment” (p. 261), Jews were for the most part politically emancipated at least in Western and Central Europe. For Sutcliffe, this means that Judaism was finally addressed “in practical terms” (p. 249). But what indeed is the precise relationship between the Enlightenment and these practical political achievements? Sutcliffe hardly explores this question. Are the two unconnected or did Enlightenment thinkers ultimately help to engender a positive change for their deprived Jewish citizens? Emancipation proved to be partial, and liable to constant erosion, but it did represent a radical change in the political status of European Jewry. The ultimate verdict on whether the Enlightenment

8. See, for the time being, Peter van Rooden, “The Amsterdam Translation of the Mishnah,” *Hebrew Study from Ezra to Ben-Yehudah*, ed. William Horbury (Edinburgh, 1999), 257–67.

was good or bad for Jews hinges on this question: whether, in the final analysis, the cumulative import of its attitudes toward Jews contributed in some positive way to their gaining full citizenship or not. In the end, does the picture drawn by Sutcliffe indicate that the glass is half full or half empty? Perhaps one might judiciously conclude that while the Enlightenment never succeeded in ridding itself of long-standing prejudices and traditional ambivalences about Jews, it at least pointed to new possibilities and rising expectations of a more promising future.