

Is there Room for Belief in Judaism?

Two German Jewish Thinkers

Debate Dogma in 1834

George Y. Kohler

Bar-Ilan University

There is probably no more distinctive sign of the differences between the 18th century thought of the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment, and 19th century Jewish Reform theology than the re-introduction of dogmatic considerations into Judaism by the reformers. At least in this respect, there seems to be no basis whatsoever to the popular claim that Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), the preeminent *maskilic* thinker, can be considered the “father of the Reform Movement” of Judaism. Arguably, Mendelssohn’s most influential – albeit generally rejected – theory of Jewish belief was that Judaism knew no articles of faith (*Glaubenslehren*) but only revealed legislation (*geoffenbartes Gesetz*).¹ Mendelssohn hoped that this radical division between belief and deed, between reason and revelation, would enable him to solve a pressing problem in the general religious thought of his time: Following the discovery and conquest of almost the entire world, the inaccessibility of Jewish/Christian Holy Scripture to most of the newly found cultures (India, China etc.) made it philosophically impossible to uphold the dogma of an exclusive redemptive impact connected with knowledge of the Bible and with leading a life governed by its commandments. Since salvation must be available to all human beings in equal measure, Mendelssohn concluded, there must be means other than the Bible to achieve eternal bliss. In the spirit of the Enlightenment, he then brought

1 See Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem, or on Religious Power and Judaism* (transl. Allan Arkush), Hannover 1983, p. 90.

under the umbrella of reason all those different paths to happiness. All that was necessary for the redemption of the human soul, he declared, was provided by human understanding, almost by the application of mere common sense. Redemption required neither the confession of dogmatic articles of faith nor the espousal of the truth of scriptural revelation. The traditional, distinct path to salvation, obligatory for Jews like himself, was neither shorter nor better than those of other religions, and, according to Mendelssohn, this path was historically, but not philosophically, justified.

This definite, and itself almost dogmatic, distinction between divine commandment and divine truth that Mendelssohn proposed in 1783 placed him at odds with accepted Jewish tradition. While the Talmud still did not know of strict dogmatics, one of the greatest *halakhists* of the Middle Ages, and at the same time one of the most radical philosophers of premodern Jewish thought, had formulated and successfully introduced into mainstream Judaism thirteen articles of Jewish faith that subsequently even found their way into the daily Jewish liturgy.² Then again, Maimonides' famous list of dogmas from the twelfth century had been subjected to intense debate from the moment of its appearance. At issue were the true intentions of its philosophical author, but, more especially, the list's supposed binding force on the Jewish believer.³ Mendelssohn, for one, was not impressed by Maimonides, and he was certainly justified in writing that, by his time, the Maimonidean *Iqquarim* had "not yet been forged into shackles of faith" in Judaism. It was important for Mendelssohn's own reading of Judaism to note that "although the thirteen articles of Maimonides have been accepted by the

2 For an attempt to write a Talmudic theology nevertheless, see Hyam Maccoby, *The Philosophy of the Talmud*, New York 2002.

3 See, for one of the latest waves of this debate, Marc Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides' Thirteen Principles Reappraised*, Oxford 2004, and Menachem Marc Kellner, *Must a Jew Believe Anything?*, Oxford 2006.

greater part of the nation,” no Jew who has debated them has ever been branded a heretic.⁴

Such outright rejection by Mendelssohn of dogma and dogmatic thought within the Jewish religion rendered rather curious the return to the establishment of ‘articles of faith’ for Judaism proposed by the first reform theologians in the nineteenth century. In fact, this drastically differentiated their religious thought from the ideas of the Enlightenment, as the present study attempts to show. Historically, this return to dogma might be explained by the theological bankruptcy of Mendelssohn’s separation theory, already apparent in the generation of his students. It was not just a radical thinker like Salomon Maimon (1753-1800) but also David Friedländer (1750-1834) – perhaps Mendelssohn’s most devoted follower – who abandoned the practical observance of Jewish law the moment the master passed away.⁵ If eternal bliss was to be achieved by *all humans* through reason alone, even by force of using mere common sense, Friedländer seemed to have preferred the general *human* aspect of his existence over his being a “historical” Jew in the sense meant by Mendelssohn. This, however, led to Friedländer’s infamous (anonymous) letter to the Protestant Provost Wilhelm Teller in which he offered to embrace Christianity if he could only be spared having to believe in Christ.⁶ Teller rejected the proposal, but it was here that what might be called the secularizing ‘theology of the Haskalah’ came to a swift and sad end, already with the generation of Mendelssohn’s immediate disciples.

A few decades later, the first reformers, desperate to return religious self-confidence to educated young German Jews, were nevertheless

4 See Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem* (Arkush translation), p. 101.

5 On Friedländer, see still Michael Meyer, *The Origins of the Modern Jew*, Detroit 1966, and Steven M. Lowenstein, *The Jewishness of David Friedländer and the Crisis of Berlin Jewry*, Ramat-Gan 1994.

6 See the anonymous tract, generally attributed to Friedländer, *Sendschreiben von einigen Hausvätern jüdischer Religion*, Berlin 1799.

unable to demand a return to the wholesale observance of the “ceremonial law” of Judaism. They found a middle ground in their turn to Jewish articles of faith, that is, the formulation of a specifically Jewish dogmatic theology, which replaced law-observance as an important identity marker for the devoted Jew. More than anything else, they argued, to culture and civilization at large, Judaism had contributed eternal Jewish ‘dogmas’ like strict monotheism, future-oriented messianism, and religious humanism. As long as those Jewish ideas were not universally accepted, Judaism and the Jewish people had to exist as the arbiters of ethical monotheism. Reform Jewish thought thus developed its own mission theology, based essentially on articles of Jewish faith that, however, were believed to be universally valid and decisive for the advent of an age of perpetual peace and prosperity.⁷

And, while this reformed theology emerged in a sophisticated form only during the 1840s – especially with two great works of religious philosophy authored by Samuel Hirsch (1815-1889) and Salomon Formstecher (1808-1889)⁸ – the first indication that Judaism had returned to the idea of specific articles of faith could be detected decades before. Already the Haskalah era had brought a revival of the Jewish catechism, for example. According to Leopold Zunz (1794-1886), writing in 1832, some fifty such works had been published throughout Europe, first and foremost for use in the newly founded Jewish schools.⁹

7 See here: Max Wiener “The Concept of Mission in Traditional and Modern Judaism,” in: *YIVO Annual* 47/48, pp. 9-24. See also David Novak, *Jewish Social Ethics*, New York 1992, pp. 225-228.

8 Cf. Samuel Hirsch, *Die Religionsphilosophie der Juden*, Leipzig 1842, and Salomon Formstecher, *Religion des Geistes*, Frankfurt 1841.

9 Leopold Zunz, *Die Gottesdienstlichen Vorträge der Juden*, Berlin 1832, p. 457. Almost every better-known Reform rabbi published a catechism during the nineteenth century. This theological treasure awaits scholarly attention. See, however Jakob J. Petuchowski, “Manuals and Catechisms of the Jewish Religion in the Early Period of Emancipation,” in: Alexander Altmann (ed.), *Studies in Nineteenth Century Jewish Intellectual History*, Cambridge, MA 1964, pp. 47-64.

The publication of those often book-long catechisms, containing extended itemizations of theological assumptions that Jewish pupils were supposed to accept and learn by heart, was, in itself, striking proof of the transformation of Jewish identity-building processes during the nineteenth century – from observing practical law to what might be called a internalization of Jewish articles of faith. That those beliefs were thought to be perfectly rational and/or historical by the authors of the catechisms, and that the purpose of these books was rather more educational than religious, did not change the fact that Judaism had now become a confession instead of an way of life.¹⁰ But interestingly, as far as could be probed for the present study, none of those dozens of freshly introduced catechisms offered even as much as a preface presenting the history, function, meaning or authority of dogma itself within the tradition of Jewish thought.

While this absence of debate might have been due to the educational purpose of those books, which were, in part, intended for elementary school use, a discussion about dogma in Judaism soon sprang up beyond the context of the catechism-literature, namely, in the pages of the similarly new Jewish journals of academic research. For, in parallel to the reforming aspirations of German Jewry, there arose a new movement, no less ambitious, which for the first time in Jewish history, aimed to approach the entire corpus of the religious literature of Judaism with scientific tools and methodologies – and it was not a coincidence that the

10 This is far from saying that Judaism had *copied* here from Protestantism, as has often been claimed by today's scholars. (See, for example, Leora Batnitzky, *How Judaism became a Religion*, Princeton 2011) It is rather a consequence of an intra-Jewish modernization process that almost necessarily followed the fall of the ghetto walls and the decline of rabbinical authority. It seems to be more promising to take the strong anti-Christian tendencies of modern German Jewish scholars seriously than to assume "inadvertent" assimilation (Batnitzky, p. 6). In addition, at least until Harnack's *Wesen des Christentums* (1900) Protestant dogma was still largely irrational, which makes a confession of this dogma essentially an expression of blind belief – unlike Jewish confessionality.

two movements shared many protagonists. This new movement, which called itself the *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, was deeply rooted in the revolutionary paradigm shift that took place during the first half of the nineteenth century, when the new ideal of scientificity (*Wissenschaftlichkeit*) replaced the *Bildung* ideal of the Enlightenment. In other words, critical, empirical, and inductive methods of research replaced the great metaphysical ideas, and the specialized, university-trained expert replaced the aristocratic polymath.

The Reform of Judaism, then, was more than a mere demythologization of religious tradition. It is impossible to imagine it without its scientific basis; it could not have existed without it. Reform Judaism actually brought forth a scientific treatment of Jewish religion. "Reform in Judaism has created the science of Judaism," wrote Hermann Cohen in 1917.¹¹ Cohen (1842-1918), the most important Jewish philosopher at the turn of the twentieth century, should always be read as exemplifying the climax of nineteenth-century Reform theology and not as representing the beginning of twentieth-century Jewish existentialism. It is in this sense that he remarked, in a public lecture in Vienna in 1898, "For 50 years now, nobody has written a *dogmatic* of our religion." Referring explicitly to Formstecher and Samuel Hirsch, Cohen said that the claim that Judaism had no articles of faith was a "nonscientific delusion." To the contrary, he explained, "every systematic science needs its own dogmatics, let alone a religion." It would only indicate poor education to say that dogmatics required blind belief. In fact it was quite the opposite: neglecting dogmatics would mean, for Cohen, "to dry out the source of Jewish life."¹²

11 Hermann Cohen, "Zur Jahrhundertfeier unseres Graetz," in: *Neue Jüdische Monatshefte*, November 1917, p. 51-57, here: p. 54.

12 Hermann Cohen, "Das Judentum als Weltanschauung" (1898), reprinted in Dieter Adelman, "Reinige dein Denken" – *Über den jüdischen Hintergrund der Philosophie von Hermann Cohen* (ed. Görg K. Hasselhoff), Würzburg 2010, pp. 322-23.

The present study will show that a revival of the debate about Jewish dogmatics can be observed a little earlier even than Cohen assumed, already in the middle of the 1830s, some fifty years after Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem*. The earliest critique of Mendelssohn's strong stance against Jewish dogma probably dates from 1834, when the young scholar and rabbi Moritz Freystadt (1810-1870) published a short essay in the journal *Sulamith* titled "Do the Jews possess articles of faith, or not?"¹³ *Sulamith* (which appeared between 1806-1848) was the first German-language journal published for a Jewish public – a journal that itself underwent an interesting development from the *maskilic* ideas of Mendelssohn to the reformatory thought of the *Wissenschaft* movement. Freystadt, born in Danzig, had studied in Königsberg with Johann Friedrich Herbart (1776-1841) and was one of the first Jews to be granted a doctorate at the Albertina University. In 1832, he published his Latin dissertation under the title *Philosophia cabbalistica et Pantheismus*. In this thesis, Freystadt attempted to show that, particularly for the theologian, Kabbalah was distinct from pantheism. His book was a courageous Jewish response to certain views held by several influential Christian philosophers. Freystadt aggressively confronted them with the claim that, unlike pantheists, all kabbalists maintained a distinction between creator and creation, between finite beings and infinite spirit.¹⁴ Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi (1743-1819), Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling (1775-1854), and others who held Spinozism and Kabbalah to be essentially identical systems of thought were simply ignorant of the original kabbalistic sources, the young Freystadt argued.¹⁵

13 Moritz Freystadt, "Haben die Juden Glaubensartikel, oder nicht?" *Sulamith* 1 (1834): 15-19.

14 Moritz Freystadt, *Philosophia cabbalistica et Pantheismus*, Königsberg 1832, pp. 112ff.

15 For a discussion, see George Y. Kohler, *Kabbalah Research in the Wissenschaft des Judentums (1820–1880): The Foundation of an Academic Discipline*, Berlin 2019, pp. 39-41.

Later, Freystadt authored several other books on philosophical subjects, but he was also active in political battles, as a pamphlet from 1862 against the anti-Semite Wilhelm Marr (1819-1904) shows.¹⁶ A reviewer of Freystadt's book on pantheism wrote that, at the time of his dissertation, the author was actually a candidate for the rabbinate, "but because he was inclined to more comprehensive studies he then acquired within a short time the knowledge necessary to follow university lectures and got acquainted with the modern philosophical achievements of the Germans."¹⁷ Freystadt himself revealed in the preface to his dissertation that, until the age of seventeen, he had studied only "Jewish theology in Hebrew and Aramaic"; that is, like most other young Jewish men of his generation, he had received only classical Talmudic training.¹⁸ Looking back at his youth, Freystadt reminisced in 1864 that, after attending several *yeshivot* in the area of Posen, he came to Königsberg, then fifteen years old, "as a little fanatic." In the German gymnasium there, however, he soon lost his Orthodox belief and turned "to the very opposite, to the obliquities of atheism." Only the study of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* saved him in his "desperate situation." He "devoured this book" and, through Kant, Freystadt eventually achieved what he later called "a

16 Moritz Freystadt, *Der Christenspiegel von Anti-Marr*, Königsberg 1862. See for background: Uriel Tal, *Religion, Politics and Ideology in the Third Reich: Selected Essays*, London 204, p. 173. Earlier, in 1843, Freystadt was involved in a local debate about emancipation with the anti-Semitic professor of theology Ludwig August Kähler (1778-1855) from Königsberg. (See: *Königsberger Allgemeine Zeitung*, 1843, pp. 47, 97f.)

17 A certain Dr. Rupp in the journal *Der Jude* of 1833, p. 24.

18 Freystadt, *Philosophia cabbalistica et Pantheismus*, p. viii. In 1837, Freystadt wrote a *Correspondenz* to the *Allgemeine Zeitung des Judentums* (23.9.1837, pp. 295-96) taking issue with an earlier all-out negative report about the cultural situation of the Jews in Königsberg from the same paper. For details, see the dissertation of Jill Storm, *Culture and Exchange: The Jews of Königsberg, 1700-1820* (2010), pp. 293-294 (<http://openscholarship.wustl.edu/etd/335>).

reasonable [*vernunftgemäß*] religious conviction.”¹⁹ In 1834, as an editorial footnote to Freystadt’s article on Jewish dogma, *Sulamith* editor David Fränkel (1779-1856) called on German Jewish communities to employ Freystadt as their rabbi, because “this young Israelite theologian” had mastered scientific knowledge alongside a thorough training in rabbinics – a combination that still seemed to have been rare at this time in Germany.²⁰

Indeed, Freystadt saw it as his mission, in his piece on Jewish dogmatics, to align Judaism with the dramatic progress made in the general philosophy of religion since Mendelssohn, especially in the wake of Immanuel Kant’s first *Critique* (1784) and its well-known rejection of any possibility of proving the existence of God. To oppose dogmatic belief, Freystadt wrote, was to misunderstand the essential character of religion in general, and particularly that of Judaism. But Freystadt was far from raising the historical truth of revelatory events or prophetic figures to the level of religious dogma. What he referred to here as “dogma” were rather the eternal truths that Mendelssohn himself had separated from the truth of history: belief in God, providence, and the immortality of the soul. Mendelssohn, however, lived and thought in the pre-Kantian era, Freystadt explained. Under the exclusive influence of the then-prevailing philosophy of Leibniz (1646-1716) and Christian Wolff (1679-1754), Mendelssohn was utterly convinced that God and immortality could be rationally demonstrated, “as easily as any law from the theory of quantities,” and even with more than one apodictic proposition. This opinion, which at this time was widespread, was

19 Moritz Freystadt, *Immanuel Kant: ein Denkmal seiner unsterblichen Philosophie*, Königsberg 1864, pp. 9-10.

20 In 1864, six years before his death, he still lived in Königsberg, however. During this year, he published the above-quoted booklet on Kant, on the occasion of the erecting of the famous Kant monument in Königsberg, created by sculptor Daniel Rauch. The statue later disappeared mysteriously from the park of Friedrichstein castle, where Marion Gräfin Donhoff had hidden it in 1945. Finally, a replica was made in 1992 and brought back to Königsberg.

enough to make Mendelssohn even “hostilely disposed” towards Maimonides’ dogmatic principles, Freystadt wrote. As a great admirer of metaphysics, in some of his works, Mendelssohn had transferred his conviction of the undogmatic, rational demonstrability of metaphysical ideas to the Jewish religion, especially because this provided him with a tool “to defeat insipid missionaries.”²¹

But while that reference to Mendelssohn’s apologetic epistle to Johan Caspar Lavater (1741-1801) seems to have included approbation of the Jewish philosopher, Freystadt noticed with some bitterness that, after Mendelssohn’s death, and especially after the Kantian revolution of religious philosophy, Mendelssohn’s view of dogma-less Judaism, as a religion confined to revealed legislation, took on a life of its own. Mendelssohn’s stance still “found its way into many theological works, some catechisms and many other popular writings” about Judaism – which was clearly “not to the advantage of religion.” Thoughtlessly, one Jewish author copied this theory from the other, Freystadt complained, without being aware of the absurdity that one could still claim today that “forgoing all academic definitions” of religious concepts, Judaism possessed no articles of faith. Kant had allowed for religion to be triumphant in its modest emphasis on faith and hope, Freystadt claimed. Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* had warned against all speculative theology. The work had shown “for all eternity” that there was no final knowledge of religious metaphysics because there could be no secure knowledge of the supernatural.²² Since Kant, faith had returned to all revealed – but also to natural – religion; this faith, however, was now no longer the blind faith that Mendelssohn rejected in his critique of dogma, but “the faith of reason, motivated by speculative as well as by

21 Freystadt, *Glaubensartikel*, p. 16. The reference made is to Mendelssohn’s works *Phädon* (1767) and *Morgenstunden* (1785), both dealing with immortality.

22 Freystadt, *Glaubensartikel*, p. 16 [für alle Ewigkeit]. Freystadt repeated this idea (in more detailed fashion) three decades later in his essay on Kant; see Freystadt, *Immanuel Kant*, p. 9.

practical interest.”²³ The certainty of such faith was, although full, still only subjective, because here, reason was lacking insight with respect to the divine object of this faith. That change in the nature of faith after Kant was why, according to Freystadt, Mendelssohn had been the last philosopher entitled to reject articles of Jewish belief. All those who still did the same, he opined, were either willing to return to the long-defeated religious metaphysics of Leibniz and Wolff or, even worse, were willing to “throw themselves into the arms of a modernized Spinozism, which is undermining every true religiosity.”²⁴ Only if God and world were identical, Freystadt seemed to emphasize here, could there be a last, slight, possibility for exact, proven knowledge of the Divine.

This sudden attack on pantheism can certainly be explained biographically: As we saw, in his dissertation, Freystadt had tried to differentiate between Judaism and pantheism, to the point of defending even kabbalah against the claim that it contained pantheistic aspects.²⁵ Spinoza and his modern followers might nevertheless have objected here that their pantheistic faith was a ‘faith of reason’ no less than Freystadt’s and the modern Kantians.’ Thus, what remains to be explained is Freystadt’s appeal to ‘true religiosity’ as the opposite of Spinozism. This perhaps anticipates the criticism of Spinoza by the later neo-Kantians around Hermann Cohen, who rejected pantheism as the arch-enemy of morality, which in turn was seen as the essence of religiosity.²⁶ Freystadt, at any rate, seems to have preferred even Kant’s postulated God, as a rational-religious dogmatic idea, over Spinoza’s philosophical *deus sive natura*. Kant’s oft-discussed claim in the second *Critique* that one could

23 Freystadt, *Glaubensartikel*, p. 17.

24 Ibid., p. 17.

25 For Freystadt’s continued interest in Jewish mysticism see his edition of Moses Haim Luzzatto’s work *Hoker uMekubbal*, introduced with a 25 page long biography of Luzzatto (Königsberg 1840, Hebrew title page).

26 See here: Robert Schine, *Hermann Cohen: Spinoza on State & Religion, Judaism and Christianity* (an annotated translation, with an introduction of Cohen’s 1915 monograph on Spinoza), Jerusalem 2014.

at least assume God existed because morality existed illuminates Freystadt's modernized Jewish dogmatism:²⁷ A religious dogma was now an article of faith that could be postulated or *assumed* through reason (but not positively demonstrated) – and this was still on the condition that it supported true 'religiosity' – a concept in all likelihood to be translated as 'true morality.' Anticipating another central element of classical Jewish reform theology, Freystadt now used this argument to counter the conceptually different Christian dogma: Mendelssohn was undoubtedly right when he wrote in *Jerusalem* that the Hebrew Bible simply presupposed that no one could deny the eternal, rational truths of religion. If this was correct, Freystadt continued, the belief in those rational truths had to always precede and consequently modify belief in the historical truths of the Sinaitic revelation – a consequence Mendelssohn was not yet willing to admit. The New Testament, however, and thus Christianity, was from the outset constructed "on mere secrets." Crucially, in contradistinction to Judaism's 'faith of reason,' Christian dogma was therefore forced to include a religious *duty* to blindly believe in its own truth.²⁸

Freystadt's conclusions in the essay were twofold: First, because they contained both historical beliefs and the 'faith of reason,' he called for generally maintaining Maimonides' thirteen articles of faith. Although the number thirteen could actually be reduced by logical operations, Freystadt asserted, the possible abridgement would only come at the price of clarity.²⁹ It was this nonbinding reintroduction of the Maimonidean list that the young rabbi-philosopher presented as the real reason for writing the essay. Nevertheless, second, Freystadt concluded, the time had come for modern philosophy to breathe its spirit into

27 Of course, Kant's argument is more complex than can be presented here. See, for details, Peter Byrne, *Kant on God*, London 2016, Steven Palmquist, *Kant's Critical Religion*, London 2000.

28 Freystadt, *Glaubensartikel*, p. 18.

29 Ibid., p. 18.

Jewish theology. Philosophy was the science of the sciences (*Wissenschaft der Wissenschaften*). As such, Judaism could only benefit if Jewish scholars eventually threw the light of philosophical critique on the intellectual traditions of their religion.³⁰ Interestingly, even in this early essay on Jewish dogmatism, one notes an almost intrinsic combination, often found later in the nineteenth century, of *Wissenschaft*, ethics, and Jewish identity – and it was the maintenance of dogma, albeit rational dogma, that was supposed to facilitate this combination.

Still the same year, in the fifth issue of *Sulamith*, published in 1834, a response to Freystadt's essay appeared that was authored by another important but almost forgotten figure of the early *Wissenschaft* movement, the Frankfurt-born Simon B. Scheyer (1804–1854).³¹ We know from the diary of the young Abraham Geiger (1810–1874), who later became one of the founders of the Reform movement, that Scheyer was highly instrumental in Geiger's decision not to jettison Jewish theology in favor of devoting his life to Oriental Studies, as he had originally planned in 1829. "The example of an acquaintance, Simon Scheyer, kept me from pursuing extreme steps," Geiger journalized, "[for] he had made the shift from inflexible Orthodoxy to unbelief, and his inner instability became an alerting example for me. By this very example, I was newly strengthened in my love for the Jews and Judaism."³² Still, Scheyer went with Geiger to Bonn, where they together studied the philosophy of Herbart and where Scheyer finally, according to Geiger's diary in 1830, "despite much indecision" remained a

30 Ibid., p. 19.

31 To his credit, Gad Freudenthal recently devoted much energy to scholarly research on Scheyer's life and work, thus essentially rediscovering this "distinguished pioneer" of the study of medieval Jewish philosophy. See his "Simon B. Scheyer (1804–1854): A Forgotten Pioneer of the Scientific Study of Medieval Jewish Philosophy," *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 2 (2016): 363–91.

32 *Abraham Geiger's Leben in Briefen* (ed. L. Geiger), Berlin 1878, p. 17.

theologian.³³ Scheyer later became one of the leading Maimonidean scholars of nineteenth-century Germany. In 1838, he published the first annotated, critical German translation of Maimonides' *Guide* (Part III only),³⁴ and, in 1845, another influential book on Maimonides' theory of the soul.³⁵ Scheyer's early and tragic death in 1854 (by suicide) prevented further volumes from appearing, yet his work stands as one of the most profound studies of Maimonides' philosophy penned in the nineteenth century.³⁶

In his *Sulamith* response from 1834, Scheyer wrote that Freystadt was to be praised for taking up the question of dogmatics within Judaism, and especially for addressing it in a scientific way. Scheyer agreed that it was a 'harmful error' to heedlessly repeat Mendelssohn's anti-dogma theory. Freystadt was further correct in considering the acceptance of articles of faith as essential for any revealed religion. But, Scheyer objected at this point, as Freystadt did not correctly grasp what had motivated Mendelssohn to reject Jewish dogma, he had failed to provide the right justification for his (in itself) fully justified demand to reintroduce articles of faith into Jewish theology. Interestingly, Scheyer's reading of Mendelssohn was more sophisticated than that of Freystadt

33 Ibid. p. 18. In Bonn, Scheyer joined for some time a study group consisting of Geiger, Samson Raphael Hirsch and others. (See Freudenthal, p. 365).

34 Simon Scheyer, *Dalalat al-Hairin, Zurechtweisung der Verirrten von Moses ben Maimon*, Ins Deutsche übersetzt mit Zuziehung zweier arabischen Mste. und mit Anmerkungen begleitet, Frankfurt 1838.

35 Simon B. Scheyer *Das psychologische System des Maimonides*, Frankfurt 1845. Already in 1842 Scheyer had published a book on Hebrew syntax, with the declared intention of facilitating the correct translation of the Bible into modern languages (*Die Lehre von Tempus und Modus in der hebräischen Sprache*, Fankfurt 1842).

36 Cf. George Y. Kohler, *Reading Maimonides' Philosophy in 19th Century Germany*, Dordrecht 2012, pp. 51-55.

and therefore seems to have done more justice to the Haskalah philosopher, despite his outright rejection of Jewish dogmatism.³⁷

First, Scheyer explained that, contrary to Freystadt's view, Mendelssohn's adherence to the metaphysics of Leibniz had no bearing on his repudiation of Jewish articles of faith. Rather, Mendelssohn had explained in *Jerusalem* that every moderately intellectually capable human being could understand the truth of God's existence and providence, for which no knowledge of Leibniz or any other complex philosophy was necessary. If that wasn't so, Scheyer wrote, if only philosophers were capable of turning their ideas and experiences into apodictic theological knowledge, Mendelssohn had to be blamed for a return to the pre-Enlightenment intellectual elitism that had been propounded by Jewish thinkers from Maimonides to Spinoza, who strictly distinguished between the 'uneducated masses' and the philosophical genius. This would have been, however, "to attribute a great absurdity" [*Ungereimtheit aufbürden*] to Mendelssohn, in Scheyer's view. Mendelssohn's opposition to Maimonides was instead founded on the opinion that it was not a rehearsed list of dogmas, but mere *common sense* that was enough to achieve a degree of knowledge that guaranteed virtue and felicitousness [*Tugend und Glückseligkeit*], even if this knowledge of the eternal truths was not (yet) apodictic.³⁸ Mendelssohn's opinion to this effect now made it self-evident, Scheyer argued, that a specific divine revelation could not have commanded beliefs or articles of faith but could, at the most, have included the legislation of specific actions.³⁹

37 Simon Scheyer, "Einige Bemerkungen über den Aufsatz des Herrn Dr. Freystadt: Haben die Juden Glaubensartikel oder nicht?" *Sulamith*, 5 (1834): 299-306, here: 299-300.

38 Indeed, Maimonides' list comes to the declared purpose to guarantee a place in the 'world to come' for *all* Israel (*Commentary on the Mishnah*, Sanhedrin 10).

39 Scheyer, *Bemerkungen*, p. 301.

If Leibniz had no bearing on Mendelssohn's view of Jewish dogma (but rather the belief in the power of common sense), as a consequence, accepting Kantian philosophical Criticism would not necessarily mean much for the opposite view, Scheyer continued. Therefore, Freystadt, too, could not infer that dogmas had to be re-introduced into Judaism just because, with Kant, all metaphysical proof of God was shown to be impossible. This was an interesting, innovative claim, because Scheyer – apparently the more traditional Jew of the two at the time of the debate – seemed thus to reject an interpretation of Kant that many conservative thinkers understood to be welcome Kantian support for a renewed traditional, belief-based religion. This interpretation was based on Kant's famous confession from the preface to the second edition of his first *Critique*: "I have therefore found it necessary to deny knowledge, in order to make room for faith..." – the very maxim to which Freystadt had referred. But even Freystadt had noted how Kant could be misinterpreted here as calling for *blind* faith. Thus, on close reading, the seemingly simple sentence turned out to be highly ambiguous, and the traditionalist interpretation, where religion took precedence, might have been just as misguided as factitiously forcing positive religion into philosophical systems. It was precisely the emphasis on both directions of the Kantian maxim that differentiated Kant's view from Orthodox positions that claimed Kant for their agenda: We can prove, intellectually, neither God's existence *nor* God's non-existence.⁴⁰

In fact, Freystadt and Scheyer were in full agreement on the meaning of the crucial word *faith* [*Glaube*] in Kant's statement. It meant what Kant himself frequently referred to elsewhere as *Vernunftglaube* [rational faith, faith of reason], a term that distinguished clearly between theoretical and practical reason. The truth of *Vernunftglaube*, according

40 For the use of Kant by German neo-Orthodoxy, see David H. Ellenson "German Orthodoxy, Jewish Law, and the Uses of Kant" in Ellenson's collection *Between Tradition and Culture*, Atlanta 1994, pp. 15ff. This essay, however, does not address the question of whether the Orthodox use of Kant was in any way legitimate.

to Kant, was justified solely by the practical moral interests of human beings. The ‘knowledge denied’ in Kant’s maxim, then, was the knowledge of the ‘things in themselves’ and the ‘faith’ that was made room for, was, rather, practical-moral knowledge.⁴¹ Thus, neither building on mathematical law nor natural science, *Vernunftglaube* constituted also no metaphysical knowledge of God or the soul. The decisive point that made Kant’s storied statement inapplicable for Orthodox purposes was that Kant had never intended to say faith and knowledge would directly contradict each other, so that faith was *counterposed* to knowledge, or even that it defied or confronted knowledge, as traditionalist readings (or mystical theologies) often had it. Kant, of course, was far from assigning to religious faith any sort of “higher certainty” or a different form of confidence for the believer than knowledge could offer. Because if understood in this non-Kantian, metaphysical way, religious faith represented, rather, a clear antithesis to philosophical ethics, to the very possibility of the practical use of human reason.⁴² Hence, Scheyer did not reject Freystadt’s reading of Kant but only his attempt to rationally ground the call for the reintroduction of Jewish dogma in Kantian epistemology – because Freystadt’s was an

41 With the increasing alignment of Jewish thought to the philosophy of Kant during the nineteenth century, this point about the possibility of rational ethics was later raised by many Jewish theologians. Thus, for example, the Kantian thinker Manuel Joel (1826-1890) wrote in 1857 that after Kant’s critique of reason “religion could again run up its victorious banner” because religion was rooted not in theoretical knowledge but in moral law – and virtue was not a mathematical problem (Manuel Joel in *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums* 1 [1857]: 37-40). See also the discussion of this text by Heinz Mosche Graupe in his *The Rise of Modern Judaism: An Intellectual History of German Jewry* (transl. John Robinson), Huntington, N.Y. 1978, pp. 158-60.

42 Compare here Hermann Cohen, *Ethik des reinen Willens*, Berlin 1904, p. 46: With the acceptance of this metaphysical interpretation of faith, “the possibility of ethics will be destroyed [*vernichtet*].”

argument that came dangerously close to certain Orthodox interpretations of Kant that Scheyer seemed to reject.

Both thinkers further agreed in their reading of Mendelssohn's pre-Kantian position that dogma had to be rejected because it was either blind or was no dogma – but while Freystadt proposed to re-introduce it as Kantian 'reasonable belief,' for Scheyer, Kant's epistemological denial of knowledge of the Absolute could not be the sole rational justification for Jewish dogmatics. This, Scheyer wrote, would be a "very volatile fundament for our revealed religion," even if it was built by a brilliant philosopher.⁴³ Instead, Scheyer suggested returning to the medieval idea of the complementarity of revelation and reason as espoused by nearly all Jewish philosophers of the Middle Ages, beginning with Saadia Gaon. While God had indeed 'revealed' much rational truth through nature and human experience, a religion of reason still stood in need of historical, scriptural revelation, "in order to gain grounding, reliability, [and] certainty," in Scheyer's words. This revelation, "God, in his fathomless wisdom, had offered to a people that because of its historical experience was the most suitable for its further propagation."⁴⁴ Here, Scheyer seemed to be again in closer agreement with Mendelssohn. "All [religious] laws [of Judaism] refer to, or are based upon, eternal truths of reason, or remind us of them, and rouse us to ponder them..." Mendelssohn had argued in *Jerusalem*,⁴⁵ and while this apparent *post facto* rationality of the religious ceremonies had no impact on the *authority* of Torah-law for Mendelssohn, it was nevertheless supportive of its observance in a pedagogical sense.

Surprisingly, however, Scheyer's strongest argument against the eternal and universal validity of Kantian metaphysical skepticism was the Jewish idea of the messiah. So far, all post-Kantian attempts to return some form of religious metaphysics had proved clearly untenable,

43 Scheyer, *Bemerkungen*, p. 302

44 Ibid., p. 302.

45 Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, Arkush translation, p. 99.

Scheyer knew, and would soon disappear. But did that mean that Kantian Criticism, that is, the subjectivity of all metaphysics, was demonstrated “with geometrical strictness, such that its opposite is unthinkable”? In order to answer this question, Scheyer had to resort to nothing less than Jewish messianism, and thus, apparently, to religious dogma itself. We await that “a twig shall sprout from the roots of humanity” [*Menschengeschlecht*], Scheyer hinted at Isaiah, a twig, on which the spirit of the Lord rested, that is, the spirit of wisdom.⁴⁶ And further modifying the prophetic verses, Scheyer continued: “With the rod of his mouth he will smite *Critical Philosophy*, the apparently invincible Goliath.” After heroically defeating Kant, Scheyer’s philosophical Messiah would then “take a deep look into nature and into our souls and thereby re-establish the timeless rights of human reason.” Ultimately, Scheyer’s Messiah would be able “to create the edifying conviction in all unprejudiced friends of truth that our understanding does not need to waive all knowledge of the real [*des Wirklichen*], and that metaphysical ideas, based on true epistemology, do have objective character.” If the Messiah succeeded in this mission, Scheyer explained, Freystadt’s theory was refuted: Freystadt would have to delete his articles of Jewish faith again from the catechisms and would have to “sacrifice them as a sign of tribute to this philosophical Messiah.”⁴⁷

Scheyer’s complex argument seemed to imply that the Messiah *had to* succeed, otherwise he wouldn’t be the Messiah. Even more than that, Scheyer, too, knew that this Messiah’s philosophical mission was impossible at present. Still, it was precisely the impossible that the Messiah was supposed to do – given that Jewish dogma was now re-established (as a ‘reasonable faith’ in ideas that were actually unprovable, like the coming of the Messiah), according to Freystadt. While Scheyer thus entangled his opponent in a net of internal contradictions, it is interesting to take a brief look at the concept of messianism behind his

46 Scheyer, *Bemerkungen*, p. 303 (referring to Isaiah 11: 1, and then 11: 4).

47 Ibid., p. 303.

hypothesis. Not only was this Messiah a philosopher and not a warrior, it was also probably not by chance that Scheyer replaced the tribal connection of the Messiah in the Bible with a humanistic one. His Jewish Messiah came to fulfill a universal mission – to refute Critical epistemology and re-introduce a religious metaphysics based on reason, first and foremost, apparently, in order to reclaim a ‘real’ God as an object of ontology. Not surprisingly, this historical universalism anticipated the rediscovery of the Messianic idea in Judaism by German Jewish reform theologians beginning from the 1840s – after Haskalah thought had generally ignored messianism.⁴⁸ Mendelssohn especially, the great opponent of dogma, had hardly a concept of the messianic, that is, of the intellectual and moral progress of humanity.⁴⁹

At any rate, this messianic argument was irrelevant to the discussion with Freystadt, Scheyer conceded, because Freystadt would not accept the possibility of Kant ever being refuted in the first place, as Freystadt wrote in his original essay.⁵⁰ Therefore, even this sophisticated messianic theory was developed by Scheyer only in support of Freystadt’s original call to re-establish the idea of Jewish dogma. But, if Freystadt’s justification for this call was too ‘volatile,’ as Scheyer claimed, what then

48 Lazarus Bendavid (1762-1832) declared that today Jews would find their Messiah merely in “good leaders who accord them rights equal to that of their fellow citizens.” See his *Über den Glauben der Juden an einen künftigen Messias*, Berlin 1823, p. 225. On the later rediscovery of Messianism in the 19th century: George Y. Kohler, “Prayers for the Messiah in the Thought of Early Reform Judaism,” in: Uri Ehrlich (ed.), *Jewish Prayer: New Perspectives*, Beer Sheva 2016, pp. 5-29.

49 However, Elias Sacks has recently pointed out that “Mendelssohn’s denial of global continuous progress should not obscure his conviction that some newly emerging philosophical systems may plausibly be judged to be superior to their predecessors.” (Elias Sacks, *Moses Mendelssohn’s Living Script*, Bloomington 2016, p. 65.)

50 See above, note 22. Kant was correct, for Freystadt, “for all eternity.” Indeed, Kant himself wrote of the three kinds of proof for the existence of God that he refuted: “There are no more of them, and there also *cannot be any more*.” (B 619, my emphasis). See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason* (transl. Paul Guyer and Allan W. Wood), Cambridge 1998, p. 563.

was his own reason for asserting the validity of Jewish dogmatism? Here, as previously mentioned, Scheyer resorted to Maimonides. Maimonides was the first thinker to have drawn up a list of Jewish articles of faith, *despite the fact* that he (like Mendelssohn) strongly held to the rational demonstrability of God's existence, Scheyer argued. Maimonides could still do this because he believed in the absolute conformity of the truth of reason and the truth of the Bible, of Jewish tradition, as he saw it.⁵¹ Scheyer agreed: This apriori presupposed conformity was the only way to justify dogmatic belief within Judaism. If it is assumed that the divinely revealed Torah contained both legal regulations *and* eternal philosophical truths, revelation did more than authorize practical commandments (as in Mendelssohn); it also consolidated and strengthened the acceptance of the great metaphysical ideas of religion (as in Maimonides). If, after Kant, the 'geometrical' proof of those ideas was shattered, as Scheyer seemed to imply here, Judaism needed even more support from the Bible's divine authority.

But here we must be careful. Mendelssohn was famously unable to find a commandment commanding religious *belief* in the divine, or in anything else, Scheyer recounted, but not because the Torah simply presupposed that only a "blasphemous ignoramus" could deny the eternal truths of religion, as Freystadt had it.⁵² To the contrary, according to Scheyer, it was the very purpose of the Torah to protect the Jews against blasphemy and ignorance. Rather, the word 'belief' did not appear in the biblical text because it would have been understood as a prohibition of free thought and inquiry, Scheyer reasoned. In the Hebrew Bible "the aspiration for apodictic conviction was not to be excluded from the truth of revealed doctrine." In Scheyer's view, divine wisdom eschewed the use of the word *belief* in order to prevent the

51 Scheyer, *Bemerkungen*, p. 304. He quoted here at length from Maimonides' *Guide* (III, 54) in his own German translation, almost identical with the version he published in 1838. (See Scheyer, *Dalalat al-Hairin*, p. 440.)

52 Freystadt, *Glaubensartikel*, p. 18 [*ruchloser Thor*].

possibility of Orthodox theology, that is, “the opinion of those who hold that revealed religion intended to suppress the development of our independence in its highest and noblest direction,” apparently meaning intellectual independence. But, in fact, Scheyer argued, there was no need for the Torah to demand belief in this or that doctrine, because the Torah obligated every Jew to believe in the divine origin of the Mosaic faith itself, including its metaphysics.⁵³ Now, if this was correct, Scheyer concluded, we could comfortably do without compiling lists of articles of faith. All that remained was one Jewish dogma: The divinity of the Pentateuch.⁵⁴

While apparently, according to Scheyer, only this single dogma had to be believed in order to uphold Judaism itself, his solution came at a price: Spinoza had already pointed out convincingly that Maimonides’ ambitious project to locate a preconceived metaphysical truth in the innocent lines of an ancient text had only been brought about by his assumption of its ‘divine origin,’ otherwise it would have been almost ridiculous.⁵⁵ Only if this text was ‘God’s word’ in a rather direct sense, must it necessarily have confirmed the results of human reasoning – but this was a circular argument. Jewish reform theology soon abandoned this last article of Jewish faith. Jewish neo-Kantians in the second half of the 19th century rejected Kant’s postulate-God together with a postulated divinity of the biblical text as unfounded presumptions, borne from necessities and not from *a priori* reason. When, in 1898, Hermann Cohen bemoaned the absence of Jewish dogmatics, as we saw above, he was clearly referring to theological ideas, that is, to hypotheses, and not to dogmatic articles of faith in the traditional sense. For Cohen, these hypotheses, that are regulative ideas such as ethical monotheism, social and universal messianism or unmediated atonement and no longer

53 Scheyer, *Bemerkungen*, p. 305.

54 Ibid., p. 306.

55 See in Baruch Spinoza’s *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670) – the long discussion of Maimonides at the end of chapter seven.

Kant's *Vernunftsglauben*, would form a 'scientific' *religion of reason*.⁵⁶ Here, eventually, no discrepancy whatsoever between religion and reason remained intact. Cohen indeed re-integrated the concept of God into his *a priori* philosophical thought, albeit not as an ontological reality (as in Scheyer) but as a regulative idea. He wrote: "If there is to be truth in the belief in God, God must be integrated into the science [*Wissenschaft*] of ethics." Only thus, built on the rationality of science, for Cohen, could belief be freed from attachment to tradition and all external authority – that is, be truly autonomous.⁵⁷ In our debate from 1834, however, Freystadt's preference for a 'reasonable faith' in God was still opposed by Scheyer's almost blind, messianic faith in reason.

Strikingly, however, the very conclusion to which Scheyer came was drawn almost one hundred years later, during the first truly scientific and analytic discussion of the role and definition of dogma in Judaism.⁵⁸ In 1926, a pathbreaking debate on the subject of dogmatism between Rabbi Leo Baeck (1873-1956), the philosopher Julius Guttman (1880-1950), and some others erupted in the pages of the flagship Jewish *Wissenschaft*

⁵⁶ Cohen himself wrote this theology of Judaism only in 1918, when he tried to show in his last work that a 'religion of reason' could be constructed from certain elements of Judaism (but not that Judaism itself was such a religion). See his *Religion der Vernunft aus den Quellen des Judentums*, Leipzig 1919. In his pathbreaking *Wesen des Judentums* (1905), Leo Baeck had already discussed dogma in the sense of doctrine.

⁵⁷ Hermann Cohen, *Einleitung mit kritischem Nachtrag zur neunten Auflage der Geschichte des Materialismus von Friedrich Albert Lange* (1914), in: Cohen, *Werke* 5/II, Hildesheim 1984, p. 108. From 1915, Cohen differentiated between two concepts of God: The God of ethics, described above, and the God of religion, providing atonement for the individual.

⁵⁸ See, even before that discussion, the first attempt by Kaufmann Kohler (1843-1926) to write a "Systematic Theology of Judaism" in 1910: Kaufmann Kohler, *Jewish Theology, Systematically and Historically Considered*, New York 1918 (first edition in German: Leipzig 1910).

journal, the *Monatsschrift*.⁵⁹ There, Guttman established that the only essential, pre-reform dogma Judaism really possessed was the divinity of the Pentateuch and, consequently, the authority of biblical and even rabbinic law. In premodern Judaism, too, the inherent validity claim of revelation did not allow for the question on which authority it was based.⁶⁰

It is not only in this limited sense, however, that the 1834 argument between Moritz Freystadt and Simon Scheyer anticipated many Jewish-theological ideas of the later 19th and early 20th centuries. The debate can be read as heralding the dawn of a new era in modern Jewish thought, after the short *maskilic* period had come to an end in Western Europe, an area, which had seen the renewal of Jewish dogmatic theories alongside the revival of the idea of messianism and the rediscovery of the religious philosophy of Maimonides. All this was accompanied by an increasingly open and well-argued rejection of Christianity as a moral substitute for Judaism. In addition, our debate sheds light on another important tension within 19th century Judaism: Was the emergence of the Reform movement, and especially its theology, a restoration of the ‘authentic’ Judaism of antiquity, as many reformers claimed – emblemized in the

59 Discussed in detail by Kerstin von der Krone, “Jüdische Wissenschaft und modernes Judentum: Eine Dogmendebatte,” in: Andreas Kilcher, Thomas Meyer (eds.), *Die “Wissenschaft des Judentums”: Eine Bestandsaufnahme*, Paderborn 2015, pp. 115-138.

60 This validity claim was later freely extended to the oral tradition of Jewish law by the Talmudic rabbis, who did not clearly define the dogmatic-theological preconditions for doing so. Belief in a divine source, even for Talmudic law, was dogmatically required from the Jew, but neither the theological differences, nor human involvement within such a concept of ‘revealed oral law’ were anywhere defined. See: Julius Guttman, “Die Normierung des Glaubensinhalts im Judentum,” in: *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums*, 5 (1927): 241-255. See before that: Leo Baeck, “Besitzt das überlieferte Judentum Dogmen?” *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums*, 4 (1926): 225-236. Max Wiener also contributed to this debate with his “Moses Mendelssohn und die religiösen Gestaltungen des Judentums im 19. Jahrhundert,” *Zeitschrift für die Geschichte der Juden in Deutschland*, 3 (1929): 201-212.

memorable metaphor of the pure core surrounded by the fossilized shell of 'traditions'? Or was reformed Jewish theology a fundamentally new approach to Judaism, as Orthodox thinkers claim to this day ("the invention of a new religion")?⁶¹ Tensions of this kind can only be resolved through a renewed interrogation of Jewish dogma, to include consideration of what, in fact, constitutes the core of Judaism.

Ultimately, the Freystadt-Scheyer debate demonstrates that, at the beginning of the 19th century, Judaism began a complex struggle for survival in modern times, keeping pace with enlightened Western philosophy as well as with its own rich intellectual traditions. It was the very "essence of Judaism" that was to be found through the renewed efforts to enumerate rational Jewish articles of faith. Identifying this 'essence,' according to many German Jewish theologians of the time, held the key to a justification for Jewish existence, first and foremost for modern Jews themselves.

Abstract

This paper traces the arguments in an 1834 philosophical debate between R. Moritz Freystadt (1810–1870) and the Maimonides scholar Simon B. Scheyer (1804–1854) on the question of whether Judaism possesses dogmas. While Freystadt proposed the re-introduction of Maimonides' articles of faith into the Jewish religion after the Kantian abolition of all secure belief in the absolute as a form of "reasonable faith," Scheyer argued that the only Jewish dogma was the divinity of the Pentateuch. For Freystadt, Kant had for all eternity refuted the possibility of religious metaphysics and Judaism had thus to rely on postulates of practical, that is, moral reason for its theological survival. Scheyer, in contrast, upheld the belief in a philosophical Messiah who

61 The best discussion of this tension is still Max Wiener, *Jüdische Religion im Zeitalter der Emanzipation*, Berlin 1933. Wiener unambiguously argued that Reform Judaism represented a theological revolution.

would eventually contradict Kant and return objectivity to faith. In the meantime, according to Scheyer, the revealed nature of Torah dogmatically authorized both its ceremonial and its philosophical messages. In this sense, the debate anticipated much of the later scientific analysis of the leading scholars of the *Wissenschaft des Judentums* regarding the emergence and function of dogma and religious authority in Judaism.