

Grit Schorch
The Linguistic Condition of Moses Mendelssohn's Philosophy¹

The ceremonial law itself is a kind of living script, rousing the mind and heart, full of meaning.²

Das Zeremonialgesetz selbst ist eine lebendige, Geist und Herz erweckende Art von Schrift, die bedeutungsvoll ist.³

The coherent and systematic features of Mendelssohn's philosophy are best demonstrated by taking his late opus magnum *Jerusalem, or On Religious Power and Judaism* (1783) as the most comprehensive representation of his thought. Here, Mendelssohn interconnects the many different layers of his philosophy. Although Mendelssohn did not adhere to the widely accepted presumption that a coherent philosophy needs to demonstrate its perfection and quality by means of systematic representation, his thought, represented in two different languages, in various styles, texts, and forms of argumentation, follows strict logical principles. The concept *living script* (*lebendige Schrift*) is not only central to Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* but one of the most complex concepts developed throughout his work. It intertwines all dimensions of Mendelssohn's multilayered thought, which encompasses such different fields as philosophy, logic, semiotics, hermeneutics, ethics, politics, aesthetics, mathematics, science, theology, Jewish law, and mysticism. The analysis of the *living script* brings to light the two fundamental features and leading principles of his philosophy: 1) semiotics, and 2) the primacy of praxis. Both features are the direct outcome of the *conditio sine qua non* of his thought: The revelation of the Jewish law to Moses. This means that in order to fully understand the concept of the *living script* and its multi-dimensional meaning, it has to be analyzed in the context and framework of Mendelssohn's entire philosophical work. And, reversely, a precise analysis of the concept helps us to better understand the major principles that qualify his work as a unique philosophical position in the 18th century discussion and an important contribution to modern, critical thought.

I. Mendelssohn's agnostic approach to the language discussion

Mendelssohn's philosophical apology⁴ for the ceremonial law⁵ in the second part of *Jerusalem* begins with an investigation into the history of language and scripture. This investigation develops hypothetical speculations about the natural genesis of signs and language which Mendelssohn had begun to work out in earlier writings, especially in his critique of Rousseau "Sendschreiben an Lessing" (written around 1755), his unpublished draft "Über die Sprache" (1756), "Von dem von der Berlinischen Akademie ausgesetzten Preise, auf die Lehre von dem Einflusse der Meinungen in die Sprachen" (1759), the famous prize essay *Abhandlung über die Evidenz in Metaphysischen Wissenschaften* (1764), and the review "Herder und Tiedemann. Ursprung der Sprache" (1773). But only with *Jerusalem*, does the intrinsic nexus between Mendelssohn's aesthetics and his semiotic theory become obvious as the core of his philosophy. While in his earlier writings Mendelssohn had concentrated on the question of how sign production is interconnected with the process of cognition, *Jerusalem* takes these reflections a step further and asks about the anthropological, social, ethical, political, and religious conditions of sign and language production, language usage, and communication.⁶

Mendelssohn's outline of the history of language appears to be a paradox: Its very foundation is a critique of the evolutionary emergence of alphabetical language as such. However, his general skepticism of historical narration did not deter him from employing it as an analytical device. For him, historical narratives are hypothetical constructions with more or less persuasive power. As early as in 1759, Mendelssohn begins to ask for probable hypotheses that may explain the natural genesis of language:

Warum mag es doch so schwer seyn, über den Ursprung der Sprachen mit einiger Gründlichkeit zu philosophiren? Ich weis wohl, daß sich von geschenehen Dingen, davon wir keine urkundliche Nachrichten haben, selten mehr als Muthmassungen herausbringen lassen. Allein, warum will den Weltweisen auch keine Muthmassung, keine Hypothese glücken? Wenn sie uns nicht sagen können, wie die Sprachen wirklich entstanden, warum erklären sie uns nicht wenigstens, wie sie haben entstehen *können*?⁷

Why might it be so difficult, to philosophize profoundly about the origin of languages? I am aware of the fact that we might seldom be able to produce more than anything else but assumptions about things that happened in the past and of which we do not have any testified evidence. But why does the philosopher not even succeed with an assumption, with a hypothesis? If they cannot tell us how languages have emerged, why at least don't they explain to us, how they *might* have emerged?

Mendelssohn follows Pierre Louis de Maupertuis and Jean-Jacques Rousseau in pointing out the circular argument of thought and language that one enters when questioning the origin of language: *Language* was necessary for learning to think whereas *thought* was the very precondition for the invention of language. Mendelssohn takes Rousseau's rather historical insight to an epistemic level and defines the circular argument of language's origin as the skeptical foundation of language theory. From this very ground, the hypothetical character of all language theories is deduced as the inevitable precondition of language reasoning:

So wenig die Augen in ihrem natürlichen Zustande, das Werkzeug des Sehens, die Lichtstrahlen, deutlich wahrnehmen, eben so wenig mag vielleicht die Seele das Werkzeug ihrer Gedanken, die Sprache bis auf ihren Ursprung untersuchen können.⁸

Just as little as the eyes in their natural state are able to perceive their tool of seeing, i.e., light beams, may the soul perhaps not be able to explore the tool of its thoughts, i.e., language, up to its very origin.

To investigate the origin of language means to move along the edge of knowledge. The metaphor of vision and light, applied by Mendelssohn to illustrate his argument, brings into relief the linguistic nature of philosophy as well as the philosophical dimension of language production. As long as philosophy has not given the proof that language is not of human origin (and according to Mendelssohn, it will never be able to give such a proof, "because there is no proof for something that happened in the past")⁹, the philosopher has to adhere to the hypothesis that language has naturally emerged. Therefore, any historical outline of the natural emergence of language is built on the same shaky hypothetical ground and can, at most, be used to question the biblical narrative of language's divine origin but not replace it.

Mendelssohn's language philosophy is subject to the agnostic argument that there is no philosophical evidence for the fact of divine revelation¹⁰ but also no proof for the opposite.¹¹ Accordingly, he discusses the origin of language from two angles: in his German writings his language theory is based on the philosophic critique of revelation, in his Hebrew writings he acknowledges the divine origin¹² of language from a traditional point of view (elaborated from the critical investigation into medieval Jewish sources). In his unpublished draft *On Language* he puts the paradox in one sentence:

Was die Allmacht dem erschaffenen Menschen wunderthätig mittheilen kann, das kann sie ihm eben so gut bey der Hervorbringung anerschaffen haben.¹³

What the Almighty may have miraculously announced to the created human being, may have been primordially attributed to it via creation as well.

Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* has been explored extensively as a source, or more precisely, *the* source of his language theory.¹⁴ However, there has not been any attention given to the fact that only here Mendelssohn directly confronts the two viewpoints of the 18th century language discourse: the hypothesis of language's natural *versus* its divine origin.¹⁵

As already mentioned, Mendelssohn begins with an investigation into the natural emergence of language and script. Recent scholarship has emphasized Étienne Bonnot de Condillac's (1714–1780) influence on Mendelssohn's semiotics.¹⁶ Condillac's *Essai sur l'origine des connaissances humaines* (1746) had in fact a strong impact on the whole discourse on language in the 18th century. Condillac has left his traces not only in Mendelssohn's writings but also in those of Rousseau, Diderot, d'Alembert, Maupertuis, and Herder. Condillac's narrative describes the emergence of language as a dialectical interaction between language and cognitive perception, the outcome of a long historical interplay between human sensations and sign production.¹⁷ The gradual transition from "natural" to arbitrary sign production, from a *langage d'action* to an abstract, rational *langage de calcul* seemed to present the plausible explanation that enlightenment discourse had eagerly longed for. And at first glance, Condillac's hypothesis seems in fact to also provide the foundation for Mendelssohn's argument that the *ceremonial law* (*halacha*) is a system of signs and 'a kind of script'.¹⁸ The emergence of our arbitrary languages out of a sensation-bounded language of physical action supposedly sets the ground to interpret the ceremonial law as a sort of language that reaches back to much earlier and more original stages of language production. But Mendelssohn's argument is far more complex, and a closer look reveals that the ceremonial law as 'a kind of script' has little in common with Condillac's concept of a *langage d'action*. Already in 1773, Mendelssohn exposed the inherent problem of Condillac's historical hypothesis as follows:

Die Sprache, die der Mensch als Thier hat, dies Geschrey, worinn sich jede lebhaftte Empfindung ohne Absicht und ohne Willkühr äussert, muß mit der, die er als Mensch hat, nicht verwechselt werden. Vergeblich hat sich daher Condillac, nebst andern mehr bemühet, den Ursprung dieser aus jener herzuleiten.¹⁹

The language that the human being has as an animal, this screaming that expresses every *lively* sensation without intention and without arbitrariness, ought not to be mistaken for the language that he has as a human being. Therefore, Condillac and others have tried in vain to deduce the origin of the latter from the former.

Mendelssohn questions the gradual transition from natural, involuntary, and spontaneous sign production to the later state of our fully developed alphabetical languages that consist of both natural and arbitrary signs. “This transition”, Mendelssohn argues, “seems to require a leap.”²⁰ In *Jerusalem*, Mendelssohn closely interlinks the emergence of arbitrary signs with the development of scripture and fully elucidates the philosophical argument that underlies his critique of Condillac. The philosophical investigation of the paradigm shift that is marked by the transition from the system of visual, hieroglyphic signs to the new system of alphabetical signs, is crucial for Mendelssohn's theory of language and scripture. It is one of the most fascinating arguments in Mendelssohn's entire work that discloses the systematic features through which Mendelssohn's language theory is interlinked with his critical aesthetics, metaphysics, and politics.

II. Diversity as an anthropological condition: The human senses, their languages, and the invention of scripture

In 1784, one year after Mendelssohn had handed over to the public his major philosophic work, *Jerusalem*, he published the small but remarkable essay *Die Bildsäule: Ein psychologisch-allegorisches Traumgedicht (The Statue: A Psychological-Allegorical Dream Vision)*.²¹ Here, in the framework of an allegoric dream the five personified senses and their sub-senses meet each other in a stage-like scenario. Mendelssohn introduces them as talking in different dialects²² and stresses their difficulties with mutual understanding. The hermeneutic effort to understand the meaning of each other's expressions provokes the desire for comparison and translation between the various dialects of the human body. This allegoric scene illustrates Mendelssohn's concept of diversity with an efficacious picture: human perception itself is divided into different personalities wherein each of the senses has invented its own language that is only of limited access to the other *dramatis personae* (i.e., the other human senses) *via* translation.²³ That means that the human subject is composed of separate perceptual categories which each is determined by its own faculties that

are captured through the qualities of another sense or, most probably, several other senses. Mendelssohn conceptualizes multilingual diversity as an anthropological condition and poses the strong claim that translation begins within ourselves. When this internal diversity is ignored and/or leveled, humankind is in danger. As is widely known, Mendelssohn's political plea for diversity is the grand finale of *Jerusalem*:

Brüder! [...] lasset uns keine Übereinstimmung lügen, wo Mannigfaltigkeit offenbar Plan und Endzweck der Vorsehung ist. Keiner von uns denkt und empfindet vollkommen so, wie sein Nebenmensch;²⁴

Brothers, [...] let us not feign agreement where diversity is evidently the plan and purpose of Providence. Not one of us thinks and feels exactly like his fellow man;²⁵

What philosophers and scholars have completely overlooked so far is the very fact that the political meaning of the concept is based on a thorough philosophical argument. This philosophical argument can only be found in explicit formulation in Mendelssohn's text *Die Bildsäule*, wrapped in an allegoric dream and written one year after *Jerusalem*.

Mendelssohn had developed elements of his argument earlier on. In his draft *On Language*, he evaluates the anthropological distinction between the five senses in relation to their function for the cognitive process. And, as it becomes unequivocally clear with his aesthetic writings and his prize essay *On Evidence in Metaphysical Sciences*, Mendelssohn regards perception and cognition as inseparable from the process of sign production. Only on the basis of the assumptions made by Mendelssohn in these earlier texts can one comprehend the full extent of his theory and critique of scripture in *Jerusalem*. In what follows, I will reconstruct Mendelssohn's argument with an eye to his various texts to shed new light on the famous *Jerusalem* passage that deals with the history of scripture.

Mendelssohn evaluates the different senses and their respective languages as follows: *Taste* and *smell* are the senses with the least developed languages. They are the slowest and most confused senses and have therefore rarely contributed to the process of cognition. But they are relevant for another reason. The close proximity and similarity between the two may have indicated in the first place the idea of translating the languages of the senses into each other and led to the conclusion that the sensations of all senses might be comparable in several transcendental terms. The *sense of sight* is of outmost relevance for cognition (*deutliche Erkenntnis*).

It is the only sense which produces universal concepts synthetically.²⁶ Furthermore, it has – in collaboration with the sense of touch – developed a language of expression based on the concepts of extension and motion that is of utmost clarity, determinacy, and precision. It is for that reason, Mendelssohn argues, that geometry and the optical science became the driving force for the scientific revolution and the emergence of modern philosophy.²⁷ He differentiates two types of vision: the *sight of figures* and the *sight of colors*. In his essay, *Die Bildsäule*, he represents them as the two allegorical dream characters “Raumgesicht” (vision of space) and “Farbgesicht” (vision of color).²⁸ Comparing the capacity for *seeing colors* with that of *hearing sounds*, Mendelssohn argues that the eye can distinguish different colors side by side while the ear receives different sounds mainly in sequences. But on the other hand, the sense of hearing is superior to vision in terms of speed: the ear is able to comprehend and distinguish a much greater amount of sequent sounds than the eye can differentiate sequent colors in a given time. The ear’s capacity to receive fast sequences of sensations makes it an excellent tool for comparison and, therefore, an important source for the production of universal concepts.²⁹ *Feeling*, or the *sense of touch*, is able to perceive several objects synchronically, and that is a clear advantage over *hearing*, *taste*, and *smell* which function – for the most part – diachronically. In contrast to *sight*, touch can only perceive a very limited quantity of objects at once, which makes it a very useful tool for comparison and separation. Therefore, the sense of touch supplements, corrects, and elucidates concepts that were generated by means of the visual sense.³⁰

Mendelssohn assumes that each of the five senses has generated its own independent system of signs and, overall, he favors the “seeing of figures” and “hearing of sounds” over the other human perceptual capabilities for the process of sign bounded cognition.³¹ Thus, it is not by accident that the seeing of figures and hearing of sounds are the aesthetic concepts which anticipate scripture, speech, and language. Mendelssohn’s brief account of the emergence of scripture and language in *Jerusalem* narrates the aesthetic and epistemological propositions he had developed in his earlier texts. The account begins with the natural genesis of the first visible signs out of the things themselves, culminating in the invention of hieroglyphic signs and script, which are uncoupled from the things themselves:

Die ersten sichtbaren Zeichen, deren sich die Menschen zu Bezeichnung ihrer abgesonderten Begriffe bedient haben, werden vermuthlich die Dinge selbst gewesen seyn. Wie nämlich jedes Ding in der Natur einen eigenen Charakter hat, mit welchem es sich von allen übrigen Dingen auszeichnet; so wird der sinnliche Eindruck, den dieses Ding auf uns macht, unsere Aufmerksamkeit hauptsächlich auf dieses Unterscheidungszeichen lenken, die Idee desselben rege machen, und also zur Bezeichnung desselben gar füglich dienen können. [...] Mit der Zeit kann man es bequemer gefunden haben, anstatt der Dinge selbst, ihre Bildnisse in Körpern oder auf Flächen zu nehmen; endlich der Kürze halber sich der Umrisse zu bedienen, sodann einen Theil des Umrisses statt des Ganzen gelten zu lassen, und endlich aus heterogenen Theilen ein unförmliches, aber *bedeutungsvolles* Ganzes zusammenzusetzen; und diese Bezeichnungsart ist die *Hieroglyphik*.³²

The first visible signs that men used to designate their abstract concepts were presumably the things themselves. Since everything in nature has a character of its own that distinguishes it from all other things, the sensual impression that this thing makes on us, will draw our attention chiefly to this distinctive feature, will excite the idea of it, and can therefore serve very well to designate it. [...] In the course of time, men may have found it more convenient to take images of the things, either in bodies or on surfaces, instead of the things themselves; Later, for the sake of brevity, to make use of outlines, and next, to let a part of the outline stand for the whole, and at last, to compose out of heterogeneous parts a shapeless but *meaningful* whole, and this mode of designation is called *hieroglyphics*.³³

Hieroglyphs are the language or sign system of the visual sense, while our alphabetical languages, Mendelssohn argues, depend on two different sign systems that fulfill different human needs: the system of sounds *and* the letters of the alphabet, i.e., a visual sign system that is different from hieroglyphs.³⁴ Whereas intersubjective communication relies primarily on temporary, audible signs, visual signs are a lasting and therefore indispensable tool for subjective memory and cognition. As already mentioned, Mendelssohn questions the linear, natural “transition” from hieroglyphs “to our script” and alphabetical signs:

Aber von der Hieroglyphik bis zu unserer alphabetischen Schrift – dieser Übergang scheint einen Sprung, und der Sprung mehr als gemeine Menschkräfte zu erfordern.³⁵

The transition from hieroglyphics to our alphabetical script seems to have required a leap, and the leap seems to have required more than ordinary human powers.³⁶

The challenge Mendelssohn faces is the philosophical problem that humans have “to conceive a deliberate plan” to designate “a multitude of concepts” that cannot be surveyed and comprehended “by means of a small number of elementary signs.”³⁷ Rather surprisingly at first glance