

JEWISH ALLEGORY IN EIGHTEENTH-  
CENTURY CHRISTIAN IMAGINATION

SBL Press

# BIBLE AND ITS RECEPTION

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Number 7

SBL Press



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**SBL PRESS**

**Atlanta**

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2023946504

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For Raphael, ben Aharon

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## PREFACE

White man, hear me! History, as nearly no one seems to know, is not merely something to read. And it does not refer merely, or even principally, to the past. On the contrary, the great force of history comes from the fact that we carry it within us, are unconsciously controlled by it in many ways, and history is literally *present* in all that we do. It could scarcely be otherwise, since it is to history that we owe our frames of reference, our identities, and our aspirations. And it is with great pain and terror that one begins to realize this. In great pain and terror one begins to assess the history which has placed one where one is, and formed one's point of view. In great pain and terror because, thereafter, one enters into battle with that historical creation, Oneself, and attempts to recreate oneself according to a principle more humane and more liberating.

James Baldwin, "The White Man's Guilt"<sup>1</sup>

My journey with this material began as a series of revelations regarding my own tradition as I encountered the history of Christian Hebraism in graduate school. I was raised and continue to identify as a Swedenborgian Christian. Through an immersive religious education from kindergarten through high school, I was absorbed in a world that understood the Bible to have essentially two kinds of meaning: an internal sense and an external sense. In my world, each of the characters in the Bible as well as the places, numbers, colors, building measurements, and materials had second meanings. I knew each of these things as part of an interconnected and dynamic spiritual world that reflected the cosmos as well as dimensions and characteristics of my own soul. I was Esau and Jacob. I was Mary and Martha. I was Israel and Egypt. Reading this way was, and continues to be, a method of interpreting my whole self in the light of the narratives and poetry of sacred texts. I did not know growing up that Christians and Jews have read the Bible in similar ways since ancient times, believing instead that this

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1. James Baldwin, "The White Man's Guilt," *Ebony Magazine*, August 1965, 47.

spiritual sense of scripture was realized only in recent history. Nor did I understand that Swedenborg's troubling framing of this approach, which relied on his characterization of the Jews as limited to the external sense of scripture, had its roots in the exegetical formulas of the church fathers. Learning the political and social origins of this idea and then tracing it through the works of medieval and Reformation theologians helped me to identify and confront a troubling thread in my spiritual lineage. I found myself drawn to the work of those in other denominations, such as the Evangelical Lutheran Church of North America, who are also wrestling with this heritage and inspire notions of interreligious exchange grounded in moral integrity and honesty about the whole truth of our traditions.<sup>2</sup>

It was sometime around 5:00 a.m. in Jerusalem during the holiday of Shavuot, having been invited to an all-night study session blessed by the teaching of Dr. Avivah Zornberg, that the full weight of the tragedy of my inherited way of thinking about Jewish exegesis hit me. How could I have been so ignorant regarding the skillful weaving and layering of rabbinic methods, the "murmuring deep" of Jewish textuality? Where did the idea of Jewish externality come from, and how could it have survived so long given its patent falsity? These questions motivated my subsequent preoccupation with the history of Christian discourses about Jews, Judaism, and the Old Testament and continue to be a driving force in my teaching and research. My discomfort and curiosity about this history has only intensified since these early epiphanies.

It was during my journey with this material that I began to notice curious instances of ideas about Jewish allegory that appeared in the eighteenth century in precisely Swedenborg's time period. As soon as I had mastered the ancient sources of Swedenborg's characterization of Jews as literalists, I was confronted with confounding instances from his contemporaries that seemed to present the opposite, celebrating Christian literalism and characterizing Jews as allegorists. I am not the first to notice these instances. David Ruderman's *Connecting the Covenants: Judaism and the Search for Christian Identity in Eighteenth-Century England* helped shape my thoughts about this puzzling trend. The absence of a sustained study of the phenomenon spurred my reading of diverse sources from this period, which I eventually organized around the five chapters presented here.

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2. See, for instance "A Declaration of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America to the Jewish Community," April 18, 1994, <https://tinyurl.com/SBLPress6706c1>.

The final stages of writing this book came amid a global pandemic and a national racial reckoning. As they did for so many others, these events triggered a period of personal introspection. As a result, the reality of my *self* as a historical creation seems more urgently connected to my academic study of history. For all these reasons this book is undeniably personal, even though it has been written according to the conventions of our academic forebearers, who believed history could be removed from the biases of its narrators. I am also aware that by uncovering and presenting the anti-Jewish perspectives of my subjects I risk giving them a voice. I am grateful to colleagues and friends who have engaged me in wrestling with the urgent methodological questions raised by these issues and who have helped me discern a path forward that walks the line between describing the past and evaluating it. That this history comes to you from a second-naïveté Swedenborgian may be ironic or it may be irrelevant. My hope is that it contributes a perspective that understands the weight of the discourses of the past on constructions of religious identity today.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Early inspiration for this project sprang in part from my mentorship with the faculty in the Department of Religion at Boston University, including Deeana Klepper, Michael Zank, and Diana Lobel. I will be forever grateful for their driving questions and guidance as I engaged the varied and troubled histories of Jewish-Christian relations.

More recent stages of this project are indebted to collegial discussion partners and draft readers, including Jim Lawrence, Devin Zuber, Kathryn Barush, Sam Shonkoff, and Marcy Latta. The faculty of the Graduate Theological Union, and particularly those at the Center for Swedenborgian Studies and the Center for Jewish Studies, have been invaluable in supporting a climate of intellectual curiosity and integrity regarding the ways we investigate and communicate historical data. I am grateful to be able to do my work in such a climate.

The library staff at the Graduate Theological Union have been especially valuable in helping me access primary source material during a global pandemic when more usual avenues of access were barred. I am grateful to Colyn Wohlmutter, Beth Kumar, Kathy Farrell and the rest of the GTU library staff for going out of their way to ensure my research could continue unimpeded.

Finally, I am grateful to my life partner, who is also my study partner. Rafi Esterson navigated all the impossibilities of pandemic parenting with me as I struggled to structure a sabbatical book project in apocalyptic conditions. Rafi has also been my *chevruta*, sitting at my side, head bowed over primary texts, puzzling over intertextual allusions and translation conundrums. This could not have happened without you.

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## ABBREVIATIONS

b.	Babylonian Talmud
<i>Dial.</i>	Justin Martyr, <i>Dialogus cum Tryphone</i>
Gen. Rab.	Genesis Rabbah
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>JBRec</i>	<i>Journal of the Bible and Its Reception</i>
<i>JECS</i>	<i>Journal of Early Christian Studies</i>
<i>JQR</i>	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
<i>JR</i>	<i>Journal of Religion</i>
<i>JSQ</i>	<i>Jewish Studies Quarterly</i>
Sanh.	Sanhedrin

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## INTRODUCTION

This book explores the surprising rhetorical connection made between Jews and biblical allegory by key figures of the eighteenth century. It is surprising because from the time of the church fathers in the early centuries of the Common Era, there had been an established rhetorical connection in Christian exegetical discourses between Jews and the literal sense of scripture. This is not a book about what allegory is in any essential or universal sense, nor is it a book about what Judaism is or how Jews fundamentally read and interpret scripture. Rather, it is a book about how the eighteenth-century ambivalence toward biblical allegory merged with an existing ambivalence toward Jews and Judaism to produce novel conceptions regarding the allegories of the Jews. It will consider how this construct functioned in an age fixated on reason and mathematical certainty, despite the perplexing contradictions on display where it appeared. The success of the trope of Jewish allegory was due to its value in addressing anxieties about the Bible, Christianity, science, and reason that materialized in this age.<sup>1</sup>

The eighteenth century witnessed attacks on the accuracy and reasonableness of biblical religion from a variety of disciplines and discourses, including textual criticism, the sciences of physics and natural history, and the growing freethought of deists who challenged traditional sources of religious authority in unprecedented ways. As they had done so often in the past, many Christian scholars responded by looking to Jewish sources and Hebrew study for answers and tools that could be applied to interpretive challenges. However, we find in the early modern period a twist in the plot. While Christian theologians had long made discursive associations between Jews and the literal sense of the Bible, now they linked Jews and allegory. In this era, Christianity would be heralded for its understanding of history, grammar, and literalism while Judaism would be seen as aligned

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1. A version of this thesis appears in Rebecca Esterson, "Allegory and Religious Pluralism: Biblical Interpretation in the Eighteenth Century," *JBR* 5 (2018): 111–39.

with mystical interpretations and hidden meanings. This significant shift in the discourse is worthy of our attention for its implications regarding the reception history of the Bible. Its effects are visible not only in formal biblical commentary but also in the public discourse and in philosophical, literary, and artistic strata as well.

Christian allegorical interpretation of the Bible had relied on narratives about the nature of Jewish texts and Jewish interpretations since its first instance in Paul's Epistle to the Galatians (4:21–5:26). Paul's interpretation of the Genesis matriarchs Sarah and Hagar, which contrasts slavery, the law, and the flesh on one hand with freedom from the law and the power of the spirit on the other, set the tone for Christian discourses about the Bible and about Jews for the ages. The explicit connection between Hagar the slave and Judaism would come in the third century with the commentaries of Origen, who divided biblical meaning between a Jewish literal sense and a Christian allegorical sense. With the emergence of Jerome's Latin translation and commentaries on the Bible in the late fourth century, Jews were further characterized as slaves to *carnaliter interpretari*. Jerome's heavy reliance on Jewish interlocutors in Palestine for the contextual meaning of scripture came at a time when accusations of Judaizing were rampant, and he sought a hermeneutical partition between his interpretation and that of his Jewish sources. It was an anxiety of influence that would haunt the Christian exegetical tradition going forward. Both Jerome and his enormously influential contemporary, Augustine of Hippo, advanced the notion of split levels of meaning in the Bible: the Jewish literal sense and the Christian spiritual sense. The success of this characterization of Jewish and Christian interpretive abilities can be traced in the work of countless medieval Christian Bible specialists and persisted in the thought of reformers such as Martin Luther in the sixteenth century. Even where Christian scholars exhibited heightened interest in the literal sense, as tended to be the case especially among Hebraists, a distinction between Christian depth of meaning and Jewish carnality was strongly pushed, such as in George of Sienna's claim that "the Jews understand and explain the sayings of the prophets and all of Scripture carnally but we Catholics draw back to the spirit ... and therefore in all of the prophecies which may be understood literally about Christ, they see in those same passages only a carnal sense."<sup>2</sup> Constructions concern-

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2. As quoted in Deena Copeland Klepper, "Literal versus Carnal: George of Siena's Christian Reading of Jewish Exegesis," in *Jewish Biblical Interpretation and*

ing Jewish externality were employed throughout history where a contrast with Christian interpretation was emphasized. The trope became entangled with Christian self-identity and claims of doctrinal authority and occupied a central place in Christian definitions of Judaism as a carnal, worldly, and spiritually deficient tradition. As author Megan Hale Williams writes of this legacy, Jerome's work "contributed greatly to the emergence of a new Christian discourse of the Jew, and to its persistence in the Latin West for at least a millennium."<sup>3</sup> While the trope of Jewish literalism persisted in certain veins of Christian discourse, and persists even today, we can trace its reversal at key moments in early modernity, especially where Christian literalism was on the rise in the guise of reasonableness, common sense, and scientific discovery. This time, rabbinic understanding was marked as nonliteral and allegorical rather than as merely carnal.

The very idea of Jewish allegory, a remarkable reversal of the scheme that had been ubiquitous in premodern Christian thought, had its roots in seventeenth-century Christian discourse about the extrabiblical books of the Jews, especially the Talmud and sources of kabbalah. Scholars at this time debated the value of these sources and their relationship to the New Testament writings, especially regarding the Jewishness of the parables and other rhetorical conventions on display in the words of Jesus and his followers. Out of an interest in Jewish storytelling, then, a debate emerged regarding whether or not the Talmud's stories were allegorical. In the preface to his father's 1639 *Lexicon chaldaicum, talmudicum et rabbinicum*, for instance, Johannes Buxtorf the younger made the case that the Talmud was full of allegories:

It contains many sound theological observations, although enveloped in the useless shells of allegory; it contains the faithful ruins and vestiges [*rudera et vestigial*] of a collapsed Hebrew antiquity that contribute to confuting the infidelity [*perfidia*] of the Jews in later times, to illustrating the history of the Old Testament, and to elucidating rituals, laws, and customs among the ancient Jews.<sup>4</sup>

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*Cultural Exchange: Comparative Exegesis in Context*, ed. Natalie Dormann and David Stern (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2008), 206.

3. Megan Hale Williams, "Lessons from Jerome's Jewish Teachers: Exegesis and Cultural Interaction in Late Antique Palestine," in Dormann and Stern, *Jewish Biblical Interpretation*, 77.

4. Johann Buxtorf, *Lexicon chaldaicum, talmudicum et rabbinicum* (Basel: König, 1639), 3. As translated in Josef Eskhult, "Andreas Norrelius' Latin translation of Johan

Other seventeenth-century scholars made similar claims, such as Wilhelm Schickard's suggestion that the Jews had forgotten the meaning of the Talmud's allegories, and Johannes Leusden's comparison between the allegories of the Talmud to those of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*.<sup>5</sup> We find evidence of these ideas in secular literature of the time as well. Margaret Cavendish's 1666 work of proto-science fiction, *The Blazing World*, depicts a fanciful alien planet, whose new empress is inspired by the "Jews Cabbala" and the mystical way of interpreting scripture in the Jewish religion on Earth. She takes the advice of her wise Duchess to create her own "Romancical Cabbala, wherein you may use Metaphors, Allegories, Similitudes, &c. and interpret them as you please."<sup>6</sup> These ideas concerning the allegorical books of the Jews expanded in the late seventeenth century and early eighteenth century beyond notions about the Talmud and kabbalah to include ideas about Jewish biblical exegesis more broadly.

This new way of characterizing Jewish interpretation was often derisive, as in Robert Hooke's words distancing his work in microscopy from the perceived obsession with biblical minutiae on the part of rabbis: "*Rabbins* find out *Caballisms*, and *Enigmas* in the figure, and placing of Letters, where no such thing lies hid; whereas in *Natural* forms there are some so small, and so curious, and their design'd business so far removed from the reach of our sight, that the more we do magnify the object, the more excellencies and mysteries do appear."<sup>7</sup> John Toland's accusation against allegorists rang a similar tone in his *Christianity Not Mysterious*: "Every-one knows how the primitive Christians, in a ridiculous imitation of the Jews, they turn'd all the Scripture into Allegory."<sup>8</sup> Toland's assessment of early Christian allegory as an imitation of Jewish interpretation would be repeated by those in the following generations who required a negative foil in defending their reading of scripture. Ironically, early Christian accusations of Jews as literalists had served a similar purpose.

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Kemper's Hebrew Commentary on Matthew: Edited with Introduction and Philological Commentary" (PhD diss., Uppsala University, 2007), 20–21.

5. For a discussion of these and other examples of seventeenth-century Christian ideas about the allegories in the Talmud, see Eskhult, "Andreas Norrelius' Latin," 18–28.

6. Margaret Cavendish, *The Blazing World*, ed. Sylvia Bowerbank and Sara Mendelson (Peterborough, Ont.: Broadview, 2000), 210.

7. From Robert Hooke, *Micrographia: Or Some Physiological Descriptions of Minute Bodies Made by Magnifying Glasses* (London: Martyn & Allestry, 1665), 8.

8. John Toland, *Christianity Not Mysterious* (London: Buckley, 1696), 115.

Positive associations between Jews and allegory were also made. Christian thinkers sometimes exploited Jewish sources out of a perception that they contained an interpretive depth unmatched in Christian commentaries. Many learned experts believed the mystical books of the Jews, especially the texts of the Zohar, contained ancient wisdom from distant lands, supposing them to be much older than today's historians believe them to be.<sup>9</sup> Some even believed Jewish exegesis to be the foundation upon which the gospels were written, such that the English orientalist and Mishnah enthusiast, Simon Ockley, concluded: "If I had ever had an Opportunity, I wou'd most certainly have gone thro' the New Testament under a Jew ... that they understand it infinitely better than we do."<sup>10</sup> Thus, while Jewish interpretation was derided by some for its association with allegory, it was appropriated by others precisely for its connection to hidden depths of meaning, revealing a tension within the intellectual culture of eighteenth-century Christendom.

Recent scholarship has contributed to our understanding of post-Reformation approaches to the Bible and early modern Jewish-Christian relations in a number of ways. Michael Legaspi, Christopher Ocker, and Jonathan Sheehan, for instance, explore the academic and cultural recentering of biblical studies in European universities and other centers of learning.<sup>11</sup> This turn to reading the Bible as cultural heritage or as part

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9. Belief in the early dating of the Zohar persisted into the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially in Christian kabbalistic circles, where it was believed to be part of an ancient wisdom predating the New Testament. Guy Stroumsa (*A New Science: The Discovery of Religion in the Age of Reason* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010], 41) argues that the eighteenth-century fascination with ancient cultures came hand in hand with a fascination with foreign cultures and notes that the texts, practices, and history of the Jews, as "foreigners within," became the locus of decoding for Christian intellectuals. There were also challenges to the early dating of the Zohar, for instance, in the work of Venetian rabbi Leon Modena. See Yaacob Dwek, *The Scandal of Kabbalah* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

10. Simon Ockley, "Letter to William Wotton," quoted in the Postscript to the Preface in William Wotton, *Miscellaneous Discourses Relating to the Traditions and the Usages of the Scribes and Pharisees in Our Blessed Savior Jesus Christ's Time* (London: Bowyer, 1718).

11. Michael Legaspi traces the work of eighteenth-century academics, such as Johann David Michaelis, who consign biblical studies to the humanities and read the Bible as classical poetry, thereby making Moses the Homer of classical Israel. See Michael C. Legaspi, *The Death of Scripture and the Rise of Biblical Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010). Jonathan Sheehan argues that the rise of the "cultural

of the emerging humanities arose alongside the scientific revolution. Stephen Burnett, for his part, describes the Reformation-era removal of Jews and Judaism from Hebrew learning and translation in Christian circles.<sup>12</sup> Naomi Seidman points to this removal as a source of conflicting notions regarding translation and conversion.<sup>13</sup> And Adam Sutcliffe argues that despite this attempted divorce from things Jewish, a deep-seated and sweeping ambivalence persisted. Sutcliffe writes: “Throughout the Enlightenment the question of the status of Judaism and of Jews was a key site of intellectual contestation, confusion, and debate.”<sup>14</sup> This ambivalence manifested both among those that challenged traditional Christian interpretations of the Bible and among those that defended them. Judaism was never absent from the discourse. “Judaic themes were invoked with equal intensity across the entire spectrum of the Enlightenment.”<sup>15</sup> Against the backdrop of this scholarship, this book argues that rather than witnessing the final demise of allegory, as some would have it, the eighteenth century saw a discourse emerge about allegorical exegesis that was itself one of these key sites of radical ambivalence concerning Jews and Judaism.

### The Myth of Allegory’s Demise

Did biblical literalism rise triumphantly alongside modernity and the scientific revolution? Many eighteenth-century figures certainly thought this

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Bible” in England and Germany was not motivated by secular impulses but rather utilized a sophisticated set of instruments inspired by confessional contexts. See Jonathan Sheehan, *The Enlightenment Bible: Translation, Scholarship, Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005). Christopher Ocker, for his part, demonstrates continuities between late medieval and early modern interest the grammatical and rhetorical elements of biblical texts. The collapse of the literal and spiritual senses that began in the Middle Ages informs the interest in biblical poetics that develops in the centuries following, and demonstrates a corresponding collapse of human and divine authorship. See Christopher Ocker, *Biblical Poetics before Humanism and Reformation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

12. Stephen G. Burnett, *Christian Hebraism in the Reformation Era (1500–1660): Authors, Books, and the Transmission of Jewish Learning* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

13. Naomi Seidman, *Faithful Renderings: Jewish-Christian Difference and the Politics of Translation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 115–52.

14. Adam Sutcliffe, *Judaism and Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 5.

15. Sutcliffe, *Judaism and Enlightenment*, 14.

was the case. Cambridge mathematician William Whiston, for instance, argued that the Bible should be read literally rather than according to its “parabolic sense” and used an array of scientific and text-critical tools to make his case. Taking his thesis to its logical extreme, he proposed that even the six days of creation and the Old Testament prophecies should be understood according to their literal sense alone. This was a bold move on both accounts as the natural sciences of the day presented serious challenges to the creation story, and even the most ardent Christian literalists who came before him still held fast to a double meaning to the prophets.<sup>16</sup> Whiston persisted, nevertheless, and argued that a proper understanding of the effects of comets explains the events described in Genesis 1 and that a thorough study of Bible manuscript versions would reveal original prophetic texts that were far more straightforward than had yet been realized. Traditional Christian reliance on more than one sense of scripture, he concluded, should be altogether abandoned along with other patristic perversions.<sup>17</sup> Whiston was an extreme example of the kind of preference for the literal sense that arose at this time, but the rhetoric of literalism pervaded more popular and devotional settings as well, where we find evidence of the belief in God’s straightforward revelation through the simple words on the page. This sentiment is reflected in the popular 1773 hymn by William Cowper, “God Moves in a Mysterious Way,” which proclaims: “God is His own interpreter, And He will make it plain.” The verse reveals the early modern conviction, especially prominent in Protestant circles but also present in Catholicism, that the true meaning of scripture is made apparent to any faithful reader in the plain sense of the text.

This view of the demise of allegorical interpretation in the eighteenth century is backed by some contemporary historians. In his book *The Bible, Protestantism and the Rise of Natural Science*, Peter Harrison points to the Protestant Reformation and its antiauthoritarian turn to *sola scriptura* as the impetus not only for the hermeneutical preference for the plain sense

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16. For instance, see Deena Klepper’s discussion of Nicholas of Lyra’s “double literal sense” and quodlibetal questions concerning the prophets in *The Insight of Unbelievers: Nicholas of Lyra and Christian Reading of Jewish Text in the Later Middle Ages* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 32–36, 82–108.

17. Whiston, like his teacher Isaac Newton, rejected the doctrine of the Trinity, viewing it as patristic innovation. This was part of a post-Reformation wave of enthusiasm for the earliest forms of Christian doctrine, forms believed to have not yet been corrupted by creeds and councils.



but for the scientific revolution itself.<sup>18</sup> Harrison points to a new kind of natural history, for instance, in the work of John Ray, one that represented an unprecedented, secular approach to the subject. While in the medieval world of Hugh of St. Victor the book of nature and the book of scripture corresponded at every point, Ray presented his classifications of plants without reference to “Hieroglyphics, Emblems, Morals, Fables, Presages.”<sup>19</sup> A singular focus on the plants themselves was all that was necessary; whatever relation they bore to other realities remained the work for another author. This separation of the study of nature from the study of the Bible was a critical moment in the demise of allegory. Harrison writes: “The new conception of the order of nature was made possible by the collapse of the allegorical interpretation of texts, for the denial of the legitimacy of allegory is in essence a denial of the capacity of things to act as signs.”<sup>20</sup> Thereafter, according to this argument, the Bible, along with nature, lost something of its symbolic potential as it gained a perceived immediacy and certainty of meaning.

Hans Frei makes a similar argument in his seminal work *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*. He writes: “Despite the influence of Pietism, the fate of ‘spiritual’ reading and thus of double meaning in the interpretation of scripture in the later eighteenth century was finally as dim as that of the principle of interpretation through tradition, evaporating the remnants of whatever mystical-allegorical reading on the part of Protestants had survived the seventeenth century.”<sup>21</sup> In this period, he argues, we find a double iconoclasm. Not only did the typological and spiritual reading of the Bible evaporate, but the realistic reading did as well. In particular, the creation stories of Genesis and the miracle stories of the gospels came under scrutiny. As scientists called into question these supernatural biblical claims, the text was placed under the critical eye of German positivism and English deism. Scholars turned their attention to a safer form of literal interpretation: philological and historical literalism. Linguists, having inherited the venerable tradition of Christian Hebraism, doubled down

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18. Peter Harrison, *The Bible, Protestantism, and the Rise of Natural Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 8.

19. From John Ray’s preface to *The Ornithology of Francis Willughby*, as quoted in Harrison, *Bible*, 2.

20. Harrison, *Bible*, 4.

21. Hans Frei, *The Eclipse of Biblical Narrative: A Study in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Hermeneutics* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974), 55.



their efforts to study the text objectively, identifying multiple sources and conflicting manuscripts. These methods allowed readers of the Bible to engage on terms familiar to the sciences: the inspection of artifacts and the testing of theories. Allegorical interpretation came to be seen as naive and simplistic in the face of a new epistemology that sought mathematical certainty and mechanistic order.

Such a view of the plight of allegory in the eighteenth century, however, betrays a certain selectivity on the part of both Harrison and Frei, in terms of whose interpretations speak for the age. Indeed, there is a great deal of evidence to suggest more continuity with premodern interpretive strategies than this narrative allows. The rhetoric of the rise of literalism that we find so prevalent in both the eighteenth century as well as contemporary scholarly descriptions of this period is countered by evidence of significant interpretive threads that understood the Bible to be saying *something else* (*allos agoria*). The present study will demonstrate that allegory did not die with the Enlightenment but took on different forms and responded to different questions. By recategorizing biblical allegory as Jewish, Christian interpreters imagined there to be some distance between allegory and their native way of reading. Allegory came to be viewed as an ancient and foreign mode of exegesis, which could be marginalized or appropriated as needed.

In his conclusion, Harrison points to the Achilles heel of his argument. The stubborn persistence of Neoplatonism in the form of kabbalah, the Great Chain of Being, alchemy, and the like is detectible in the work of many natural philosophers from the early modern period, including Isaac Newton, Robert Fludd, Robert Boyle, and others. Rather than view this trend as “an unconscious reluctance to admit the failure of the old world picture,” as Harrison does, I view it as evidence that symbolic or allegorical thinking was not absent after the Reformation.<sup>22</sup> Allegorical biblical exegesis, while certainly no less fraught than it had been in the past, survived the Reformation and the scientific revolution and impacted various cultural, philosophical, and religious milieux where the symbolic potential of language, art, and even the human psyche would be explored and exploited well into modernity. The current study demonstrates the persistence of biblical allegory in eighteenth-century Christian thought and its entanglement with the figured discourse of Jewish and Christian religious identity.

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22. Quote from Harrison, *Bible*, 271.

## Allegory Allegations

It may, at first, seem unwise to showcase allegory in a historical study of a century that was decidedly turned off by the term. Many of the figures who will be featured here reveal a semantic preference for “representations,” “signs,” “emblems,” and “symbols” in their interpretive work, and allegory is often enough associated with “enthusiasm,” “mysticism,” or other heresies of the day. Such ambivalence results from, as Jon Whitman puts it, “the polemic against speaking ‘otherwise’ that had developed from the late Middle Ages and the Reformation to the Romantic period.”<sup>23</sup> Yet it is precisely this troubled framing of allegory that draws our attention to it. For despite their ambivalence toward allegory and their well-formulated distinctions between, for instance, allegory and symbol, many eighteenth-century figures produced interpretations of the Bible—be they theological, philosophical, or poetic—that belied such distinctions.

The ambivalence about allegory itself has deep roots in biblical traditions. Often, the use of the term allegory has been pejorative, either disparaging the methods of some other interpreter, such as Jerome distinguishing his work from “that allegorist” Origen, or pointing to the temptation in one’s self to distort the text, as in Martin Luther’s warning that allegory is “a beautiful harlot who fondles men in such a way that it is impossible for her not to be loved.”<sup>24</sup> In either case, when used pejoratively the accusation usually claims the allegorist left behind the plain sense of scripture and replaced it with something of their own, rendering God’s word disposable or, even worse, making God a liar. Thus, allegory is frequently used as a foil to mark the preferred interpretation as distinctly loyal to the original text.

When used pejoratively, allegory tends to be distinguished from some other, preferred form of nonliteral exegesis. Often it has been contrasted with symbolism, as in Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s assertion that the Bible, rather than merely allegorical, is “the most perfect specimen of symbolic poetry.”<sup>25</sup> William Blake differentiated allegory from vision, the latter

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23. Jon Whitman, *Interpretation and Allegory: Antiquity to the Modern Period* (Leiden: Brill, 2000), 20.

24. Regarding Origen, see Dennis Brown, *Vir Trilinguis: A Study in the Biblical Exegesis of Saint Jerome* (Kampen: Kok, 1992), 163. Quote of Martin Luther from *Commentary on Genesis* 30:9–11, as quoted in Whitman, *Interpretation and Allegory*, 3.

25. Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *On the Constitution of the Church and State*, ed. John Colmer (London: Routledge, 1976), 139. On the distinction between allegory

again representing the superior, biblical mode. In more recent times allegory has been contrasted with typology with the view that typology is rooted in the history in ways that allegory is not. The list of interpreters to make this distinction, a long and venerable one, includes Jean-Guenolé-Marie Daniélou, Eric Auerbach, Hans Frei, and Northrop Frye. This has resulted in something of a consensus view that allegory and typology are rival siblings, one ultimately victorious over the other. Allegory is the foreign intruder sent to replace and deceive, while typology honors and fulfills the promise of the literal sense. We find, however, that these efforts to distinguish between better and worse forms of nonliteral interpretation are often either applied inconsistently or oversimplify their opponent's approach.<sup>26</sup> And, in retrospect, they often expose a political tension rather than an interpretive one. Rather than asking what form of interpretation is being rejected, therefore, it is better to ask the question: *whose* interpretation is being rejected? Who stands in for allegory when allegory's demise is celebrated in favor of some other technique?

Whitman writes that during the early iterations of allegory in Greek and Roman antiquity there was less of a concern for the historicity of the signifying events. In this context allegory "indicates primarily a transfer from one word or concept to another. Something is said (*agoreuein*), and something else (*allos*) is signified."<sup>27</sup> Greek allegorists, he argues, were motivated by the search for an underlying logic (*logos*) in the passages of the story (*mythos*).<sup>28</sup> However, Jewish and Christian appropriations of allegory, beginning around the turn of the first centuries BCE and CE, generally affirmed the veracity of the original meaning of the text. This was done differently by different communities. Whitman's edited volume

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and symbolism, see Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "The Statesman's Manual," in *Complete Works: With an Introductory Essay upon His Philosophical and Theological Opinions*, ed. W. G. T. Shedd (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1853), 437.

26. For the former, see Peter W. Martens, "Revisiting the Allegory/Typology Distinction: The Case of Origen," *J ECS* 16.3 (2008): 283–317. Regarding the later, John David Dawson traces this to Quintilianus and his distinction between trope and figure in *Christian Figural Reading and the Fashioning of Identity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 14. Martens argues that Dawson himself succumbs to the pitfalls in distinguishing between allegory and typology in his reframing of the distinction in terms of "figural" and "figurative." See Martens, "Revisiting," 292.

27. Jon Whitman, "From the Textual to the Temporal: Early Christian 'Allegory' and Early Romantic 'Symbol,'" *New Literary History* 22.1 (1991): 162.

28. Whitman, *Interpretation and Allegory*, 35–37.

on the subject demonstrates, for instance, how Alexandrian Jews emphasized the performative elements or the behavioral context suggested by the linguistic context of scripture. The midrashic tradition isolated and elaborated on verses or words of scripture not to expose or impose meaning but as a kind of “interposition between the words of scripture.”<sup>29</sup> Paul’s use of the term *allegory* in Galatians in the first century CE drew connections between earlier events and later events, neither rejecting nor dismissing the historicity of the former.<sup>30</sup> These and other Jewish and Christian ways of characterizing and reading texts relied on a preserved connection to an original canon and an original community. That is not to say that Jews and Christians have uniformly affirmed the truth of biblical accounts: they have not. But it highlights the difficulty in defining allegory according to what is rejected or taken away rather than by what is added. It is precisely this perceived connection to the actual people and events of the Bible that has produced pejorative uses of the term allegory, which display an anxiety about losing this connection. Many forms of biblical interpretation deemed allegorical, however, still maintain the truth of the original account in its most obvious sense.

This project broadly understands allegory to be the “capacity of things to act as signs,” as Peter Harrison puts it, without qualification regarding the integrity of the things (sacred texts in this instance) themselves.<sup>31</sup> Put another way, an allegorical interpretation views a text as having more than one meaning. Rather than determining the precise contours of a definition of allegory, however, this book will analyze how the term is used discursively to define the religious identity of self and other. A study of allegory in the long eighteenth century requires us to investigate figures who distance their own methods from allegory, begging the question of how and why they did so. As Whitman notes, allegory shouldn’t be thought of as a single “kind” of interpretation, but a “series of critical negotiations” between a text and its readers.<sup>32</sup> And it is allegory’s troubled past that is precisely what allows us a pathway into anxieties about text, history, and religious identity.

In the last half-century, literary critics and philosophers have reversed the Romantic distinction between allegory and symbol and have effectively

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29. Whitman, *Interpretation and Allegory*, 41.

30. Whitman, “From the Textual,” 162–64.

31. Harrison, *Bible*, 4.

32. Whitman, *Interpretation and Allegory*, 5.

“rehabilitated allegory” as a category for understanding hermeneutics, pointing to the subjectivity of signs and the figured nature of language more broadly.<sup>33</sup> Scholars have also challenged the notion that allegory springs from an essentially Greek or Western heritage. For instance, in his study of allegoresis in Chinese poetry Zhang Longxi rejects misconceptions of Chinese literature as radically monistic, literal, natural, and impersonal.<sup>34</sup> The present study will build on this scholarly attention to the persistence of allegory not in an attempt to demonstrate that *all* interpretation is allegory but to argue that the political, social and religious utility of allegory explains its presence in even those environments supposedly hostile to it.<sup>35</sup> Allegory ensures a certain flexibility in a textual tradition by allowing connections to contexts foreign to that of the text’s origins. By seeking out and uncovering a hidden meaning, the reader is able to either hold on to something they are in danger of losing or introduce innovation into a community that would be otherwise suspicious. As Moshe Idel writes of kabbalah, allegory brings to life “a whole literary universe, mostly a biblical one, compounded of dead persons, destroyed cities [and] shattered temples.”<sup>36</sup> Early modern readers of the Bible were no less concerned with the question of the relevance of biblical places and characters than their ancestors were, and they employed a familiar range of hermeneutical methods in their interpretations, even if their discourse about these methods bears the markings of their political itineraries. The

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33. See, for instance, Whitman, *Interpretation and Allegory*, 15–20, and part 2, “The Late Middle Ages to the Modern Period” with notable contributions from Azade Seyhan, Rainer Nägele, and Tobin Siebers. See also Susanne Knaller, “A Theory of Allegory Beyond Walter Benjamin and Paul de Man,” *The Germanic Review* 77 (2002): 83–101. Knaller uses the phrase “rehabilitation of allegory” in reference to the work of Walter Benjamin. Gadamer also uses the phrase in discussing the direction of aesthetics and hermeneutics; Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, trans. Joel Weinsheimer and Donald G. Marshall (New York: Continuum, 2004), 79–81.

34. Zhang argues for a likeness between traditional Chinese interpretations of the Confucian *Shi jing* and Jewish and Christian interpretations of *The Song of Songs*. See Zhang Longxi, *Allegoresis: Reading Canonical Literature East and West* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2005).

35. See Whitman’s summary of this position, most famously articulated by Northrop Frye, in *Interpretation and Allegory*, 16–17.

36. Moshe Idel, “Kabbalistic Exegesis,” in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: A History of Its Interpretation*, ed. Magne Saebø (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 1.2:461.

following chapters will examine five cases from diverse, though not disconnected, contexts that reveal various facets of this phenomenon.

### Structure of the Book

The opening chapter presents a case study from England in which a heated and public intra-Christian debate about the allegories of the Jews would reveal sharply contrasting viewpoints. Some pointed to Jewish allegories as the source of confusion regarding the truth of scriptures, while others saw Jewish allegory as the key to rescuing revealed religion in an age of skepticism. The chapter begins with a noteworthy instance of Christian scientific literalism in the work of William Whiston. Successor to Isaac Newton as Lucasian Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge, Whiston believed that the application of scientific and historical discoveries to the study of the Bible would reveal a text that cohered perfectly “without any recourse to Typical, Foreign and Mystical Expositions.”<sup>37</sup> He blamed any contradiction or confusion of meaning on Jewish manuscript corruption and the interference of Jewish allegorical methods of interpretation. Once these corruptions were exposed and resolved, Whiston believed God’s plain and straightforward message to humanity would be revealed and the perfect harmony between science and Christian thought would resound. The self-described freethinker Anthony Collins would publish a lengthy rebuttal to Whiston and offer a reverse position on the usefulness of Jewish allegories. It was Collins’s positive framing of rabbinic and kabbalistic exegesis in tones of whimsical irreverence toward his adversary that would trigger an explosive reaction and a decades-long public debate on the part of his readers. In surveying the published responses to Collins we find perplexing combinations of ideas regarding Jewish allegory, ideas whose contradictions stand out against the overarching appeal to enlightened rationality. Jewish allegory is successful as a trope, despite the open inconsistencies on display where it appears, because it appeals as a method for addressing deep concerns about the reasonableness of the Christian Bible in the age of Enlightenment.

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37. William Whiston, *The Accomplishment of Scripture Prophecies: Being Eight Sermons Preach’d at the Cathedral Church of St. Paul in the Year MDCCVII* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1708), 13.

Chapter 2 explores the assumed relationship between Jewish conversion and biblical allegory that characterized Christian eschatological and exegetical activity in the early eighteenth century. In particular, this era saw the rise of the study of kabbalah at centers of Protestant learning, where some believed it to be a key to the kind of *unfolding* or *revealing* of history and salvation that both conversion and proper biblical interpretation described. This chapter examines the work of the convert and Christian kabbalist Johan Kemper, who understood his own conversion to mirror the process of decoding the Bible's secrets. He believed his Jewish identity prefigured his Christian identity like the Old Testament prefigured the New. Kemper's Hebrew-language commentaries on the Zohar and the New Testament, produced while he was a lecturer at Uppsala University, demonstrate key ambivalences regarding Judaism as both foundational and adversarial to Christianity, ambivalences that also manifest in his autobiography. His efforts to simultaneously exploit and erase his own Jewishness will invoke an examination of the phenomenon known today as "philosemitism" that permeated spaces of higher learning in the eighteenth century, though the term itself will provide an opportunity to investigate the historicity at hand.

Kemper's case demonstrates that the narrative of literalism's rise in early modernity has misrepresented the significance of Christian kabbalah in this era. European universities of the time sought rabbinic and kabbalistic texts for their libraries and recruited converted Jews who could apply these sources to Christian teaching. Natural philosophers of the day were familiar with kabbalistic themes and incorporated them into their theories and models. Christian interest in rabbinic and kabbalistic sources increasingly related to ideas about the discovery of ancient wisdom, which could reveal the secrets of the universe and the secrets of the Bible simultaneously. Kemper's allegorical conversion embodied these expectations. It would be the mere fact of his conversion and the *idea* that his Christianized kabbalah held the key to interpreting the Bible, more than the actual content of his commentarial work, that would constitute his legacy at the Swedish university. The commentaries themselves were laden with hints and allusions to talmudic sources that went underappreciated or unnoticed by his Christian students and translators, and the manuscripts were never published.

Chapter 3 examines the work of the German Jewish philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, who, when pressed to give his reasons for not converting to Christianity, responded by disparaging Christian creedal



formulas that limited language and text to a single, determined meaning. In surveying Mendelssohn's Hebrew-language Bible commentaries and his German-language philosophy, we find not only a defense of rabbinic hermeneutic modes that produce multivocal readings but also a subtle but steady critique of Christian literalism. Mendelssohn inhabited a complex set of social contexts and attempted to respond to the various intellectual and political realities of his diverse readership, both Jewish and Christian, orthodox and secular. His work countered certain stereotypes regarding Jews and Judaism with a theory of the Hebrew language and Jewish religious life that exhibited morality, rationality, flexibility, and spiritual vitality. He also repeated negative stereotypes regarding the opacity and moral impurity of the Yiddish language, demonstrating his own participation in the contradictions and paradoxes of the *Aufklärung*.

This third chapter also explores Mendelssohn's response to the Christian convention of interpreting the Bible and human religious history along parallel paths, or of believing the relationship between the two Testaments to be both typological and teleological in nature. This tradition tended to view Judaism as an early stage in the developmental progress of humanity and the Old Testament as a remnant of a primitive, authoritarian culture. Mendelssohn presented an alternative view of history as cyclical rather than linear and thereby characterized Judaism as a modern religion in its own right rather than an infantile stage in the development of humanity. The Old Testament was not, as his friend Gotthold Lessing described it, a primer for school children. His midrashic interpretations of Bible stories had much in common with Christian typology, but, he would insist, the moral development encoded in the Bible applies to the individual only and not humanity as a whole. Furthermore, a person's moral capacity is not determined by their location on the timeline of human progressive history. Such an arrangement would be the work of a cruel God. Thus, even Christian allegorizing in the form of typology is cast in Mendelssohn's light as rigidly determined rather than flexible and accommodating.

Mendelssohn's approach attempted to preserve the Bible's multiple layers of meaning and also insisted on the particularity of some of these layers for Jews. Jews understood very well their symbols, he argued, but the symbols themselves neither are universal nor can they be understood universally. His general theory that all language necessarily carries multiple meanings and requires interpretation allowed him to mine rabbinic commentaries for treasures of meaning that could connect Jewish readers to their tradition. His insistence on the particularity of biblical



revelation also informed a vision for religious pluralism. If the text of the Bible could mean different things for different readers simultaneously, religiously diverse communities could live harmoniously in a single state. Mendelssohn thereby responded to ideas about Jewish allegorizing with a philosophy of language that recast rabbinic multivocality as theologically and politically nimble and recast Christian literalism as the brittle and dead letter.

Immanuel Kant was an early admirer of Mendelssohn's but ultimately distanced himself from Mendelssohn and openly rejected many of his ideas, including those about Judaism, language, and history that are relevant here. Chapter 4 considers these themes through Kant's ambivalent relationship with another contemporary of his, the scientist-turned-mystic Emanuel Swedenborg, that reveals his most urgent anxieties concerning the allegorical nature of language and scripture. Swedenborg's insistence that a spiritual world corresponded to the natural world the same way that a spiritual sense corresponded the literal sense of the Bible was attractive to Kant, who was drawn to notions of an otherworldly "community of spirits," and whose "moral sense" interpretation of the Bible sought to leave behind the external husk of scripture like a soul leaves behind its body at death. Kant's ultimate rejection of this kind of speculative metaphysics aligns with his ultimate rejection of Swedenborg, whose allegorical interpretations of the Old Testament, Kant would write, made "the mistake of including Judaism."<sup>38</sup>

This fourth chapter also demonstrates that both the character of Kant's anti-Judaism and his principles for interpreting scripture relate to the development of his moral philosophy.<sup>39</sup> His attempts to redraw

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38. Immanuel Kant, *The Conflict of the Faculties*, trans. Mary J. Gregor (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), 65.

39. The scholarly discourse on the distinction between anti-Judaism and anti-Semitism reveals many tension points in the telling of this history. Many of the instances discussed in this book do indeed demonstrate characteristics typically identified as anti-Semitic, such as irrationality, fantasy, and protoracism. I will be using the broader term anti-Judaism, in part because of my interest in showing consistency across generations, particularly when it comes to hermeneutics and the religious other. My position is aligned with David Nirenberg in viewing the focus on Jews and Judaism as woven into long-standing patterns of thought and self-identity in the west. See David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition* (New York: Norton, 2013). For more on the distinction, see Robert S. Wistrich, *A Lethal Obsession: Anti-Semitism from Antiquity to the Global Jihad* (New York: Random House, 2010); Gavin

the borders of reason paralleled efforts to exclude parts of the Bible seen as morally problematic and to euthanize Jewishness from pure religion. Various anxieties of influence emerge in Kant's thought, however, showing his borderlines to be more porous than they first appear. This becomes apparent through analysis of Kant's equivocation regarding Swedenborg, allegory, the Old Testament, and Jews. Kant famously argued that Judaism was no religion at all but a political entity concerned with externalities, legalism, rewards and punishments. He also believed the New Testament to be morally advanced over the Old Testament, which merely documented Jewish ideas about a punishing God. However, we find notable contradictions in his views on these matters, as in his reliance on the Ten Commandments as foundational to moral religion. Furthermore, we find that despite Kant's rejection of Swedenborg's allegorical correspondences, his own approach to scripture produced interpretations nearly identical to Swedenborg's. That his sharpest attack on Swedenborg comes in a chapter titled "Antikabbalah" will further allow us to wade through the eighteenth-century scholarly rhetoric concerning Jewish mysticism and interpretation.

Chapter 5 explores William Blake's poetic reformulation of biblical figures and his provocative distinction between *vision* and *allegory*. While vision is associated with inspiration and immediacy, allegory is associated with memory and with what is backward looking, formulated, and artificial. The Bible, Blake writes, is no allegory but "Eternal Vision or Imagination of All that Exists."<sup>40</sup> In making this distinction, Blake echoes the sentiments of philosophers and poets of his age who wished to reject the dogmatic and arbitrary methods of past generations in favor of more experiential modes. We find that rather than describing a technique of representation whereby one thing is signified by the image of another thing, a technique that pervades Blake's poetry and illustrations, allegory instead functions for Blake as a particular mode of being. Those things he calls "allegoric" are the aspects of religion that are repressive and authoritarian.

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I. Langmuir, *Toward a Definition of Antisemitism* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990); and Jeanne Favret-Saada, "A Fuzzy Distinction: Anti-Judaism and Anti-Semitism (An Excerpt from *Le Judaïsme et ses Juifs*)," *Journal of Ethnographic Theory* 4.3 (2014): 335–40.

40. William Blake, "A Vision of the Last Judgement," in *The Complete Poetry and Prose of William Blake*, ed. David Erdman (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008), 554.

As with Kant anti-Judaism emerges in Blake's work as a mechanism for discarding what is unwanted from biblical religion, and his allegoric mode is most often represented with allusions to Jewish things. Blake makes Jews the unfortunate symbol for those things he is troubled by in corrupted forms of Christianity: false piety, legalism, and clerical duplicity. Motivated in part by the rhetoric of deists around him, Blake adopts the position that the God of the Old Testament is a vengeful tyrant, which he then incarnates as the miserable Urizen. In Urizen Blake provides Christianity's ancient heresy, Marcionism, a most vivid expression and anticipates the troubling success of the trope of the *angry God of the Old Testament* into modernity. Blake's Jewish God is the God of allegories, the God of pretense and deception. This all comes despite Blake's more positive appropriation of Jewish sources elsewhere, including imagery and concepts from the Hebrew Bible and from kabbalah. Like Kant then, Blake's ambivalence toward Jews and Judaism parallels an ambivalence toward biblical allegory: anxieties about the foreignness of biblical language are displaced onto the religious other.

The cases in this study counter the narrative of the demise of allegory in the Enlightenment. They also demonstrate the ways religious identity and Jewish-Christian relations continued to shape biblical hermeneutics into modernity. The conclusion discusses the biblical criticism that was born of these dynamics and developed in the generations to follow. For example, Elizabeth Cady Stanton's *The Woman's Bible* utilized source criticism to isolate threads in the text that were favorable to women's rights and regarded the rejected material as having been corrupted by Jews who were bent on deception. The anti-Jewish threads evident in nineteenth-century biblical criticism, in the name of literalism and historical certainty, have their roots in an age characterized by a double ambivalence toward Jews and allegory, despite the persistent and substantive influence of both on Christian thought.

This is a study of the use of allegory in a particular period in history, a period in which assumptions about ontological connections between nature, scripture, reason, and spirit were challenged and changed. Exegetical and literary articulations of semiotic relationships in language and text were impacted by these changes. Despite the claims of some eighteenth-century critics as well as some critics today, allegory did not breathe its last breath in this century. It did, however, show up in new contexts where it was allied to different communities than it had been previously and where it was rejected or embraced using new criteria for interpreting and knowing the truth. Each of the exegetes considered here found their own way

through the hermeneutical challenges of their time by conceptually marrying multivocality and Jewish identity, sometimes positively and sometimes negatively. This was a surprising turn, given the history of the Christian discourse of Jewish literalism, one that adds to our understanding of the entanglement of religious identity and biblical exegesis.

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