Felix Mendelssohn's Oratorio St Paul and the Question of Jewish Self-Definition

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How, precisely, should one understand the term 'Jewish'? When it comes to defining Jewish identity or 'Jewishness' in a systematic way, ideological assumptions are everything. The tendency, especially among theologians, is to essentialize by classifying people and phenomena as Jewish only in so far as they conform to an assumed essence of a normative Jewishness. This essence may or may not be related to theologically derived criteria such as matrilineal descent, conversion to a particular tradition or set of beliefs, adherence to a certain body of law, a role in salvation history, or to non-theological criteria such as racial, national or cultural characteristics. Responsibility for determining Jewish authenticity rests entirely with the observer, irrespective of whether his views originate from within the community or from outside. For the essentialist, anything or anyone who does not correspond to the given definition is to be excluded as marginal at best and deviant at worst. One might imagine a core of authenticity surrounded by concentric circles of ever decreasing legitimacy. The problem, of course, is that observers do not agree on what exactly constitutes the core of authenticity. Whichever definition is to be regarded as authoritative depends upon one's existing biases. Furthermore, proponents of essentialism do not tend to recognize the historically-conditioned nature of such definitions and often assume that the characteristics of Jewish authenticity have remained fundamentally unchanged down through the ages.

An alternative method of categorization is that of 'self-definition', the approved method for many social scientists. This non-essentialist approach does not pre-determine the outer limits of Jewishness and so 'deviancy' or 'marginality' are terms with little or no meaning. The inclusion of those who define themselves Jewishly can lead to political controversies, such as the acceptance of Messianic Jews despite their dismissal as Christians-by-another-name by a broad spectrum of the Jewish community. The advantage of a self-definitional approach is that it largely frees the observer from the responsibility for selection and minimizes the projection onto the subject of his own ideological biases. For some, 'self-definition' implies that the individual defines himself primarily in Jewish terms, but this need not be the case. Arguably, an individual
can possess a self-image that includes a Jewish component, however he defines it. This is an important point, especially in the context of intercultural studies which take for granted overlapping or hierarchical identities. Nor should one forget that an individual’s self-image evolves and transforms in real time and changes according to social context. The self-definitional approach is commonly used because it offers a method that can accommodate the complex, shifting nature of Jewish identity.¹

Unfortunately, ‘self-definition’ excludes many who do not appear to see themselves in Jewish terms and yet who live lives and produce works that strike the sensitive observer as inexplicable without reference to a Jewish dimension of some sort. Celebrated examples include the seventeenth-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza and the nineteenth-century composer Felix Mendelssohn. A work of monumental Jewish scholarship such as the *Encyclopaedia Judaica* will include such problematic individuals due to its working principle that ‘anyone born a Jew’ is qualified for inclusion, even if he later converted or disassociated himself from Jewish life, as are individuals born of only one Jewish parent who are ‘sufficiently distinguished’.² However, no theoretical justification is offered for this approach and it appears to be premised upon unacknowledged essentialist assumptions of a theological and/or racial kind. Is it possible to qualify the self-definitional method, so that it a more nuanced treatment of such individuals can be offered that avoids the common essentialist definitions?

The key question, surely, is whether a significant part of an individual’s worldview is best explained in terms of his self-identification at some level as a Jew, and whether the failure to take this dimension seriously would result in an impoverished understanding of his life and work. For our purposes, it does not matter whether the individual’s perception of Jewishness or Judaism is real or imagined – or even whether or not it is consciously acknowledged. For those Jews who convert to Christianity or who try to dissociate from Jewish life in general, breaking the psychological ties of association is very difficult, if not impossible. This is especially true for those living in historical periods when a Jew was regarded as a member of a particular race. Thus a Spinoza or a Mendelssohn would have been well aware that their contemporaries continued to see in them an indelible trace of Jewishness and, at some level at least, they must have internalized this social reality. To put it another way, it might be possible to expand the self-definitional approach to include those born Jews who, after leaving the community, continue to identify as Jews at a subliminal or sub-conscious level. The problem, of course, is how an observer can know whether the individual so identifies if this association is not articulated explicitly. If one takes seriously such a Jewish dimension to the individual’s inner world, then one should admit the possibility of it having a tangible impact on the individual’s creative work. Such works then become evidence of the author’s self-image at the time of production. Arguably, Spinoza and Mendelssohn should be included under the self-definitional approach if a case can be made that an awareness of their identification as Jews at some level contributes in a significant sense to an understanding of their philosophical and musical compositions. Consequentially, both the subject and the observer must share the responsibility for establishing ‘self-definition’ because however much depends upon the subject’s assumptions, attitudes and value-judgments, just as much hangs on the observer’s ability to uncover and interpret them in their historical context. In particular, the observer will need to mine the ‘semitic discourse’ of that period and place in order to reconstruct the meaning of Jewishness in the subject’s own cultural environment.³ In what follows, an attempt will be made to justify the inclusion of Felix Mendelssohn under the rubric of a subliminally self-defining Jew, drawing heavily upon a close reading of his oratorio *St. Paul*.

Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847) was a grandson of the famous Jewish Enlightenment philosopher, Moses Mendelssohn, and a son of the banker, Abraham Mendelssohn, who had him baptized as a seven-year-old. A musical child prodigy who frequently had been compared to Mozart, Felix went on to become a renowned conductor and composer in the Romantic tradition. Among the many symphonies, concertos, oratorios, piano and chamber music that he wrote in his short lifetime, two of his most famous were the oratorios *Elijah* (1846) and, of greatest interest here, *St. Paul* (1836).⁴

A passionate debate currently rages amongst scholars as to whether Felix defined himself as Jewish. No one disputes that he was a sincere Lutheran and proud German. Rather, the focus of the debate is how important, if at all, Felix’s Jewish heritage was to his self-understanding and to his religious worldview. The history of this controversy is long and not a little sordid. An influential anti-Semitic attack by Wagner in 1850, shortly after Felix’s death, had sought to marginalize his works by reference to their perceived Jewish characteristics⁵ and the Nazis took up this theme and went on to ban performances of his music from 1938. In a classic study by Werner in 1963, the negative value judgment of Felix’s Jewishness was reversed and a portrayal of a great musician was offered that stressed Jewish influences and pride in his Jewish heritage.⁶ However, recent research by Saposchek has directed much of Werner’s presentation, showing that he modified the wording of key documents in making his case. Saposchek argues instead that Felix saw himself as enlightened, rationalist, and, in short, a typical German *Neuehrich*⁷ as Jewish converts to Christianity were called, with no documented interest in his Jewish ancestry. Certainly, evidence to the contrary is hard to come by and appears to amount to a report that Felix once commented on the irony that he, as a ‘Jew-boy’, had brought about a revival of the church composer J.S. Bach,⁸ and his considerable investment in time and effort in arranging for his grandfather’s works to be published in 1840.⁹ Nevertheless, other scholars, including Botstein and Steinberg, while accepting Saposchek’s demolition of Werner’s account, continue to regard Felix’s Jewishness as integral to the man and his music. While Saposchek fixates upon the question of conscious self-definition, they are more interested in Felix’s subliminal identification with Jews and the place of *Neuehrich* more generally in the Jewish ideological landscape. They suggest that it is too simplistic to disregard his Jewish heritage entirely, and that, in early nineteenth-century German society, Felix could not have avoided
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his Jewishness even if he had so desired. They point out that the *Neuchristen* were acutely aware of society's prejudice, and that, taking into account the social stigma; one could not expect Felix to have worn his Jewishness on his sleeve. In fact, there is not as much distance between the two camps as appears at first sight. Sposato is prepared to acknowledge a development in Felix's writing which, towards the end of his life, arrived at what is described as a 'strategy of dual perspective', that is, an attempt to demonstrate his consciousness of both Jewish and Christian perspectives. It is agreed, then, that Jewishness and Judaism were part of Felix's self-consciousness, to some extent at least. In any case, for those interested in complex Jewish identity; whatever the precise label given, his oratorio about the Apostle to the Gentiles has some intriguing insights to offer.

Before considering the musical work itself, it is worth reminding ourselves of the intellectual and emotional influences from within Felix's own family. With his success in publishing the collected works of Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786) only four years after the completion of *St. Paul*, it seems reasonable to assume that Felix had long been familiar with his grandfather's philosophical body of work that had attempted to relate eighteenth-century rationality and theism. For example, Moses had written in Jerusalem (1783).

It is true that I recognize no eternal truths other than those that are not merely comprehensible to human reason but can also be demonstrated and verified by human powers... I consider this an essential point of the Jewish religion and believe that this doctrine constitutes a characteristic difference between it and the Christian one... Eternal truths... insofar as they are useful for men's salvation and felicity, are taught by God in a manner more appropriate to the Deity; not by sounds or written characters, which are comprehensible here and there, to this or that individual, but through creation itself, and its internal relations, which are legible and comprehensible to all men. Nor does He confirm them by miracles... but He awakens the mind, which He has created, and gives it an opportunity to observe the relations of things, to observe itself, and to become convinced of the truths which it is destined to understand here below.12

If Felix's exposure to Judaism was largely limited to his readings of his grandfather's philosophy, then his conception of the religion itself must have been profoundly shaped by Moses' deist-like conception of a God who reveals his purposes and ethical demands through the natural world and by means of the universal access to reason. Even more significant, perhaps, was the influence of Felix's father, Abraham Mendelssohn-Bartholdy (1776-1835), whose humanistic worldview was wary of theism of any sort; while he rejected Judaism, he did not offer a ringing endorsement of Christianity, either. This is made clear in a letter that Abraham wrote to Felix's sister at the time of her confirmation.

Does God exist? What is God? Is He part of us, and does He continue to live after the other part has ceased to be? And where? And how? All this I do not know, and therefore I have never taught you anything about it. But I know that there exists in me and in you and in all human beings an everlasting inclination towards all that is good, true and right, and a conscience which warns and guides us when we go astray. I know it, I believe it, I live in this faith, and this is my religion... This is all I can tell you about religion, all I know about it; but this will remain true, as long as one man will exist in the creation, as it has been true since the first man was created. The outward form of religion your teacher has given you is historical, and changeable like all human ordinances. Some thousands of years ago the Jewish form was the reigning one, then the heathen form, and now it is the Christian... We have educated you and your brothers and sister in the Christian faith, because it is the creed of most civilized people, and contains nothing that can lead you away from what is good, and much that guides you to love, obedience, tolerance, and resignation... By pronouncing your confession of faith you have fulfilled the claims of society on you, and obtained the name of a Christian. Now be what your duty as a human being demands of you, true, faithful, good; obedient and devoted till death to your mother, and I may also say to your father, unremittingly attentive to the voice of your conscience... and you will gain the highest happiness that is to be found on earth, harmony and contentedness with yourself.13

In another letter to Fanny he wrote, 'There are in all religions only one God, one virtue, one truth, one happiness.' Thus, for Abraham, 'religion' was, in essence, a universal ethic towards which humankind is progressing that had once been clothed in the apparel of Judaism and was now wrapped in the garments of Christianity. It was a historical view of religion that linked Judaism and Christianity and, arguably, Abraham did not see his conversion (six years after his son's baptism) or change of name (to Mendelssohn-Bartholdy) as a rejection of Moses Mendelssohn's core values, but rather as a continuation or extension of them, the fulfillment of an ideological trajectory. In addition to this philosophical perspective, there was also a social dimension to Abraham's decision to have his children baptized, a desire to have them freed from social constraints and bigotry. Approaching Felix's *St. Paul* with these familial influences in mind is important for understanding its author's ambiguous attitude towards his Jewish heritage at the time of its composition.

The oratorio, which had been commissioned in 1832, was first performed in Germany in 1836; it launched Felix's international career and was his most popular work during his lifetime. Musically, it courted controversy with its use of chorales, which were normally associated with Church or liturgical music, and the innovative decision to have the words of Christ to Saul on the road to Damascus sung by an all-female choir, rather than the bass performance that was conventionally used to represent the voice of Christ. The oratorio is divided into two parts, the first includes Stephen's martyrdom (Nos. 1-11), Saul's persecution of the Christians (Nos. 12-13), and his conversion on the road to Damascus (Nos. 14-22). The second part treats Paul and Barnabas' commission (Nos. 23-26), the Jews' opposition to Paul (Nos. 27-32), the Gentiles' opposition to Paul, having first thought him a god (Nos. 32-40), and his departure from Ephesus, ready to face martyrdom (Nos. 41-45). Throughout, the choruses and solos are interspersed with narrative, most of which is de-
Arguably, this central theme is indicated by the choice of the text for the first chorus of the oratorio, which exclaims, ‘LORD, Thou alone art God; and Thine are the heavens, the earth and the mighty waters’ (Acts 4:24). Likewise, in a later episode in Lystra in which Paul is mistaken by the Gentiles for a god after having performed a healing, a similar critique is made of the Gentiles who appear even more confused about the nature of God than had the Jews. Felix cites at length Paul’s reaction to the Gentiles’ intention to sacrifice to and adore him as a god:

O wherefore do ye these things? We also are men of like passions with yourselves; who preach unto you, in peace and earnestness, that you should turn away from all these vanities unto the ever living God, who made the out-stretched heavens, the earth and the sea. As saith the Prophet: ‘All your idols are but falsehood, and there is no breath in them. They are vanity; and the work of errors: in the time of their trouble they shall perish.’ God dwelleth not in temples made with human hands. (Acts 14:15; Jeremiah 10:14,15; Acts 17:24)

Felix immediately follows this with Paul’s question, ‘For know you not that ye are His temple, and that the spirit of God dwelleth in you?’. For the temple of God is holy, which ye are’ (1 Corinthians 3:16,17), and with a chorus that confirms, ‘But our God abideth in heaven: His will directeth all the world. We bow to only His decree, Who made the skies, the earth and sea’ (Psalm 115:3). As if to drive home the significance of the debate regarding the nature of God, Felix has the Jews and Gentiles come together to assail Paul in a joint chorus in section 36,

This is Jehovah’s temple. Ye children of Israel, help us. This is the man who teacheth all men, against the people, against this place, and also our holy law. We have heard him speak blasphemies against the law. He blasphemeth God. Stone him. (Acts 21:28)

Thus Felix’s editorial choices imply that Jew and Gentile alike have misunderstood the nature of God, and have set up idols, temples and laws as a result of their ignorance of the true Creator of the Universe. In contrast, Felix projects onto Paul (and Stephen) a deistic-like admiration of the divine watchmaker, whose temple is to be found within man and who is properly worshipped through the spiritual appreciation of nature, as suggested by the psalm of praise of God as the source of all knowledge that ends the first part of the oratorio. What is of significance here is that Felix’s particular understanding of Christianity as the path towards knowledge and enlightenment is by no means an obvious emphasis for a treatment of the life of Saint Paul. To explain it, one might, paradoxically, look to the influence of Moses Mendelssohn. For while the kind of belief that characterizes the oratorio has been described as ‘an aesthetically blank lowest common denominator of the Christian community in the act of worship’, it might as easily be said to have characterized the work of his grandfather. Certainly, the parallels to Moses’ famous adherence
to a God who reveals his universal will to those who, by rational observation of his creation, can detect it, are there for all to see. As Arguably, then, Felix's understanding of religion has been derived and shaped by Jewish thought, even as it simultaneously offers a critique of an ancient form of Judaism. And thus Felix's musical composition, whether he was aware of it or not, embodied a kind of Judeo-Christian religious consciousness.

In addition to Felix's critique of Judaism's misplaced confidence in the Temple and the Law, and his portrayal of the rebellious character of the Hebrews as described in Stephen's speech, the oratorio provides further evidence of its author's negative attitude towards ancient Jewry. Sposato has demonstrated how, through successive drafts of section 38, Felix eventually replaced the biblical account of Gentile opposition with that of an essentially Jewish opposition. And early in the second part, Felix focuses on the envy of the Jews at Paul's popularity with the masses, their arguments with him, and eventually their conspiracy to ambush and kill him. Furthermore, several choruses of Jews vigorously assert their rejection of the Savior and their hostility to Paul and 'all deceivers.' This negative portrayal of the Jews has been put down to the influence of Abraham Mendelssohn, but in any case it represents a mechanism by which Felix can explain the apostle's momentous decision to turn from the Jews to the Gentiles, which is the point of sections 23-31. It concludes with his famous parting shot,

Ye were chosen first to have the word of the Lord set before you, but, seeing that ye put it from you, and judge yourselves unworthy of the life everlasting, behold ye, we turn, even now, unto the Gentiles. (Act 13:46)

For Felix, however, more significant than the failings of the Jews was the universalization of the knowledge of the one true God - in his mind, this was only made possible through sacrifice and martyrdom. This important theme helps account for the structure of the oratorio and even for his interest in Paul in the first place. It is implicit in the death of Stephen himself, whose martyrdom was necessary in order to put Paul on the path to becoming the Apostle to the Gentiles, and whose story, as already noted, seems to have been given disproportionate attention. The divinely ordained enlightenment of the Gentiles is a phenomenon referred to repeatedly throughout the work, and is emphasized in the opening chorus of the second part, which preempts Paul's rejection of the Jews:

The nations are now the Lord's; they are His Christ's. For all the Gentiles come before Thee and shall worship Thy name. Now are made manifest Thy glorious law and judgments. (Revelation 11:15, 15:4)

Felix's interest in the cost of universalization also explains the length of the final section, which is devoted to Paul's farewell to the elders of Ephesus. While not offering much in terms of drama, the four final sections are replete with references to Paul's readiness to suffer death in the cause of taking the gospel message throughout the world, including: 'Bonds and affliction abide me there [in Jerusalem]; and ye shall see my face no more' (Acts 20:23,25), 'For I am prepared not only to be bound, but also to die at Jerusalem, for the name of the Lord our saviour Jesus Christ' (Acts 21:13), and 'And though he be offered upon the sacrifice of our faith, yet he hath fought a good fight... Henceforth there is laid up for him a crown of righteousness' (2 Timothy 4:7,8). Some commentators have complained at Felix's tendency toward sentimentalism, and, arguably, the final sections could be regarded as an over-indulgent expression of the pathos of Paul's life. Nevertheless it also echoes Moses Mendelssohn's emphasis on the transnational, universality of religious truth, and Abraham Mendelssohn's painful conviction of the necessity of severing his children's ties to the outmoded religious language of Judaism in favor of Christianity. Thus Felix's internalization of his two forebears' philosophies, a strange combination of Jewish and pseudo-Christian rationales, is implicated in his meditation of the sacrifice necessary to achieve universal knowledge of the one true God.

Secondly, there is the issue of materials and themes left out by Felix. To anyone familiar with the theology of Paul and his life story as related in the book of Acts and his letters, the absence of an explicit reference to the Pauline doctrine of faith alone, or to his abrogation of the Law in that context, or to Trinitarian conceptions of God, or to the Jerusalem Council's decision, after heated debate, to accede to Paul's position that the Gentiles were equally acceptable to God, is puzzling, to say the least. Such omissions were undoubtedly deliberate, as we can see from the evidence of the co-author of the libretto in a complaint he made after Mendelssohn's death.

That he [Mendelssohn] would not accept my suggestions for the Pauline doctrine of the justification by faith, but, at the appropriate place, substituted merely the general assertion: 'Wir glauben all an einen Gott' [We all believe in one God] was something that did not satisfy my theological conscience, though, perhaps, any extension of the work in this direction would have made it too long.

Put another way, one might ask: to what does Paul convert? Not, as one might have expected from the pen of a convert to Lutheranism, to an understanding of faith in the divine Christ for salvation. In fact one is struck by the general lack of interest in Jesus. While it would be an exaggeration to claim that Mendelssohn sought to eliminate him, the impression made is certainly one of neglect. Except for three citations of Matthew, the Gospels are completely ignored. Mendelssohn's overwhelming preference is for the Book of Acts (77 citations), in which very little is offered in the way of direct quotations of Jesus. Next to nothing is said of Jesus' messianic role or of his redemptive sacrifice. The gloriously powerful cosmic Christ of the Pauline epistles does not emerge from the text. Rather, Jesus is referred to in the context of bringing an end to the Temple and the Law (section 5) and is associated as a martyr with Stephen (section 6). Admittedly, Christ is also seen by Stephen in a vision standing by the side of the Father (section 6), and the unconventional use of women's voices to represent the words of the ascended Christ on the road to...
Damascus certainly produces an ethereal, otherworldly effect (section 14). But this only reinforces the impression that the heavenly Jesus is met only in the subjective visions of men. Of course, the audiences for the oratorio could fill in the gaps, and no doubt Mendelssohn was happy for them to do so, but the fact remains that the traditional emphases of Paulinism, and in particular his high Christology, are conspicuous by their absence. Jesus appears primarily as a liberator from outward religion and thereby as a pioneering exemplar for Stephen and Paul.

If the themes of the libretto are not recognizably Lutheran, then what are they? Felix’s portrayal of Paul is one of an individual Jew’s realizations of the God who exists on a plane far beyond the reach of idol or Temple and whose Laws are better observed from the natural world than from the Torah. Furthermore, it champions an understanding of faith that assumes an unchanging Judeo-Christian ethical core which, from time to time, requires liberation from the religious misunderstandings and theological confusions that human minds (Jewish and Gentile) have accrued over time. The autobiographical resonances are compelling, and the parallels with the views of his grandfather and father are obvious.

For those prepared to dismiss as intrinsically implausible the idea that Felix was entirely free of Jewish self-consciousness, St. Paul offers a chance to explore the dilemmas of identity facing this ‘Jew-boy’ musical genius. Living in a world even more confusing than that of his grandfather’s, Felix was one of many assimilated Jews who were forced to reassess and re-express their Jewish heritage, acutely aware that their contemporaries regarded them as, if not religiously Jewish, then at least racially or culturally Jewish. In Felix’s world, 

Neuchristen were frequently met with suspicion concerning their spiritual sincerity, and their new social proximity. If at times he felt the need to distance himself from Judaism, as his father had demanded and as seems to have been the case in St. Paul, it does not necessarily imply Jewish self-hatred or a total rejection of his Jewish self-image. In fact, Felix seems to have interpreted Abraham’s ideological problems with Judaism primarily in terms of a rejection of the Temple and the Law, and to have shared fewer of his social concerns about Jewishness as a marker of marginality. Thus Paul represented for Felix the moment when these more primitive religious crutches were done away with. Once gone, Christianity (that is, as interpreted by Abraham Mendelssohn) and Judaism (that is, according to Moses Mendelssohn) are viewed as theologically equivalent, suggesting the possibility, at least, that baptism was not to be regarded as betrayal. In this sense, Felix’s religious identity, which has been described as ‘Jewish Protestantism’, was understood as a universal religion of ethics that was founded more on rationality than on the mystery of faith, that had been expressed at different times and places in different ways but that was, in its essence, difficult to distinguish from the religion of his grandfather (excepting Moses’ stubborn adherence to the Law). As Botstein has put it, Felix’s project was

alism and religious difference. Mendelssohn spoke to his fellow humans through music on the assumption that a rational ethics could govern human behaviour... Music was an instrument of spiritual education and guidance and not an end in itself.

To debate whether Felix was authentically Jewish, or even whether he consciously defined himself as Jewish in some sense, is to miss the point. For Sposato, the anti-Jewish strain in St. Paul was enough to demonstrate Felix’s non-Jewish identity, at least at the time of writing. Taking this conclusion is to dismiss the complex, racial understanding of ‘Jewishness’ in nineteenth-century European Semitic discourse. Sposato himself observes that Felix’s attitudes towards the Jews shifted throughout his lifetime, from which some might infer a lifelong struggle with a subliminal Jewish self-identification. Thus Felix’s negative representation of the Jews in the oratorio could be plausibly interpreted as an antagonistic posture adopted for complicated psychological and social reasons that reflect the complicated reality of Jewish existence at that time and place, rather than simply as evidence that he did not self-identify as a Jew. To put it another way, the sensitive observer cannot help but feel that important aspects of his creative work can best be explained by reference to a dimension to his inner world that reflected a Jewish self-identification at some level, regardless of whether or not he himself was comfortable with this. During the short period in which he edited the text and wrote the music of St. Paul, Felix Mendelssohn’s ostensibly Protestant worldview engaged with Jewishness and Judaism in a way that gives us a tantalizing glimpse into a kind of Judeo-Christian experience that has long since ceased to exist.

Few would disagree that inclusion based on the criterion of Jewish self-definition allows one to take into account more fully the rich variety of Jewish experience even if, in the context of Jewish identity politics, such ways of defining Jewishness logically result in politically contentious conclusions for those who wish to deny the complexity of Jewish identity. Arguably, the self-definitional approach can be expanded to include individuals such as Mendelssohn whose subliminal self-identification also had consequences for their life and work. The question is not to ask ‘Is this commentator on Paul authentically Jewish?’ but rather: ‘What kind of Jew is this commentator on Paul?’ and ‘How does his Jewishness exhibit itself and affect his understanding of Paul?’ To categorize Felix Mendelssohn as Jewish in this wider sense is not to make the term meaningless, but to celebrate the reality of Jewish diversity and ‘marginality’, and to acknowledge the subtle workings of Jewish-Christian cultural interrelations in the modern world.

[A] utopian Protestant project rooted in the Judaism of his grandfather that was centered on enlightenment, harmony and the transcendence of nation-
Endnotes


2. In their introduction the editors write, 'In certain biographical entries a problem was to determine who was a Jew. The first principle adopted was that anyone born a Jew qualified for inclusion, even if he or she had subsequently converted or otherwise dissociated himself from Jewish life (where these facts are known, they are stated). The second principle was that a person with one Jewish parent would qualify for inclusion (with the relevant information stated) if he or she were sufficiently distinguished. A person whose Jewish origins were more remote would only be the subject of an entry in very unusual cases. However, a more generous attitude was taken in the case of Marranos, in view of the special circumstances surrounding their history.' *Encyclopaedia Judaica*.

3. The seminal study by Bryan Cheyette, *Constructions of the Jew* in *English Literature and Society: Racial Representations, 1875-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) showed that an analysis of 'semitic discourse' generates a range of definitions of 'Jewishness' that offer real insights into a culture's particular ideological landscape. Undoubtedly, the 'semitic discourse' has implications for the self-image of Jews living within that culture, too.


5. Wagner published 'Das Judenhuemm in der Musrik' in *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik* (Leipzig, 1850) under a pseudonym. He describes Mendelssohn's music as 'vague, fantastic shades forms', having already observed that '[a]lthough the peculiarities of the Jewish mode of speaking and singing come out the most glaringly in the commoner class of Jew, who has remained faithful to his fathers' stock, and through the cultured son of Jevreys takes untold pains to strip them off, nevertheless they show an imperceptible obstinacy in claying to him.' Richard Wagner, *Jewish Music and Other Writings*, translated by W. Ashton Ellis (London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 89, 96.


9. Felix Mendelssohn's advocacy of his grandfather's work is certainly positive evidence of his connection to being Jewish. A revival of or an increase in his grandfather's works by definition had to invoke a visible affirmation of Felix's Jewish heritage... Felix's knowledge of and lifelong admiration for Moses Mendelssohn's work was nontrivial.' Leon Botstein, *Mendelssohn and the Jews* in *The Musical Quarterly* 82:1 (Spring 1998), 212.

10. 'The Felix Mendelssohn should be considered a Protestant rather than Jew simply replaces one conceptually and historically inadequate label with another.' Michael F. Steinberg, *Mendelssohn's Music and German-Jewish Culture: An Intervention* in *The Musical Quarterly* 83:1 (Spring 1999), 32.


13. Felix was known to believe that the revealed law could likewise be explained in terms of a rational purpose, and could be regarded as 'the foundation for the national, co-hesion.' Moses Mendelssohn, *Jerusalem*, 126-128.


16. Abraham wrote to Felix, 'My father felt that the name Moses dei Mendel Dessau would handicap him in gaining the needed access to those who had the better education at their disposal. Without any fear that his own father would take offence, my father assumed the name Mendelssohn. The change, though a small one, was decisive. As Mendelssohn, he became irrevocably detached from an entire class, the best of whom he raised to his own level. By that name he identified himself with another group. Through the influence which, ever growing, persisted to this day, his name Mendelssohn acquired great authority and a significance which defies extinction. This, considering that you were reared a Christian, you can hardly understand. A Christian Mendelssohn is an impossibility. A Christian Mendelssohn the world would never recognise. Nor should there be a Christian Mendelssohn; for my father himself did not want to be a Christian. 'Mendelssohn' does and always will stand for a Judaism in transition, when Judaism, just because it is seeking to transform itself spiritually, clings to its ancient form all the more stubbornly and tenaciously, by way of protest against the novel form that so arrogantly and tyrannically declared itself to be the one and only path to the good.' Letter from Abraham Mendelssohn to Felix Mendelssohn (8 July 1829) reproduced in Michael F. Steinberg, *Mendelssohn's Music and German-Jewish Culture: An Intervention* in *The Musical Quarterly* 83:1 (Spring 1999), 27-38.

17. Abraham discussed the matter with his wife's brother, who had changed his name from Sulmon to Bartholdy, and who apparently convinced him to do likewise in correspondence. 'You say you owe it to the memory of your father [to remain a Jew] — do you think you have done anything evil by giving your children the religion they desired? Then remain in the best one of the two. It is an act of homage which you and I and all of us owe to Moses Mendelssohn's efforts in the interests of true Enlightenment... A man can remain loyal to an oppressed, persecuted religion; he can impose it on his children as a candidature for a lifelong martyrdom — as long as he thinks that it alone will bring salvation. But as soon as he no longer believes that, it is 'creative activity of the kind.' Letter to Abraham Mendelssohn (untrrated) reproduced in S. Hessel, *The Mendelssohn Family, 1:75.*

18. Performances followed in England, Switzerland, Denmark, Holland, Poland, Russia, and the United States.


20. As to his methodology, Felix wrote that 'When I am composing, I usually look out [sic] the Scriptural passages myself.' Letter from Felix Mendelssohn to J. Fürst (20 July 1820) reproduced in Paul and Carl Mendelssohn Bartholdy, eds. *Letters of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy* (New York: Longmans, Green, 1902) is reproduced by Lady Wallace and/or: Longmans, 1950, is determined to be true to the texts. In a letter to one of his theological advisors, he asks to know 'Whether you are of the opinion that any of the principal features in the history or the acts, and also in the character and teaching of St. Paul, have been either omitted or falsified.' Letter from Felix Mendelssohn to Julius Schubring (1833) reproduced in P. and C. Mendelssohn Bartholdy, *Letters of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy*, 5.

21. After Abraham's death, before he completed the oratorio, Felix wrote 'The only thing that now remains is to do one's duty, and this I strive to accomplish with all my strength, for he [Abraham] would wish it to be so if he were still present, and I shall never cease to endeavour to gain his approval as [formerly did, though I can no longer enjoy it]. I shall now work with double zeal at the completion of 'St. Paul' for my father urged me to it in the very last letter he wrote to me, and he looked forward very impatiently to the completion of my work.' Letter from Felix Mendelssohn to Julius Schubring (6 December 1835) reproduced in P. and C. Mendelssohn Bartholdy, *Letters of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy*, 88.

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23 In fact even his father, Abraham, complained, but Felix's polite reply (included within a letter to his sister) does not offer any explanation. The non-appearance of St Paul at the stoning of Stephen is certainly a blemish, and I could easily alter the passage in itself; but I could find no positive mode of introducing him at the time, and no words from him to utter in accordance with the Scriptural narrative; therefore it seemed to me more expedient to follow the biblical account, and to make Stephen appear alone. I think, however, that your censure is obviated by the music; for the reconciling of Stephen, though the words are long, will not occupy more than two or three minutes, or including all the choruses — till his death, about quarter of an hour." Letter from Felix Mendelssohn to Rebecca Dyke (25 December 1834) reproduced in P. and C. Mendelssohn Bartholdy, eds, Letters of Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy, 62-63.

24 'O great is the depth of the riches of wisdom and knowledge of the Father! How deep and unerring is He in His judgments! His ways are past our understanding. Sing to His glory forevermore. Amen.' (Romans 11:33)


26 Botstein makes a similar observation. "Insofar as Mendelssohn actually succeeded in integrating a Judaic element in the Protestant theology of the text of St Paul Julius Schrubnig provided him, it was in the highlighting, through the choral numbers, of the abstract and rational substance of faith. Despite the prominence of the figure of Christ in St Paul and the centrality of the conversion, it is the rational, ethical essence of faith that stands out... St Paul represented Mendelssohn's musical-dramatic defence of the theological stance of Abraham Mendelssohn, who ultimately converted to Christianity himself. In St Paul, baptism is the route to a rational enlightenment." Leon Botstein, 'Songs without Words: Thoughts on Music, Theology, and the Role of the Jewish Question in the Work of Felix Mendelssohn' in The Musical Quarterly 77:4 (Winter 1993), 574-575.

27 According to Sposato, Mendelssohn 'tried to distance himself from his [Jewish] heritage as much as possible... The editorial practices in his sacred music libretti also support this view of Mendelssohn, containing as they do numerous examples of the composer unnecessarily including anti-Semitic texts, such as in the chorus 'His blood be upon us and our children' in his edition of St Matthew Passion and those that add to his stereotypical depiction of the Jews as a law-abiding people in Paulus.' Jeffrey S. Sposato, 'Creative Writing: The [Self-]Identification of Mendelssohn as a Jew' in The Musical Quarterly 82:3 (Spring 1998), 204.


29 One chorus sings "Thus saith the Lord, I am the Lord, and beside me there is no Saviour" (Isaiah 43:11) and another "Is this he, who, in Jerusalem, destroyed all calling on that name which here he preacheth? May all deceivers ever be confounded! Force him away!" (Acts 9:21).

30 Interestingly, Sposato has shown that Felix 'softened the anti-Jewish intensity of certain scenes,' after his father's death. Jeffrey S. Sposato, 'Mendelssohn, Paulus', and the Jews: A Response to Leon Botstein and Michael Steinberg' in The Musical Quarterly 83:2 (Summer 1999), 288-289.

31 Felix also chooses to include the references in Stephen's speech relating the persecution and suffering of God's messengers: 'Which of the Prophets have not your fathers persecuted? And they have slain them which showed before the coming of Him, the just one, with whose murder ye have here been stained' (Acts 7:52) and a similar gospel passage, 'Jerusalem, Jerusalem, thou that killest the Prophets, and stonest them which art sent unto thee' (Matthew 21:37).

32 Texts that Felix uses to allude to the Gentiles' salvation include: Acts 4:26-29; Isaiah 60:1; Revelation 6:15, 15:4; Romans 10:15, 18; Acts 13:36-47; 2:21; 2 Timothy 4:17; 1 John 3:1.


34 I am grateful to Canon John Davies, formerly of the University of Southampton, for this observation.

35 The other-worldly effect has also been explained as an example of Jewish influence. According to Heinrich Jacob, Felix had applied the commandment 'Thou shalt make thee no graven images' to his music, utilising a device that stressed the great distance between Man and God. Heinrich E. Jacob, Felix Mendelssohn and His Times, translated by Richard and Clara Winston (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1963), 217.

36 For example, a letter from Felix's sister hints at a tension between the composer and his father regarding the need for a less Jewish-sounding surname. "It's suddenly come to Father's attention that your name was mentioned merely as Felix Mendelssohn in several English newspapers. He thinks he detects an ulterior motive in this fact and wants to write to you today about it... I know and approve of your intention to lay aside someday this name [Bartholdy] that we all dislike, but you can't do it yet because you are still a minor... Suffice it to say that you distress Father by your actions. If questioned, you could easily make it seem like a mistake, and carry out your plan later at a more appropriate time.' Letter from Fanny Mendelssohn to Felix Mendelssohn (8 July 1829) reproduced in Marcia J. Citron, ed, The Letters of Fanny Hensel to Felix Mendelssohn (New York: Pendragon, 1987), 66-67.

37 This is the view of Botstein. [Baptism] into Protestantism was not necessary a betrayal of the beliefs of one's forefathers. Rather, as the music of St Paul suggests, for Felix Mendelssohn, baptism marked the synthesis of past and present. It represented human progress in the modern age in which the Jewish tradition was preserved. The ultimate aim of the Jewish religion — the triumph of rational human wisdom in the name of God — understood in the sense of Moses Mendelssohn and realized by modern Protestantism, was therefore embraced psychologically by Felix Mendelssohn and rendered central to his vocation as a musician. Leon Botstein, 'Songs without Words: Thoughts on Music, Theology, and the Role of the Jewish Question in the Work of Felix Mendelssohn' in The Musical Quarterly 77:4 (Winter 1993), 574-575.