

# Bible, Jews, Revolution: Sylvain Maréchal's *Pour et contre la Bible* (1801)

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A young Parisian Jew miraculously survives war, Nazi occupation, and Franco's prisons, returning to his country in 1945. As a *kohen*, an engineer, a resistance fighter and a commando officer, he thinks of offering his skills to settlers in Palestine, taking his chances once again but this time on a kibbutz, grenade in one hand, machine gun in the other, against English and Arabs. Or he can remain in France to become what he sees as truly French: accept baptism, marry a Catholic, baptize his children. He chooses the latter, changes his name to that on the false identity papers he'd used during the war, and lives a long, happy life during and after a brilliant career.

Much is striking about this true and poignant story (recounted to me by its protagonist), not least its rarity; indeed it runs counter to the history of Jews in France. Few Jews who stayed in, or returned to post-war France felt compelled to convert in order to be fully French. Earlier, during the French Revolutionary period, when "the Jewish question" was on the public agenda and full emancipation was finally achieved (albeit incrementally), the general attitude among Jews was that no such choice was required. Not only did they generally not convert, but even those who had converted, or whose ancestors had converted (whether by compulsion or persuasion) in Spain or Portugal during the late Middle Ages and the Renaissance, reclaimed their Judaism on immigrating to France during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries; the same was true in England and Holland.<sup>1</sup> Even before the Revolution, Enlightenment attitudes enabled a judge to declare, in 1784, regarding a Bordeaux Jew accused of not being French, that

in France, as elsewhere, it is not one's religion but one's origins, one's birth, that makes one French...; whether one is atheist or deist, Jew or Catholic, Protestant or Mohammedan matters little: if one is born in France of a French mother and father, if one has in no way expatriated oneself, one is a natural Frenchman and enjoys all the rights of a citizen.<sup>2</sup>

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1 Esther Benbassa, *The Jews of France*, Princeton 2001, pp. 51-52.

2 Harvey Mitchell, *Voltaire's Jews and Modern Jewish Identity: Rethinking the Enlightenment*, London and

To be sure, emancipation brought restrictions on rabbinic and communal authority and on past textual authority as well, that is, on the practical authority of the Torah, the Talmud, and centuries of scholarly commentary together comprising "Jewish law." Was there a way to be fully French and fully Jewish? Despite some short-lived resistance by a very few Ashkenazi leaders, the dominant response was positive, and even those who had initially been fearful marked emancipation with joy and public celebration.<sup>3</sup> Ronald Schechter writes that

Jews were capable of quickly integrating revolutionary values into their worldview without abandoning or even questioning their identity....They assimilated that culture into their own...They recognized its values as their own without undergoing a fundamental transformation of identity. To those Jews who might have worried that they faced a choice between nations, [those who wrote about it at the time] affirmed that no such choice was necessary. The Jews could have it all: membership in a new community of equal citizens and an ancient *nation juive*.<sup>4</sup>

The notion of a gulf between nationality and religion developed only some decades after emancipation. In the 1820s, as Jay Berkovitz writes, revived anti-Jewish attitudes and increased assimilation generated among some intellectuals an identity crisis that produced several widely publicized cases of conversion; these were, however, neither typical nor statistically significant.<sup>5</sup> On the centenary of the Revolution, rabbis and grand rabbis all over France acknowledged anti-Semitic attitudes but unanimously celebrated "avec une profonde ferveur"<sup>6</sup> the patriotism and gratitude of Jews, who now had a country of their own: France, "cette nouvelle Jérusalem."<sup>7</sup>

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New York 2008, p. 185.

3 See Jay R. Berkovitz, *Rites and Passages: The Beginnings of Modern Jewish Culture in France, 1650-1860*, Philadelphia 2004, pp. 102-103, on Isaac Berr of Lorraine and his initial reluctance to give up certain privileges of Jewish communal and rabbinic autonomy.

4 Ronald Schechter, *Obstinate Hebrews: Representations of Jews in France, 1715-1815*, Berkeley 2003, pp. 13, 179.

5 Berkovitz, note 3 above, pp. 156, 161, 237.

6 See the Preface to Benjamin Mossé, *La Révolution Française et le Rabbinate Français*, Paris 1890.

7 Mossé, note 6 above, p. 26. Mossé was grand rabbi in the Avignon area, member of the Marseille and Madrid Academies, founder and officer of several educational organizations. The book is a collection of sermons given at special services throughout France marking the centenary. The Introduction is the speech of M. Carnot, President of the Republic, at Versailles. Although this precedes the Dreyfus affair by several years, anti-Semitism, especially in the military, was already sufficiently pronounced to warrant notice in this speech and in numerous of the sermons. The phrase quoted is from the sermon of Rabbi Aron of the Lunéville temple.

Today, the effort in France to balance universality with particularity, state secularism with individual or collective observance, has re-entered civil society, partly under pressure of North African Islamic and Jewish immigration: witness the controversial 2004 ban on Islamic headscarves and other religious insignia in public schools and government buildings; or, in 2010, on the burka or "voile intégrale." As for Jews, there was the 1980 scandal of Prime Minister Raymond Barre saying that although a bomb attack on a synagogue targeted Jews, it only hit "innocent French people"—as if Jews were neither French nor innocent. More recently, French Zionists have attempted to redefine Jewishness as loyalty to Israel, to the point of proposing, in a 2004 report, to criminalize criticism of Israeli policies, an effort being replicated in Canada as I write.<sup>8</sup>

The question of the Jews' civil status predated the Revolution. Already Louis XV had commissioned a report on it, and in 1787 the Academy in Metz had mandated, for its essay contest, the topic "Is there a way for Jews to be happier and more helpful in France?" The prize was shared by three contestants, among them a scholarly Jewish immigrant from Poland, Zalkind Hourwitz, who went on to become a well-known spokesman for full emancipation. After 1789 the National Assembly and the Jews themselves debated the relation of citizenship to religious practice, civic equality to religious difference, French law to Jewish law. Accordingly, the press was full of articles pro and con, political clubs held discussions, public speeches were made, tracts distributed.

The prominence of "the Jewish question" in late eighteenth-century France lends special interest to the text I want to write about here: the *Pour et contre la Bible* (1801) of Sylvain Maréchal. Himself an atheist from a Catholic but not especially pious background, Maréchal was nonetheless happily married to a practicing Catholic; the union was childless. Maréchal served as writer and editor for the influential radical journal *Révolutions de Paris* during its relatively short publication life (late 1789–February 1794). A leading member of the so-called Babeuf conspiracy of 1796–97, he managed to escape arrest when the imminent call to revolt was betrayed by an informer. He collaborated with the famous revolutionary painter J.-F. David on academic volumes; he produced numerous treatises in verse and prose, one of which cost him his job as sub-librarian at the prestigious Collège Mazarin in his native Paris, and another which brought

8 See Regis Debray, *À Un Ami Israélien*, Paris 2010, p. 50 for the French report. The Canadian Parliamentary Committee to Combat Antisemitism submitted its report to an international conference in Ottawa in November 2010. For an update on France, see Irwin Wall, "Remaking Jewish Identity in France," Howard Wettstein (ed.), *Diasporas and Exiles: Varieties of Jewish Identity*, Berkeley 2003, pp. 164–190.

him – along with notoriety and fortune – a short prison term just before the Revolution erupted.<sup>9</sup>

By 1801, when Maréchal's Bible study appeared, emancipation had already been legislated for nearly a decade; but Napoleon had not yet established the structure of consistories, Sanhedrin, and grand rabbinate that would be decreed a few years later and that remains a force in French Jewish life to this day. Why would Maréchal feel the need for such a work at that moment? For several reasons, I think. One is that religion was his constant theme and *bête noire*. He had addressed the failures, corruption, and devastating social effects of religion generally ("superstition" as he and others would have it) and of Catholicism especially in many works over the years, the most sustained and explicit being probably his satirical legendary *La Nouvelle Légende Dorée* (1790).<sup>10</sup> Now he turned to the *fons et origo*, the *Urtext*, behind all of it—behind the monasteries and convents, the prayer and hagiography, the crusades and confessors, the massacres and inquisitions, the cults of virginity, asceticism, self-flagellation, Mariolatry: in short, the Bible.

A more pressing motive, I suggest, is the author's sense of an immediate social need for such a work. Napoleon's Concordat with the hated Catholic Church would not be finalized until July, 1802, but preliminary approaches and formal negotiations for it had commenced as early as the summer of 1800 and proceeded thereafter in Paris, with due pomp and circumstance. The revolutionary reorganization of church-state relations was about to be reversed, and many in Paris and elsewhere were only too happy to jump onto the bandwagon in a revival of religious fervor. *Pour et contre* was launched as a propagandistic intervention against what everyone knew was coming and indeed had already begun: the rehabilitation of the Catholic Church as a social force in support of a new autocratic ruler, soon to be crowned Emperor in the presence of the Pope (1804). For someone who had lived through the Revolution, worked for it, publicly supported and risked his life for its most radical aims, this must have been a truly heartbreaking prospect.

The author's aim is already expressed in the title of his volume, "For and against the Bible": a title meant to shock and to educate. It would shock the devout reader for whom scripture was a sacred document, immune from rational critique or any other "contre." In confronting, indeed affronting, such a prejudice, it might shake something loose, cause a question to arise. The more open-minded

9 For a detailed and sympathetic biography of Maréchal, see Maurice Dommanget, *Sylvain Maréchal, l'Égalitaire*, Paris 1950.

10 On the legendary, see my *Anti-Saints: The New Golden Legend of Sylvain Maréchal*, Edmonton 2012.

reader would hear the title as an affirmation of biblical facticity, its manmade textuality, hence its availability to any analytical method exercised on any cultural artifact. Does this title deliberately echo the *Sic et non* (Yes and no) of Maréchal's radical countryman Pierre Abelard, who shocked twelfth-century theologians with critical interrogation of religious texts and dogmas? Perhaps; in any case, Abelard occupies first place in Maréchal's scandal-making *Dictionnaire des Athées*, published just the previous year in 1800, and Maréchal plainly considered him a kindred spirit.

"Men make books, and books in turn make men", writes Maréchal ("Les hommes font les livres....mais les livres, à leur tour, ne font-ils pas les hommes?"<sup>11</sup>) Given this humanist perspective, any study of the Bible as literature would have to offer both "pour" and "contre," for any objective evaluation of a major work of literature must take account of both positive and negative in its object of study. Thus no religious literature can be dismissed as simply, or simplistically, a pack of lies, for such dismissal, ignoring cultural norms, would undercut the historicist method within which Maréchal works. It would also ignore the aesthetic dimension of the work, in an essentially philistine gesture alien to Maréchal's personal sensibility as a poet and classicist. Not least, outright dismissal would violate Maréchal's propagandistic aim, i.e., to subject the Bible to the same type of literary scrutiny as exercised on any other influential text.<sup>12</sup>

In his preface to *Pour et contre*, framed as an epistle to ministers of all religions, Maréchal expresses his sense of urgency and dismay at developments marking the turn of the century. Here, at the opening of the nineteenth century, he exclaims, surely we can do better than to revert to the crude absurdities of the last eighteen hundred years (p. vi). He acknowledges the marked "réaction religieuse" (p. xix)

11 Sylvain Maréchal, *Pour et contre la Bible*, Jérusalem [Paris] 1801, pp. xxx-xxxii. (The given place of publication is false, as was the common eighteenth-century practice, especially with controversial material.) Page references to Maréchal's book will henceforth appear parenthesized in the text.

12 This is the problem with articles by Bernard Schwarzbach and Daniele Menozzi on eighteenth-century Bible study ("Les Adversaires de la Bible" and "La Bible des Révolutionnaires," respectively, both in Yvon Belaval and Dominique Bourel [eds.], *Le Siècle des Lumières et la Bible*, Paris 1986): they dismiss Maréchal (along with other rationalist or atheist critics) as merely an anti-Bible propagandist. They ignore everything he writes about the literary-poetic value of some biblical books and the morality and wisdom in some others. They also omit to mention his forward-looking critical perspective, which was in line with an already well-established trend in French, English, and German biblical scholarship. A similarly reductive mention by Marie-Hélène Cotoni, *L'Exégèse du Nouveau Testament dans la Philosophie Française du Dix-huitième Siècle*, Oxford 1984, fails to note that Maréchal's book is mostly about Hebrew scripture (p. 380); and while Christian scripture is her topic, it seems odd to omit the real character of the work and to cite from it only a few ironic phrases about Jesus, ignoring the importance of method.

characterizing this first year of the nineteenth century. This reaction included not only a massive return to churchgoing by once-irreligious people but also a popular taste for books such as *Génie du Christianisme* by the aristocratic libertine and repatriated former exile F. R. Chateaubriand. A romanticized account of the poetry, virtues, mysteries, and "truths" of Christianity, the work was published in 1802 and became a great best-seller; but it had been informally circulated and advertised for subscription well before official publication, and is twice mentioned in *Pour et contre* (p. viii, n2; p. ix, n1).

Bible study was no novelty when Maréchal wrote: his rational-humanistic approach already had a tradition with which he was familiar, starting with the Amsterdam philosopher Benedict Spinoza (1632-1677). A guiding spirit for Maréchal and the subject of a long entry in the *Dictionnaire des athées*, Spinoza understood religion as justification and sometimes model for the state and hence Bible criticism as a way to enable a critique of governmental structures, whether Christian or Jewish. In France there were dozens of commentaries, studies of scripture, and treatises on ancient Israelite history by Catholics and Protestants both lay and clerical, and a few by Jews. Most aimed to show the truth of their chosen doctrine or the existence of divinity however defined; most wished a reform of religion, not—as with Maréchal—its abolition. Nonetheless their attention to linguistics, style, cultural norms, narrative, and character paved the way for later and more thoroughgoing criticism. The seventeenth century produced Richard Simon, Montesquieu, and the frequently reprinted Claude Fleury and Le Maistre de Sacy with their prolific scholarly circles. Maréchal has Sacy's Port-Royal Bible before him and frequently deplures what he sees as the Jansenist scholar's insensitivity to the subtlety and grandeur of Hebrew poetry. The eighteenth century had Duguet, Voltaire, and Diderot together with their many sources, from late-classical to contemporary, as well as the atheist Baron d'Holbach, the prince of best-selling authors<sup>13</sup> and undoubtedly a major influence on Maréchal. Most of these writers' works on the Bible, religion, Jews, and related topics, as well as commentaries, critiques and biographies, were held in the Mazarin Library where Maréchal worked,<sup>14</sup> and many were readily available commercially. Maréchal's awareness of them is displayed in other works, notably his *Dictionnaire des Athées* and his *Calendrier des Républicains*.

It isn't my purpose here to elucidate the origin of every sentiment or expression in Maréchal's text; this is not the place for a detailed source-study or comparative analysis. Rather, this sketch serves to introduce his interesting and, I believe,

<sup>13</sup> Robert Darnton, *The Corpus of Clandestine Literature in France, 1769-1789*, New York 1995, p. 203.

<sup>14</sup> Auguste Molinier, *Catalogue des Manuscrits de la Bibliothèque Mazarine*, Paris 1892, passim.

timely text to a modern audience both Anglophone and Francophone. I would hope to add it to the growing body of work on the representation of Jews and other "marginal" or minority groups in earlier periods. It may be useful to observe how the author's politics inflects his representation of Jews, and to acknowledge the stubbornly iconoclastic voice of a writer who was not afraid to swim against the stream.

What, then, of Jews in Maréchal's Bible study? To begin with, he is an equal opportunity provocateur, addressing his prefatory tirade to "ministres de tous les cultes" (ministers of all religions). By accusing them of four thousand years of lies ("Quatre milliers d'années de mensonges ne vous suffisent-ils pas?"; p. vi) he clearly includes Jewish as well as Christian tradition. Rabbis are not specified in the preface, nor is the Talmud, but other formulations leave no doubt as to the intended inclusiveness: he names the Bible, the Gospels, the Koran and the Zend-Avesta as books to be burnt "avant tous les autres" ("before all the rest": p. xxv) and urges the elimination of all religious labels such as "materialistes, spiritualistes, catholiques, protestans, musulmans, juifs" (p. xxv). He urges all religious leaders to accept the way of reason, get jobs, publicly confess their sad role in deception, and turn their work over to women (pp. xxix-xxxv), who will do a much better job of it. (This is not, in Maréchal's lexicon, a compliment.)

For Maréchal, Jews are an "Oriental" people, and "oriental" is a recurrent term in his work. There were about 500 Jews in Paris during the revolutionary period, of around 35-40,000 in France as a whole. Approximately half lived in Alsace, another 4,000 in Lorraine, 3,500 in or near Metz, 2,300 around Bordeaux, 1,000 near Bayonne, and 2,500 in Avignon, the Comtat Venaissin, Marseille and elsewhere in Provence<sup>15</sup>; a number of poor or transient Jews would not have been counted. Jews whom Maréchal might have seen or met would likely have been Ashkenazi rather than Sephardi. Coming from Alsace, Germany, Poland, or elsewhere in Eastern Europe, they would not have been culturally "Oriental" (Middle Eastern). Clearly his thought is of biblical Jewry, not of Jews who addressed the National Assembly or (at the other economic pole) peddled used clothing in the streets. Though there is no hard evidence that Maréchal knew specific Jews or understood their community organization, he did share a friend—the atheist astronomer Jérôme Lalande—with the well-known Jewish writer Zalkind Hourwitz,<sup>16</sup> like Maréchal a Parisian radical and librarian-scholar. It is intriguing to speculate whether Maréchal's patriarchal fraternity, the geriatric "hommes sans dieu," might have been modeled on the body of elders of the local *kahal*.

15 Schechter, note 4 above, pp. 4-7.

16 Frances Malino, *A Jew in the French Revolution: The Life of Zalkind Hourwitz*, Oxford 1996, p. 154.

How are the Jews collectively to be denoted? This was an important question, both expressing and determining a position on their proper civil status. Maréchal pointedly denies them the status of "nation," either in biblical or contemporary times, defining them rather as a "peuplade" ("tribe"; p. 5)—and a lazy ("paresseuse") one at that, requiring chastisement from Moses. "Nation" was a term that communities of Jews used of themselves in conducting official business at the municipal or regional legislative level or at court, and the term was used of them reciprocally: "la nation juive d'Alsace" or "la nation allemande" for Ashkenazim. Thus in 1760, "la nation des juifs portugais de Bordeaux"<sup>17</sup> submitted for royal authorization a set of rules governing its taxation on behalf of its poor.<sup>18</sup> This usage did not carry our modern connotation of statehood or even of unity, whether ethnic or territorial. Rather it is the old medieval corporative concept of "nation" applied to any legally recognized grouping such as the "English nation" in a French or Polish university or, as David Feuerwerker observes, in the guild sense as the "nation" of tin workers or lemonade sellers ("nation' des ferblantiers, des limonadiers, etc.").<sup>19</sup> Indeed, there was little sense of unity among Jewish populations in France, nor any structural or organizational means of connection, so that rivalry between Ashkenazim and Sephardim on the national scale (e.g., for privileges or rights from king or National Assembly), or between wealthy governing elite and majority poor in a municipal context, could well escalate into legal or physical conflict.

The notion of Jewish nationhood was deployed by the opponents of emancipation. For them, Jewish difference was to be accepted so fully that Jews could not and should not be integrated into French society. The die-hard anti-Semite Jean François Reubell, a deputy from Alsace where half the Jewish population of France lived, said: "The Jews collectively are a *corps de nation* separate from the French. They have a distinct role. Thus they can never acquire the status of an Active Citizen,"<sup>20</sup> i.e., could not vote and hold office even if possessing the high property qualification to do so. If they are a nation, then they are a nation within

17 Jacob Rodrigues Pereyre et al., *Réglement de la Nation des Juifs Portugais de Bordeaux, Approuvé & Autorisé par Sa Majesté*, Versailles 1760 (in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris).

18 The document offers insight into the sort of conflict that could arise in the *kahal* (community), in this case people refusing to donate the required amount to charity for support of the poor and other communal needs (as defined, of course, by the ruling syndics). Pereyre was the agent for the Bordeaux Jews in Paris (and at court in Versailles); the document is signed by him and the syndics. The document was renewed and extended three years later. Sephardi Jews were usually labeled "Portuguese" regardless of their country of origin. Zosa Szajkowski, *Jews and the French Revolutions of 1789, 1830 and 1848*, New York 1970, pp. 12-14, notes that some community leaders sent their poor elsewhere—Jamaica, Surinam, London.

19 David Feuerwerker, *L'émancipation des Juifs en France*, Paris 1976, p. 40, n2.

20 Gary Kates, "Jews into Frenchmen: Nationality and Representation in Revolutionary France," Ferenc Feher (ed.), *The French Revolution and the Birth of Modernity*, Berkeley 1990, p. 112.

the nation, potentially a fifth column with loyalties elsewhere than to France—France whose own nationhood, territory, language, and form of government were violently disputed during these turbulent few years. If they are a nation, then they cannot possibly be French and Jewish any more than they could be French and English.<sup>21</sup> Moreover, as a "nation" they ought to have their own laws and authorities, and ideally their own territory elsewhere than in France; indeed, as Michel Winock notes, the Jacobin Society of Nancy recommended expulsion and can hardly have been the only ones to do so.<sup>22</sup>

For those who favored emancipation, Jews might once have been a nation—in the biblical period—but not for some 1700 years, since the Roman invasion and occupation of Jerusalem. The Abbé Grégoire, a deputy and ardent supporter of emancipation (for reasons that scholars continue to debate), wrote:

The Jews are no longer a nation; they are only the remains and debris of a nation destroyed. One cannot give the name of nation to men who have neither territory nor sovereignty nor government...no central gathering place, no rallying point...He who speaks of "nation" speaks of power and Jewish power today is no more real than that of the Assyrians or Medeans.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, as a corporate entity under the *ancien régime*, that status had been dissolved when the old corporations were abolished.<sup>24</sup> As a non-nation, then, Jews were as deserving of French citizenship as blacks in the French colonies—who were granted citizenship just as haltingly as the Jews, in a series of acts between 1791 and 1794. For proponents of emancipation, the watchword was that pronounced in the National Assembly on December 23, 1789: "Il faut tout refuser aux juifs comme nation, et accorder tout aux juifs comme individus" ("It's necessary to refuse everything to the Jews as a nation and grant everything to Jews as individuals").<sup>25</sup>

21 F.-B. Darracq [Corps législatif, Conseil des cinq-cents], *Opinion de Darracq dans l'affaire des Juifs de Bordeaux*, n.p. 1799, p. 18. Darracq, a deputy, was addressing the Napoleonic legislative body, the Council of 500, regarding the refusal of the Bordeaux Jews to give up their cemeteries as national property. He lost and was censured; the Jews retained their cemetery (which they claimed had never anyway been communal property but had been bought by private individuals). Cf. also Szajkowski, note 18 above, p. xx.

22 Michel Winock, *La France et les Juifs*, Paris 2004, p. 24.

23 Cited in Shmuel Trigano, "The French Revolution and the Jews," *Modern Judaism* 10 (1990), pp. 171-190, at 177-178.

24 Kates, note 20 above, p. 113.

25 Winock, note 22 above, p. 18.

Maréchal's reading of individual chapters of the Hebrew and Christian Bibles is as literary and as scholarly as he can make it. He proceeds methodically through both texts (though I won't summarize his analysis of every one of them), stating his preferences and dislikes with the reasons for each, and indicating the current state of relevant scholarship. He is well aware of recently edited collections of mythological material from other cultures, of priestly redactors, and of the plurality of gospels as well as the more traditional patristic commentary and various translations. Each chapter ends with or includes a list of literary or visual artworks on that specific book or its main incident.

Genesis is "le plus beau"—sublime and simple. Its universality is denied and its cultural specificity asserted. Moses, hero of the "Old Testament," makes his appearance in Exodus, which Maréchal finds less interesting than the preceding book. He suggests a naturalistic version of the burning bush: it might have been the aurora borealis, which the ingenious Moses was able to turn to his own purpose before an ignorant people (p. 6, n1). Maréchal shows great admiration for Moses, who as an extraordinary legislator and moralist could have used his genius to its fullest extent had he ruled a more advanced people—not unlike Czar Peter I (pp. 25-26). Of course the Pentateuch, like the rest of the Bible, is sprinkled with miracles and falsehoods; Maréchal wryly invites the French Institute in Cairo to take the trouble to verify them. This allusion is a gibe at Napoleon, whose foray into Egypt was accompanied by a large retinue of scientists and scholars—"a full-scale academy", in Edward Said's phrase<sup>26</sup>—their job being to assist the army, pave the way for French imperialism, and open Egypt to European ideas and technologies. These *savants* founded the French Institute, and indeed the Rosetta Stone was discovered during this campaign, in 1799. Yet the project was a disastrous defeat for the French, who withdrew after three years and surrendered in the same year Maréchal published his Bible study, 1801. Not only a reminder of this humiliation and its cost to the French in lives and money, the snide remark also poses the dilemma of intellectuals. Can they really perform their function in the new religious climate, or will scholarship have to defer to the new piety and betray its principles by—as Maréchal sarcastically proposes—verifying miracles?

The book of *Ruth* is declared a masterpiece of the pastoral genre. King David was the Louis XIV of the Jews, both of them enamored of luxury and women, both weak and debased at the end of their reigns (p. 42). This and the next Louis reappear in Maréchal's discussion of the relation of kings and priests, in connection with *Paralipomenon* (*I Chronicles*). *Nehemiah* shows simplicity, nobility,

<sup>26</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism*, New York 1978, p. 83.

candor, and—a key critical term for Maréchal—"onction," a term with overtones of skilled rhetoric, emotion, and (its etymon) oil, with connotations of soothing sweet odor. Judith he sees as a patriot; surprisingly, given his critique of biblical immorality, there is no condemnation of her murderous zeal. He raises the possibility, first floated by St. Jerome, that Judith wrote her own story—a hint pursued by Harold Bloom two millennia on—and why not, asks Maréchal, since both sexes have equal access to divine inspiration? Nonetheless, he continues, we prefer to see a needle or a bobbin in a woman's hand rather than a pen and a sword (p. 72). This is, of course, the orthodox two-sided Catholic position on women shared by many revolutionaries, even atheists like Maréchal. Esther is magnificent, a political romance or novel, composed in honor of the Jewish nation (p. 74). Nonetheless, despite these flashes of literary brilliance, the Bible is tainted by the incest, violence, concubinage, adultery, and general turpitude it portrays (p. 79).

Job is "sublime," showing energy and profundity, philosophy and high poetry. The French translations are pygmies trying to lift Hercules' knotty club. There is nothing negative to be said about this "conte oriental", even though no translator, whether prose writer or "miserable versificateur" (p. 83) comes close to the sublimity of the Latin. Each of the 150 psalms of David is briefly considered. Most are praised, some are dismissed as common, repetitive, or nothing new ("peu de chose"; pp. 87, 88, 110), and some are used as indices to the character of David. No hero, David is a prideful, vengeful king, a hypocrite and a "Tartuffe" (p. 92). Once again the violence of biblical rhetoric is deplored in favor of a poetry that teaches virtue; let the poetry perish that requires butchery, let books be burnt that offer people such atrocities as are represented in some of the psalms: if tigers had a religion it would be that of David and his imitators (pp. 98-99).

Isaiah is Maréchal's favorite among the prophets: superb, rich, sublime, exquisite, energetic, comparable to Homer and Michelangelo (p. 160). Yet it is sad, Maréchal claims, that all this genius lacks a more useful moral purpose, a more direct use for humanity. More or less the same, pro and con, is said of Jeremiah: both prophets could have used their talent to raise the abased spirit of their nation and give it morals (p. 182). Moreover, Jeremiah's character is too irascible, too vindictive, for a man of God (p. 186). Ezekiel is too baroque (my word) for Maréchal's taste, with its wheels, animals, nightmares and extreme metaphors (p. 205), all showing an "ivresse de cerveau" (intoxication of the brain); yet it too is sublime, some of it more so than anything in Homer.

Maréchal's moralism comes to the fore especially in his discussion of Hosea,

whose opening metaphor of adulterous fornication he denounces and refuses to translate from the Latin, indignant that enlightened nations continue to hear the echoes of "sales chansons d'une horde demi-barbare et sans vergogne!" ("dirty songs of a semi-barbaric and shameless horde": pp. 220-221). Only in *I Maccabees* do the Jews play a role that does them honor, according to Maréchal's revolutionary value-system: defending their homes and liberty (p. 246). The second Maccabees, though, is flat and boring and ought not to have been made canonical (p. 251). This survey of the Hebrew Bible ends with a short excursus on its mixed style and a warning that it is not suitable for all to read.

With that we turn to the Christian Bible, which I include here because it was written by Jews and chronicles the career of the most famous biblical Jew (though this is not Maréchal's perspective: for him, Jesus is still "Jésus-Christ" albeit with an ironic inflection to the title). Maréchal's discussion opens boldly by denouncing at length the cosmic adultery that is claimed to have produced Jesus. Not that there is anything wrong with being a bastard—and indeed the Revolution had passed laws on their behalf—but why place among someone's perfections the illegitimacy of his birth (p. 256)? Maréchal doesn't go as far as the medieval anti-Christian polemic *Toledot Yehoshua*, which hypothesizes an affair with a Roman soldier, for his point is that even within the terms of Christian myth itself, Mary committed adultery (with the Holy Spirit). He imagines the domestic disputes that must have taken place between the pregnant young wife and her aged spouse. Recycling a passage from his *Nouvelle Légende* (under "Mary" in the alphabetical listing), Maréchal reflects that if Mary had only said "no," we would have had no pope, no masses, no inquisition or crusades, etc.; Mary would have been quite simply a carpenter's wife and mother of a little woodworker helper (p. 257). The adultery theme reappears in the commentary on Luke, where Maréchal appeals to honest wives and good mothers to reject this immoral scenario and its consequence, the virgin birth, that "monstrueux dogme." With its magic and miracles, the story is full of absurdities worthy of the *Thousand and One Nights* (p. 260). We are still in the realm of Oriental fiction, and indeed this comparison was already a trope in rationalist study of Christian texts, for Voltaire had written in 1763, "Plus je relis les *Actes des martyrs*, plus je les trouve semblable aux *1001 nuits*..." ("the more I reread the *Acts of the Martyrs* [i.e., saints' lives], the more I find them similar to the *Thousand and One Nights*").<sup>27</sup>

The worst that can be said of Jesus is that he was willing to split families: this anti-moral and anti-social behavior shows Jesus acting like a genuine bastard (p. 262) or sounding like a demon with "infernal" advice (p. 270). Rousseau was

<sup>27</sup> Frances Malino, note 16 above, p. 211, n23.

wrong to have praised Jesus as highly as he did, for no commentary can palliate these passages. In Luke Jesus appears as a spoilt child who deserves a whipping, and he makes the wrong choice between Mary and Martha. The best of Jesus is the Sermon on the Mount: commonsense counsel that will last forever and has no need of miracles, prophecy, or divine inspiration to be understood (pp. 265-266). John occasions an excursus on figurative language, which makes it easy for priests to say anything with impunity and deceive the people (pp. 302-303). Other gospels are mentioned besides the four canonical ones; these four heterogeneous booklets are contrasted unfavorably with the masterpieces of classical literature (p. 306), and a belittling epitaph for Jesus concludes the gospel section: "Cy-gît un Dieu qui se fit homme, / Et qui mourut pour une pomme" (Here lies a god who made himself man, and who died for an apple" [i.e., the apple that Eve ate, the original sin for which Jesus's death atones]).

The remainder of the Acts and Epistles are briefly commented on with respect to style and content; scholarship is duly noted. The last chapter, "Résultat de la lecture de la Bible" (Result of reading the Bible) offers an overview of "notre analyse impartiale" (our impartial analysis, p. 368), which becomes a diatribe against Christianity and its foundational text. Jesus could have been an authoritative revolutionary leader and freedom fighter leading the Jews against Rome; Maréchal obligingly provides sample speeches for this alternative patriotic Jesus. Nor did Jesus behave well at his trial (pp. 373-377); again, Rousseau was wrong to praise him.

The uncompromising discourse of the revolutionary martyr Gracchus Babeuf, Maréchal's friend and comrade, must have been in Maréchal's mind as a contrast to the passive, terrified Jesus of Gospel; indeed he had written an eloquent and poignant tribute to Babeuf as the latter awaited trial and execution only four years earlier. Here was a man who did have a "sublime théorie" and fought for it, a man who was both "bon père de famille" and a champion of real equality.<sup>28</sup> Yet as little as Jesus did Babeuf's death or life make the difference it could have. With enormous contempt for those who had crippled the "real" revolution, Maréchal in effect bid farewell to political life when the Babeuf coup was nipped in the bud. He must have seen the writing on the wall and yet it would get worse: émigré priests would flock back to France, people would crowd reopened churches, Napoleon would become emperor, the pope would come to Paris to bless him, many of the best laws of the early days would be reversed. This is the world into which Maréchal launched his last major work, a lone atheist revolutionary voice crying in the Napoleonic wilderness with as much vitriol as it could muster.

28 Sylvain Maréchal, "L'Opinion d'un Homme," Paris 1796.

"Blushing for the human race to which I belong, I want at least to mark the first year of the nineteenth century of the common era with a solemn protest against the cult prostituted for so long to the most absurd, useless, immoral and evil-doing of all books" (p. 396).

And the Hebrew Bible? The two testaments are equally guilty of causing bloodshed, lies, vice and crime, and we have paid a high price for the invention of printing (pp. 392-394)! Not even the Jews have benefited, for they slander other nations throughout their history-book, and the slanders have been reciprocated (p. 395). A series of bitter, insulting apostrophes concludes the chapter: the author addresses the "livre affreux" (awful book), Jesus, the ordinary folk who, "flock of docile, routinistic bipeds" ("troupeau de bipeds dociles et routiniers": p. 398) that they are, will now cave in to their priests, the "femmelettes du jour" ("little ladies of the moment": p. 399) with ebony and gold crosses on their bare breasts, the bought-and-sold elegant writers: no, nothing will be different from preceding centuries after all, and the friends of reason will groan for humanity yet will continue to hope even if repaid with ingratitude or persecution (p. 399).

A short postscript attempts to mitigate this severity by recommending, instead of the Bible, Benjamin Franklin's pamphlet "Science du bon homme Richard." Not merely part of a longstanding "craze for America" documented by Robert Darnton,<sup>29</sup> this recommendation places before the reader one of the heroes of the radical revolution. As a working printer, scientist, political leader and writer, Franklin fulfilled in his lifetime several roles most admired by revolutionaries. When he died in 1790, the National Assembly decreed three days of mourning, and the Parisian print workers conducted a memorial. In 1794, Robespierre invoked Franklin's invention of the lightning rod as evidence that humanity can control nature to beneficial ends by the exercise of rational thought. A second postscript recommends the publication of morally and rationally illuminating books, concluding with the reminder that "Eclairer les hommes vaut mieux que de les tuer pour les rendre meilleurs" ("Educating people is better than killing them to make them better": p. 404).

What emerges from this overview, with respect to Jews and Judaism, is that while part of Maréchal's representation of ancient Jews was conditioned by the revolutionary discourse about emancipation and by a devastating loss of hope for the revolution, his central concern, even when writing about the Hebrew Bible, was with Catholicism, the old revolutionary foe that had come back

<sup>29</sup> Robert Darnton, "The Craze for America: Condorcet and Brissot," *George Washington's False Teeth*, New York 2003, pp. 119-136.

as strong as ever. Even during his tenure as editor of the influential radical journal *Révolutions de Paris* (1790-94), there was no in-depth coverage of "the Jewish question" as such, despite its prominence in intellectual discourse and governmental debate. Relevant votes in the National Assembly were noted, but arguments were not described in detail. Perhaps the journal's staff took it for granted that the 1789 Declaration of the Rights of Man made full emancipation a self-evident consequence requiring no special justification. Perhaps, for one caught up in the complete social and cultural transformation that 1789 seemed to promise, the civil status of Jews was a minor footnote in the creation of a new society, and their foundational text an obstacle to that renovation. For us, at a time when religiosity tries to and sometimes does shape public discourse and policy in the United States, Canada, Israel, and elsewhere, a dose of eighteenth-century French rationalism may be the healthiest antidote.

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