

Willi Goetschel

**Moses Mendelssohn’s “Living Script” and the Question of Translation:
Introduction**

If classics are those one cites and may quote but does not read, then Moses Mendelssohn would certainly qualify. His notion of the ‘living script’ is as suggestive as it is ingenious, capturing a moment in speaking, writing, preserving, and scriptural transmission – in a word, *Schrift*. It is a concept whose apparent paradox constitutes our attempts to fix that ever-elusive thing we call meaning. While scholarship has picked up on the significance of Mendelssohn’s concept, it rarely has granted it the philosophical attention justified by its rich theoretical implications. They are profound, however, exceeding mere linguistic, hermeneutical, and theological significance. They reach to the heart of Mendelssohn’s project of rethinking not just philosophical but also public discourse. As an exponent of the Enlightenment project, Mendelssohn has often and too hastily been reduced to the Enlightenment discourse as it succeeded – or more precisely failed.

Mendelssohn, in light of this, demands closer attention. The contributions to this issue by Grit Schorch, Robert Gibbs, and Willi Goetschel are interventions to help us appreciate Mendelssohn as the challenging, sophisticated, and seminal philosopher as which he is occasionally extolled but rarely read. The three papers collected in this theme issue – all of which focus on the philosophical significance of Mendelssohn’s conception of the ‘living script’ – originated in a colloquium at the University in Toronto in 2014. The protracted delay in getting this issue ready kept the ‘scripts’ we had prepared, one could say, ‘alive,’ allowing us to sit with this project for a longer than expected but ultimately productive time. This extended time for conversation, rereading, and rethinking, was not lost. On the contrary, it proved beneficial in modelling, as it were, the creative dynamics that the performative aspect of the ‘living script’ sets free. Despite the unintentional delay, the holding pattern still turned out to be one year shy of Horace’s wise admonition to spare the public nine years from one’s publications. During that time, on Grit Schorch’s suggestion, we took a closer look at Mendelssohn’s essay “The Statue: A Psychological-Allegorical Dream

Vision.” This little-known essay illuminates a profound, central point in Mendelssohn’s thought, presenting the most philosophically succinct discussion of the constitutive function of language and translation for human thought and action. The text deserves attention for the way it situates the issue of language and translation right at the front and center of philosophical attention. John Koster translated the essay for inclusion in this issue.

In the meantime, it turned out that Jacques Derrida did not only engage at some point with Mendelssohn’s *Jerusalem* in the French translation of Dominique Bourel, published in 1982 – as Derrida’s markings in his copy of the text illustrate – but also dedicated a session of his 1987 seminar “The Theological-Political” to Mendelssohn. I owe great thanks for this discovery to Rodrigo Therezo who kindly pointed me to this lecture. This seminar explored, over the course of a semester, the discourse on the translation of the biblical scriptures, ranging from Spinoza to Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, before leading to a discussion of the theory of language in Walter Benjamin and Gershom Scholem (a project that resulted, for instance, in the essay “The Eyes of Language: The Abyss and the Volcano”). The session on Mendelssohn is of particular interest for two reasons. Focusing with particular care on Mendelssohn’s argument regarding the ‘living script,’ Derrida’s discussion – given the subtle reader he was – offers a striking and illuminating engagement with Mendelssohn. Fleshing out the theoretical trajectory of Mendelssohn’s theory of speech and writing, Derrida’s discussion brings home the critical edge of Mendelssohn’s argument, deepening our understanding of his theory of the ‘living script’ in crucial ways. In addition, Derrida’s engagement with the ‘living script’ relates in a suggestive manner to his own theoretical trajectory. A moment of late recognition of another thinker whose critical thrust intimately resonates with Derrida’s own trajectory is palpable in this lecture. While Derrida early on registered intuitions to that effect in his discussion of Hegel in *Glas*, his appreciation of Mendelssohn does not assume more explicit articulation until this seminar more than a decade later, an appreciation that leaves its traces behind, for example, in “Interpretations at War: Kant, the Jew, the German.” As Derrida began to associate his thought in his later years at the interface between exponents of the critical tradition of Sephardic and Ashkenazi descent, i.e. Spinoza and Benjamin, Mendelssohn appears as another interlocutor whose theological-political sensibilities correspond with Derrida’s in-

creasing interests in a philosophically sustainable understanding of the post-secular situation.

Derrida's seminar is a heartening reminder of how Mendelssohn's rich yet nimble thought can engage with contemporary critical thought in productive and unexpected ways, an insight that also informs the contributions by Schorch, Goetschel, and Gibbs. In her essay "The Linguistic Condition in Moses Mendelssohn's Philosophy," Grit Schorch examines the foundational significance of language as the basic philosophical concern underpinning the trajectory of Mendelssohn's philosophical project, the linchpin, as it were, of his thought. Schorch brings out the systematic, profound character of this central concern, a concern whose critical philosophical challenge we continue to face, while tracking it in both his German and Hebrew writings. In "Meaning and Translation: Mendelssohn's 'Living Script,'" Willi Goetschel examines how Mendelssohn's analysis of the function of language and translation moves past the blockade that the Pauline distinction between letter and spirit imposes, giving way to an innovative approach to rethinking the process of transmission, tradition, and the production of meaning. With Mendelssohn it becomes possible to theorize meaning no longer simply understood as rehearsed through time, as it were, by hermeneutic reanimation – a notion that rests on Pauline commitments – but as ever constituted anew by the performative act of interpretation and translation. In "Living Script and Law," Robert Gibbs directs our attention to the difference between Mendelssohn and Luther's approach to the grammar of law. In pointed contrast, Gibbs shows, Mendelssohn offers an insight into the divide between two concepts of scripturality marked by the difference between the Lutheran *Sollen* and the Jewish tradition's understanding of law, found in *Müssen*. Mendelssohn's contribution, Gibbs highlights, is to develop with the 'living script' a theory that helps flesh out the profound difference between the two registers or grammars of law, the one exemplified by the Roman-Christian concept, the other by the Jewish tradition. In this approach, the deep nexus between linguistic specificity and philosophical difference comes to the fore with all of its deep theological-political implications. Naturalized over centuries, they have become entrenched in our most familiar concepts. Mendelssohn's merit consists in offering a gentle but effective response to disentangle them.

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