

## **Scepticism in Mendelssohn's Commentary on Qohelet and His Other Hebrew Writings**

Mendelssohn's commentary on Qohelet, which was most likely written between 1768 and 1769, is a treatise that tackles prominent themes within natural religion such as the immortality of the soul and divine providence. The significance of the commentary stems from the fact that it provides a penetrating analysis of practical knowledge portrayed in popular terms. In this exegetical writing, Mendelssohn argues that secular wisdom is insufficient to [supply/provide] a logical substantiation of the eternal truths of natural and revealed religions.

Mendelssohn himself viewed scepticism as a "disease of the soul" (*Krankheit der Seele*), but he clearly makes use of sceptical strategies. The reason he did so was essentially twofold: first, to illustrate the precedence of ceremonial acts (*Zeremonialhandlungen*) over pure reason as the basis for human piety, and second, to reconstitute the place of honour that revelatory truth once held. An investigation of Mendelssohn's innovative interpretation of the sceptical and heretical positions in this unique biblical book will assist us in deriving his own complex stance on scepticism, which can be found in his later writings.

In this workshop, we intend to read and comment upon Mendelssohn's commentary on Qohelet both in itself and in relation to his other Hebrew works, aiming to reveal the inner logic of the commentary and its strategy of evading traditional stances (in the text as transmitted) in order to harmonise it with revelation.

# Mendelssohn's Commentary on Qohelet

**Mon, Feb 1, 2021  
and  
Tue, Feb 2, 2021**

**Zoom**

## **PROGRAMME**

### **Monday, February 1, 2021**

<b>10:30 – 10:45</b>	<b>Welcome</b>
10:45 – 11:35	<b>The Influence of Mendelssohn's Commentary on Qohelet on Nineteenth-Century Commentators in Eastern and Western Europe</b> Tova Ganzel (Bar-Ilan University)
11:35 – 12:25	<b>"Ceci n'est pas un commentaire": Mendelssohn's Commentary on Qohelet and the Art of Bible Translation</b> Yael Sela (University of Michigan)
<b>12:25 – 14:00</b>	<b>Lunch break</b>
14:00 – 14:50	<b>Mendelssohn's Defence of Women in <i>Megillat Qohelet</i> and <i>Jerusalem</i>. The Strategy of Individual Conduct: A Lesson in Pragmatic Scepticism</b> Giuseppe Veltri (Universität Hamburg)
14:50 – 16:35	<b>Mendelssohn, Isserles, and Leibowitz on the Mind-Body Problem</b> Zev Harvey (Hebrew University, Jerusalem)

### **Tuesday, February 2, 2021**

10:00 – 10:50	<b>Leibniz's Theodicy in Mendelssohn's Qohelet Commentary</b> Christoph Schulte (Potsdam University)
10:50 – 11:40	<b>From Dialogue to Dialectics: Moses Mendelssohn and Juda Leib ben Ze'ev on Qohelet</b> Grit Schorch (University of Jena)
<b>11:40 – 12:00</b>	<b>Coffee break</b>
12:00 – 12:50	<b>Sacred Text as an Irreducible Phenomenon: Moses Mendelssohn's Defence of Rabbinic Hermeneutics</b> Tsachi Slater (Universität Hamburg)
12:50 – 13:40	<b>The Rabbis and the Principle of Noncontradiction in Mendelssohn's Qohelet Commentary</b> Ze'ev Strauss (Universität Hamburg)
<b>13:40 – 15:00</b>	<b>Lunch break</b>
15:00 – 15:50	<b>What Is the Best Argument for Immortality? Philosophy, Scepticism, and the Bible in Mendelssohn's Qohelet Commentary</b> Elias Sacks (University of Colorado Boulder)
15:50 – 16:40	<b>Mendelssohn on Ecclesiastes and the Art of Dialogue</b> Michah Gottlieb (NYU)
<b>16:40 – 17:00</b>	<b>Coffee break</b>
<b>17:00 – 17:45</b>	<b>Final discussion</b>

## **The Influence of Mendelssohn's Commentary on Qohelet on Nineteenth-Century Commentators in Eastern and Western Europe**

Tova Ganzel (Bar-Ilan University)

The importance of Mendelssohn's commentary on Qohelet is, among other factors, due to its influence on nineteenth-century commentators, who adopted – either explicitly or implicitly – his unique way of interpreting Scriptures. In this lecture, I will discuss unique characteristics of Mendelssohn's commentary on Qohelet and the ways in which they were implemented by later biblical commentators.

## **“Ceci n'est pas un commentaire”: Mendelssohn's Commentary on Qohelet and the Art of Bible Translation**

Yael Sela Teichler (University of Michigan)

At the centre of this paper is a twofold question: Why did Mendelssohn write two separate commentaries on *Megilat Qohelet*, and, in turn, how might we understand his decision not to translate Qohelet into German? Drawing on the different characters of the two parts of each commentary —the *peshat* and the *derush*—the paper will consider this exegetical text in light of Mendelssohn's other Hebrew writings on biblical poetry and translations of it: the earlier *Qohelet Musar* on the one hand and (select sections from) the Pentateuch translation on the other. By contextualising the commentary on Qohelet, it will suggest that this text can be read as a sceptical philosophical essay on translation, specifically on the translation of biblical Hebrew poetry, continuing a course that Mendelssohn had begun to formulate in the mid-1750s and that would come full circle in his translation and commentary projects published in the early 1780s.

## **Mendelssohn's Defence of Women in *Megillat Qohelet* and *Jerusalem*. The Strategy of Individual Conduct: A Lesson in Pragmatic Scepticism**

Giuseppe Veltri (Universität Hamburg)

Moses Mendelssohn follows a sceptical strategy in *Megillat Qohelet* and *Jerusalem* in his approach to the matter of the (anti)feminist question of the Bible and the contemporaneous Prussian and Church government. In *Megillat Qohelet*, he attempts to dismantle the author's general consideration of female morality and his reduction of female behaviour to aberrant conduct as a metaphor of human sexual desire. He rejects the absolute judgement of all women here, instead making recourse to an exegetical trick and referring to statistics. In *Jerusalem*, with reference to the case of divorcing one's husband because of conversion, Mendelssohn defends the liberty of conscience of the female partner. The Prussian Protestant government invoked the principle of tolerance for the case of the husband's conversion, a position rejected by Mendelssohn because it offends the principle of individual decision on the basis of the conscience. His sceptical strategy is to attack the general validity of this position based on an exaggeration of individual conduct and the general principle of tolerance that protects marriage but offends the individual conscience. In both cases, general principles are questioned from the point of view of individuality. This lecture will focus on pragmatic scepticism: How can we question general principles which offend individuality, making individual choice/conduct subject to general principle.

## Mendelssohn, Isserles, and Leibowitz on the Mind-Body Problem

Zev Harvey (Hebrew University, Jerusalem)

In his commentary on the *Asher Yašar* blessing, Rabbi Moses Isserles (1530–1572) explains that God is said to “act wondrously” because He connects the spiritual (*ruḥani*) with the physical (*gashmi*); i.e., the mind with the body (*Orah Hayyim* 6:1). In his discussion of human language in the introduction to his commentary on Maimonides’s *Logic*, Moses Mendelssohn (1729–1786) quotes Isserles’s explanation of God’s “acting wondrously” and further argues that the connection between the mind and the body is beyond human understanding (*Mendelssohn’s Hebrew Writings*, ed. Edward Breuer and David Sorkin, pp. 67–68). It is not entirely clear whether he means that it has not yet been explained by scientists or that *in principle* it cannot be explained by scientists. In his Hebrew book on the mind-body problem (Jerusalem, 1974), Yeshayahu Leibowitz (1903–1994) refers to Isserles’s statement (p. 60). He interprets it in a similar way to Mendelssohn, but explicitly argues that the connection between the mind and the body is *in principle* not understood. Mendelssohn’s views on the mysterious nature of the connection between the mind and the body also appear in his commentary on Ecclesiastes (e.g., 3:21–22 and 12:7).

## Leibniz’s Theodicy in Mendelssohn’s Qohelet Commentary

Christoph Schulte (Potsdam University)

One major point of scepticism in Qohelet is the disproportion between a person’s moral behaviour and her innerworldly well-being: (evil) accidents befall the virtuous man as well as the culprit (Qoh 8:14; 9:2-3), irrespective of their merits or crimes. This disproportion calls into question God’s justice; in Greek, “theodicy.” In his lengthy commentary on Qoh 8:17, which serves as an introduction to chapter 9 of Qohelet, Mendelssohn does not interpret the text of Qohelet, but rather makes philosophical remarks which reveal that he is a reader of Leibniz and Voltaire, without mentioning their names or works in his Hebrew Bible commentary, of course.

The Lisbon earthquake (1755) was one of these evil physical accidents which kill the righteous and innocents alike. In reaction to the earthquake, Voltaire wrote his *Candide* (1759), which included a satirical attack on Leibniz’s theodicy. Mendelssohn always took Leibniz’s side, and in his commentary on Qoh 8:17, he implicitly uses Leibniz’s arguments to counter Qohelet’s scepticism by tacitly referring to Leibniz’s distinction between moral evil and physical evil: we know of no (causal) relationship between natural events and the moral world. For example, an earthquake (as accidental as it is) and the subsequent human suffering belong to different (viz. natural) order of causality from human morality or immorality. As Leibniz’s puts it: *malum physicum* is categorically different from *malum morale*. A natural accident (*mikre* in Hebrew), foreseen by God, is never justice or injustice done to a person; rather, it is an event of another order, disconnected from the moral world.

Divine providence has foreseen but not predetermined *malum morale* and *malum physicum* in this world, but they are not causally connected and we do not know which future purpose they serve in the pre-established harmony of the universe. The reader finds these elements of Leibniz’s theodicy in Mendelssohn’s commentary on Qoh 8:17 (JubA 14, p. 188ff.; JubA 20,1, p. 254) and 9:1–12, reassuring them of the immortality of the soul.

## **From Dialogue to Dialectics: Moses Mendelssohn and Juda Leib ben Ze'ev on Qohelet**

Grit Schorch (University of Jena)

Juda Leib Ben Ze'ev's interpretation of the book of Qohelet was published in the framework of his *Mavo 'el Mikra'ei Qodesh* in 1810. The introduction to this biblical book is based on forty years of maskilic Bible exegesis: Mendelssohn wrote an introduction and commentary in 1770 (*Bi'ur Megillat Qohelet*), David Friedländer translated the book into German in 1788, and Joel (Brill) Loewe and Aron Halle-Wolfsohn presented a new edition of the book as part of their edition of the *Chamesh Megillot* in 1790. My paper will show how Ben Ze'ev's philosophical interpretation of Qohelet emerges from Mendelssohn's approach to the book. Both aimed to harmonise hermeneutic strategies of medieval Jewish Bible exegesis from a modern philosophical perspective. Ben Ze'ev, who opened the Bible up to higher methods of criticism, takes Mendelssohn's approach one step further. This very interesting and meaningful reading prepared the way for Nachman Krochmal's influential interpretation of the book.

## **Sacred Text as an Irreducible Phenomenon: Moses Mendelssohn's Defence of Rabbinic Hermeneutics**

Tsachi Slater (Universität Hamburg)

While Moses Mendelssohn's commentary on Qohelet aimed to explain the sceptical and heretical positions of the biblical text in accordance with natural religion, the first part of his introduction addresses rabbinic hermeneutics. Based on the fourfold notion of biblical interpretation (the so-called PaRDeS), Mendelssohn claims that the sacred text, and indeed language itself, should be regarded as a saturated phenomenon that cannot be reduced to its straightforward meaning or common explanation. This paper explores this unique stance towards rabbinic exegesis and how it may explain several peculiarities in Mendelssohn's own text.

## **The Rabbis and the Principle of Noncontradiction in Mendelssohn's Qohelet Commentary**

Ze'ev Strauss (Universität Hamburg)

In his Qohelet commentary, Mendelssohn attempts to uncover the underlying accordance between various verses found in Qohelet that ostensibly appear to contradict one another. In numerous instances in this commentary, Mendelssohn draws on the rabbinic interpretations of the *deraš* to unearth the deeper and multifarious meanings of Hebrew Scripture. In my presentation, I set out to link Mendelssohn's view of rabbinic tradition as a spirited dialogue in his Qohelet commentary to the one that is present in his famous treatise *Jerusalem*.

## **What Is the Best Argument for Immortality? Philosophy, Scepticism, and the Bible in Mendelssohn's Qohelet Commentary**

Elias Sacks (University of Colorado Boulder)

In his much-celebrated German treatise *Phädon*, Moses Mendelssohn famously outlines a number of arguments for the immortality of the soul—for example, arguments revolving around the soul's status as a non-composite entity, the individual human pursuit of perfection, the relationship between earthly injustice and divine providence, and the relevance of immortality to civic life. In this paper, I will explore Mendelssohn's assessment of these proofs in his Hebrew commentary on Qohelet, focusing on his insistence that this biblical book privileges reasoning focused on injustice and providence over reasoning focused on the metaphysical nature of the soul. Mendelssohn, I will argue, is implicitly casting the Bible as a text that addresses sceptical worries which have long plagued philosophical defences of immortality. Moreover, I will suggest, this reading of his

Qohelet commentary has implications for how we understand Mendelssohn's thought more broadly—for how to understand his views on the relationship between reason and the Bible, his evaluation of the Jewish exegetical tradition, and his place in the history of Jewish philosophy.

### **Mendelssohn on Ecclesiastes and the Art of Dialogue**

Michah Gottlieb (NYU)

It is well known that in his Hebrew commentary on Ecclesiastes, Mendelssohn interpreted the work as a philosophical dialogue dealing with divine providence and the immortality of the soul. This paper will have three parts. In part 1, I will explore the role of dialogue in Mendelssohn's thought and literary output. In part 2, I will review the literary history of Mendelssohn's commentary and how he came to interpret Ecclesiastes as a philosophical dialogue. In part 3, I will compare one of Mendelssohn's arguments for the immortality of the soul in his commentary on Ecclesiastes with a proof from the *Phädon* that had been published two years earlier. In this way, I will explore the similarities and differences in Mendelssohn's use of the dialogue form in his Hebrew and German writings.