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## INTRODUCTION

This volume attempts to make a modest contribution to the historical study of Jewish doubt, focusing on the encounter between atheistic and sceptical modes of thought and the religion of Judaism. Along with related philosophies including philosophical materialism and scientific naturalism, atheism and scepticism are amongst the most influential intellectual trends in Western thought and society. As such, they represent too important a phenomenon to ignore in any study of religion that seeks to locate the latter within the modern world. For scholars of Judaism and the Jewish people, the issue is even more pressing in that for Jews, famously, the categories of religion and ethnicity blur so that it makes sense to speak of non-Jewish Jews many of whom have historically been indifferent or even hostile to religion.

Strictly speaking, Jewish engagement with atheism (i.e. disbelief in God's existence) can scarcely be found before the modern period, unless one expands the definition to include biblical condemnations of practical atheism (i.e. non-observance), and Jewish attraction to ancient world beliefs that might be said to have challenged the idea of Jewish monotheism. Of course, there were also debates about the existence of others' gods (e.g. disbelief in the official gods of the Classical world, or disbelief in the triune God of Christianity), which generated condemnations of Jewish atheism. Likewise, serious Jewish encounters with the Greek sources of philosophical scepticism (i.e. disbelief that a true knowledge of things is attainable by humans) are rare until thinkers like Simone Luzzatto in the early-modern period, although a weaker definition of scepticism (i.e. doubts about authority and suspension of judgment in approaching sources of knowledge, whether secular or sacred) might be said to have a Jewish legacy from the time of the first-century philosopher Philo onwards, including tantalizing figures such as Elisha Ben Abuyah in the Talmud, and especially in the form of medieval fideism (i.e. the idea that faith is independent of reason). These shallow intellectual eddies of pre-modern doubt about God's existence and nature, and about the veracity of human knowledge derived through tradition, became stronger currents with the seventeenth-century philosopher Spinoza, who was regarded by many as atheistic, and with the eighteenth-century Jewish Enlightenment or *Haskalah*. From that time suspicion of revealed religion began its ascendancy and the ties of religion loosened so that less ambiguously sceptical expressions within Jewry began to be heard. However it was the nineteenth-century culture of scientific progress, and the attendant popular interest in ostensibly naturalistic and materialistic writings in the 1870s (especially those of Marx, Nietzsche and Freud in Germany; Spencer, Huxley, and Russell in England; and Ingersoll in the US), that provoked a sea change in popular Jewish thought. Increasingly, the God of revelational religion simply appeared too naïve to countenance. It was from that time that a good number of Jewish thinkers felt obliged to establish oppositional, alternative, synthetic, or complementary models explicitly relating Judaism to the challenges of such atheistic and materialistic philosophies.

Significant scholarship on the subject exists – the well-known studies of Giuseppe Veltri and David Ruderman in the early-modern period spring to mind<sup>1</sup> – but that scholarship

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<sup>1</sup> Among Ruderman's most important contributions is David Ruderman, *Jewish Thought and Scientific Discovery in Early Modern Europe* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1995). Veltri currently directs a research

tends to be localized and fragmented in nature and we still await a general survey of these related topic.<sup>2</sup> Such a survey of Jewish doubt could potentially transform the way atheism in the Western world is understood. Setting to one side the fact that there is surprisingly little scholarly literature dedicated to either atheism or scepticism as cultural themes, existing histories effectively offer an account of its emergence and development in the contexts of Classical and Christian thought. Thus, the discourse has long featured a theoretical concern to trace the origins of atheism back to ancient Greece (e.g. Thrower's *Western Atheism*, 1971) or to late eighteenth century Europe (e.g. Berman's *A History of Atheism in Britain*, 1988).<sup>3</sup> As has been pointed out before, one's position in this debate depends mainly on whether one is interested primarily in the emergence of a naturalistic worldview in the Classical world, or in its widespread dissemination as a materialist system of thought during the Enlightenment. But, regardless, these histories of Classical and Christian atheism neglect to include the Jewish elements of the story, and this remains true even for more recent studies such as Spencer's *Atheists: The Origin of a Species* (2014).<sup>4</sup> Why? In short, the problem has been the ubiquitous myth of the Judeo-Christian tradition which assumes a shared theological essence, history, scripture, and so on, and which subsumes the Judaic into the Christian. This idea has been challenged, most famously in an essay by Arthur Cohen entitled 'The Myth of the Judaeo-Christian Tradition' (1969),<sup>5</sup> yet only recently has some attempt to correct this gap in the history of atheism been made.<sup>6</sup> Interesting new observations can be made about the development of atheism if the focus is the influence of specifically Judaic dimensions.

Jews from across a wide spectrum of perspectives have wrestled with the questions posed by atheism, scepticism and challenges to monotheism. Philosophical scepticism and atheism (in both theory and practice) raised questions for Jews about the nature of authority, modes of enquiry and textual analysis, intellectual exchange with non-Jewish culture (including polemics), and shifting conceptions of heresy, nonconformity, and

programme on Jewish Scepticism at the University of Hamburg and among his most relevant publications is Giuseppe Veltri, "Principles of Jewish Skeptical Thought. The Case of Judah Moscato and Simone Luzzatto," in Rabbi Judah Moscato and the Jewish Intellectual World of Mantua in 16th-17th Centuries, ed. Giuseppe Veltri and Gianfranco Miletto (Boston: Brill, 2012). Together they co-edited David Ruderman and Giuseppe Veltri, eds., *Cultural Intermediaries: Jewish Intellectuals in Early Modern Italy* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004).

<sup>2</sup> Historically speaking, the topics have not tended to feature in reference works. There is, however, a short entry for 'atheism' in the *Jewish Encyclopedia*, its inclusion being best explained by the idiosyncratic philosophical and interfaith interests of the authors, the Reform rabbis Emil G. Hirsch and Kaufmann Kohler. Emil G. Hirsch and Kaufmann Kohler, "Atheism," in *Jewish Encyclopedia*, ed. Isadore Singer (New York: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1901-1906). And see also Alvin J. Reines, "Skeptics and Skepticism," in *Encyclopaedia Judaica* (Second Edition), ed. Michael Berenbaum and Fred Skolnik (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 2007).

<sup>3</sup> David Berman, *A History of Atheism in Britain: From Hobbes to Russell* (London: Croom Helm, 1988). James Thrower, *A Short History of Western Atheism* (London: Pemberton, 1971).

<sup>4</sup> Nick Spencer, *Atheists: The Origin of the Species* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014).

<sup>5</sup> Arthur A. Cohen, "The Myth of the Judeo-Christian Tradition," *Commentary* 48, no. 5 (1969).

<sup>6</sup> One example is Jennifer Hecht, *Doubt: A History* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), which deliberately sought to identify and bring together the distinctive contributions of Jewish, Christian and Muslim thought. Inevitably, however, the balance was very much towards Christian engagement with scepticism and philosophical doubt. More promisingly, the recent *Oxford Handbook of Atheism* (2013) included a short entry explicitly on Jewish atheism by Jacques Berlinerblau. But this important pioneering survey, in which the author emphasized the absence of previous scholarship, spent much of its time on Jewish secularism (i.e. ethnic Jewishness), which, while related, is not quite the same thing, and it neglected other related themes such as Jewish mysticism and negative theology, Jewish fideism and critiques of scepticism, Jewish engagement with science and philosophical materialism, and it made only passing mention of the Jewish 'death of God' religious response to the Holocaust. Crucially, it took no interest in Judaism's confrontation with atheism, that is, the varieties of religious Jewish critical engagement with the challenge of atheism, both real and imagined. Jacques Berlinerblau, "Jewish Atheism," in *Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, ed. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013).

irreligion. What has been the relationship in the Jewish imagination between atheism and scepticism? Can one speak of scepticism in rabbinic thought and methodology? What does it mean to be an atheistic Jew? How have Jews engaged with historical-critical and scientific discourse? There have been many different Jewish responses to such questions, ranging from stout defences of monotheistic Judaism, to radical reformulations of Jewish religion, to theological resignation and apostasy, to the establishment of alternative universalist systems of thought by ostensibly non-Jewish Jews. Such responses, which include the varieties of Jewish religion but also non-religious ways of being Jewish, have appeared in many different forms including philosophical, theological, sociological, psychological, legal, mystical, and literary genres.

These and many other responses and approaches were on prominent display at the international conference on ‘Atheism, Scepticism and Challenges to Monotheism’ at the University of Manchester in 2015, organised by the British Association for Jewish Studies (BAJS) in cooperation with the Institut für Jüdische Philosophie und Religion, Universität Hamburg.<sup>7</sup> There, presentations of well-known figures such as Philo, Maimonides, Spinoza and Luzzatto were joined by lesser-known figures, including the fictional character of Shim’i the Sceptical in early-modern Jewish polemics. There, the emphasis shifted from critiques of Classical- and Christian-orientated discussions of the arguments for and against God’s existence to specifically Jewish concerns, including interfaith polemics, such as Christian and pagan condemnations of the Jews’ alleged atheism; rabbinic discussions about how to name God, about ‘two powers in heaven’, and about ‘devout idolators’; influential proofs of God’s existence such as offered by the medievalists Maimonides and Halevi; *kabbalistic* forms of negative theology; condemnations of the false messiah Sabbatai Zevi’s radical teachings; edifying early modern Hasidic *midrashim* (exegesis and homilies) concerning atheism; the unique problem of ‘the non-Jewish Jew’ (i.e. radical nineteenth-century Jewish assimilationists such as humanists and socialists); engagement by converts from atheism, such as the Jewish theologian Will Herberg; and twentieth-century Jewish theological, literary and philosophical responses to the Holocaust that cite the eclipse or the death of God.

The papers delivered in 2015, of which only a select few are presented in this volume, challenge the simplistic assumption characteristic of so much of the scholarship of atheism and scepticism that there is a shared Judeo-Christian approach to the issue. To the general history as presented within the confines of the Classical and Christian contexts, one can add the distinctly Jewish encounter with atheism and scepticism. Reading through these essays, which engage with ancient challenges to monotheism, and with atheism, doubt and scepticism in the very different contexts of early-modern history and of modern Jewish philosophy, theology, and literature, the theme appears to be an exciting and promising focus of future research both as a corrective to wider mainstream scholarship and in its own right.

Daniel R. Langton  
BAJS President 2015

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<sup>7</sup> For the full BAJS 2015 conference programme and abstracts see [www.manchesterjewishstudies.org/bajs-programme/](http://www.manchesterjewishstudies.org/bajs-programme/)

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