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### Jacques Basnage and the History of the Jews: Polemic and Allegory in the Republic of Letters

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# Jacques Basnage and the *History of the Jews*: Anti-Catholic Polemic and Historical Allegory in the Republic of Letters

Jonathan M. Elukin

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Since the first Christian communities sought to distance themselves from Judaism, Jews and their religion have haunted Christians. The medieval Christian exegetical tradition tried to exorcise the ghost of Judaism by “appropriating” the Hebrew Bible. Christians transformed it into a book that predicted the coming of Christ and God’s rejection of the Jews.<sup>1</sup> By thus neutralizing the internal validity of Judaism, Christians could take advantage of the rabbinical tradition as an aid in interpreting Christianized Scripture.<sup>2</sup> For Christian exegetes of the Middle Ages from Andrew of St. Victor to Nicholas of Lyra, the rabbis and their commentaries increasingly became a repository of information that could assist in understanding the heavenly language of Moses. Their knowledge of Hebrew, however, did not generally deter Christian scholars from reading Christian sensibilities into the Hebrew Bible. Medieval exegetes were uniformly concerned that the Jews had corrupted the original Hebrew of the Old Testament either by ignorance or through self-conscious attempts to distort predictions about the Messiah.<sup>3</sup> Humanist scholars of the Renaissance and Reformation continued to harp on the corrupted nature of the Hebrew text, but the advantages to be reaped from exploiting Jewish sources were too great

<sup>1</sup> Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Christian Tradition: A History of the Development of Doctrine. The Emergence of the Catholic Tradition (100-600)* (Chicago, 1971), 16-20.

<sup>2</sup> Gilbert Dahan, *Les Intellectuels chrétiens et les juifs au Moyen-Age* (Paris, 1990), 121.

<sup>3</sup> Amos Funkenstein, “Theological Interpretations of the Holocaust,” in *Unanswered Questions*, ed. François Furet (New York, 1989), 287. Cf. Jeremy Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews* (Ithaca, 1982).

to ignore. Lorenzo Valla, for example, wanted to establish an accurate translation of the psalms not just as a scholarly exercise but in order to perfect his own devotion.<sup>4</sup> Luther, Erasmus, and others expressed unease at the enthusiasm for Hebrew, but the study of Hebrew sources became one obsession of the scholarly world of the Renaissance and Reformation, although Hebrew never quite achieved equality with Latin and Greek.<sup>5</sup>

In the polemical conflicts of post-Reformation Christianity, scholars of both confessions looked to the Hebrew Bible and Israelite history to justify their religious history. Catholic scholars like Cardinal Baronius, Bishop Bossuet, and the Abbé Fleury searched the Israelite tradition for precedents to prove the antiquity and thus the legitimacy of Church institutions. This was a tradition that went back to Eusebius's identification of Jewish ascetic groups such as the Essenes and the *therapeutae* as Christian monks.<sup>6</sup> Dutch Calvinists and English Puritans also seized upon the image of the early Israelites for their own purposes. The Israelite experience of being freed from slavery and called to the worship of the true God mirrored their own identity and experience.<sup>7</sup> One scholar has recently noted the intense identification of Scottish reformers with Jews and their history.<sup>8</sup> Specific battles of contemporary European political and intellectual life, such as the separation of secular and religious powers in Reformed states, were fought out in terms of precedents from Israelite

<sup>4</sup> See Pelikan, *Christian Tradition*, 20, and Don Cameron Allen, *The Legend of Noah: Renaissance Rationalism in Art, Science, and Letters* (Urbana, 1949), 50, n. 40. On Valla, see Heiko A. Oberman, "Discovery of Hebrew and Discrimination against the Jews: The *Veritas Hebraica* as Double-Edged Sword in Renaissance and Reformation," Andrew C. Fix and Susan C. Karant-Nunn (eds.), *Germania Illustrata* (Sixteenth Century Essays & Studies, XVIII [1992]), 22.

<sup>5</sup> There is a large bibliography: Jerome Friedman, *The Most Ancient Testimony* (Athens, Oh., 1983); Richard H. Popkin, *Isaac La Peyrère (1590-1676)* (Leiden, 1987); Peter T. Van Rooden, *Theology, Biblical Scholarship and Rabbinical Studies in the Seventeenth Century* (Leiden, 1989); Aaron L. Katchen, *Christian Hebraists and Dutch Rabbis* (Cambridge, 1984); and Oberman, "Discovery of Hebrew," 23-24.

<sup>6</sup> Frank E. Manuel, "Israel and the Enlightenment," *Daedalus*, 111 (1982), 34. For an extensive survey of Christian scholarship on Judaism, see Manuel's *The Broken Staff: Judaism through Christian Eyes* (Cambridge, 1992), although he treats Basnage only in passing as a popularizer.

<sup>7</sup> Simon Schama, *The Embarrassment of Riches* (New York, 1988), 93-123. See also, Robert M. Healey, "The Jews in Seventeenth Century Protestant Thought," *Church History*, 46 (1977), 63-79.

<sup>8</sup> Arthur Williamson, "Scots, Jews, and Indians: The British Imperial Impulse and the Discourse of Cultural Difference," paper presented to the Davis Center seminar, Princeton University, 5 April 1991. See also his "Latter Day Judah, Latter Day Israel: The Millennium, the Jews, and the British Future," Klaus Deppermann (ed.), *Pietismus und Neuzeit: Chiliasmus in Deutschland und England im 17. Jahrhundert* (Göttingen, 1988), 149-65; and his "The Jewish Dimension of the Scottish Apocalypse," Yosef Kaplan, Henry Mechoulan, and Richard H. Popkin (eds.), *Menasseh Ben Israel and His World* (Leiden, 1989), 7-31.

history.<sup>9</sup> In this paper I will study how post-biblical Jewish history was assimilated into the confessional polemics of Protestants and Catholics.

To complicate matters, by the middle of the seventeenth century, scholars from both confessions were living in a world whose intellectual climate had radically changed since the fifteenth century. Humanists like Valla and Erasmus had applied the philological tools they had used to edit classical texts in order to recover the original version of Scripture.<sup>10</sup> The textual analysis of the Bible opened the way for more sustained attacks on the divine character of Scripture, which occasionally broke down along confessional lines as in the debate over the authenticity of the book of the Maccabees.<sup>11</sup> In the seventeenth century more fundamental attacks on the holiness of the Bible were being launched all across Europe. Isaac La Peyrère, for example, had challenged the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch as did Hobbes and a few others.<sup>12</sup> The great Catholic scholar Richard Simon explained the evolution of the text as the legacy of imperfect, albeit inspired, scribes. For Simon, however, the sacred integrity of the Bible was guaranteed by the traditions of the Church.<sup>13</sup> The harshest blows were struck by Spinoza. Laboring in the shadow of Descartes and the skeptical tradition, he was thought to have undermined the sanctity of the Bible by displacing it from the center of man's search for truth.<sup>14</sup>

Jacques Basnage (1653-1723) was deeply involved in the confessional

<sup>9</sup> Petrus Cunaeus's *De Republica Hebraeorum* (1617) was in part a plea for such unification because he believed the theocracy of ancient Israel was the most stable and peaceful form of government. See Manuel, *Broken Staff*, 115-28; and Katchen, *Christian Hebraists*, 37ff. Cf. Schama, *Riches*, 118-22. I am grateful to Professor Pierre Lurbe of the University of Caen for sending me a copy of his article, "John Toland et l'utilisation de l'histoire juive: entre l'histoire et le mythe," forthcoming in a volume of essays on "The Jews in the Republic Of Letters," from a 1990 Sorbonne conference.

<sup>10</sup> Jerry H. Bentley, *Humanists and Holy Writ: New Testament Scholarship in the Renaissance* (Princeton, 1983).

<sup>11</sup> See Elias Bikerman, "Une question d'authenticité: Les privilèges juifs," *Annuaire de l'Institut de Philologie et d'Histoire Orientales de l'Université Libre de Bruxelles*, 13 (1953), 12.

<sup>12</sup> See Popkin, *Isaac La Peyrère*.

<sup>13</sup> On Simon, see among other works, Paul Hazard, *The European Mind (1680-1715)*, tr. J. Lewis May (Cleveland, 1963); and Paul Auvray, *Richard Simon (1638-1712)* (Paris, 1974); and the insightful review by B. Schwarzbach, "At last, Paul Auvray's Richard Simon," in *Jewish Quarterly Review*, 67 (1976-1977), 177-81.

<sup>14</sup> See the criticisms of Hazard's interpretation of *la crise* by Margaret C. Jacob, "The Crisis of the European Mind: Hazard Revisited," Phyllis Mack and Margaret C. Jacob (eds.), *Politics and Culture in Early Modern Europe: Essays in Honor of H. G. Koenigsberger* (New York, 1987), 251-71; See also Richard H. Popkin, *History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Descartes* (rev. ed.; Assen, 1960), and "Cartesianism and Biblical Criticism," Thomas M. Lennon, John M. Nicholas, and John W. Davis (eds.), *Problems of Cartesianism* (Kingston, Ont., 1982), 61-83. An excellent review of the importance of Spinoza's biblical criticism is found in Brad Gregory's introduction to Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, tr. Samuel Shirley (Leiden, 1989).

polemics and the international network of scholars in the seventeenth century. Exiled from France, and serving as a Calvinist minister in Rotterdam, Basnage was one of the most prolific members of the so-called Republic of Letters, which included his more famous friend Pierre Bayle and his brother Henri Basnage de Beauval. Basnage, like many other Christian scholars, turned his attention to Jewish history. The *Histoire de la religion des Juifs, depuis Jésus-Christ jusqu'à présent, pour servir de supplément et de continuation à l'Histoire de Joseph*, first published in Rotterdam in 1706-7, won him a reputation as the first historian sympathetic to Jews and their history.<sup>15</sup> In fact, Basnage used Jewish history as a polemical tool to attack Catholicism in the highly charged confessional and self-consciously critical atmosphere of the seventeenth century.

Basnage constructed an analogy between rabbinic Judaism and Catholicism. He saw the way the rabbis seemingly corrupted Scripture and biblical Judaism as an allegory for the manner in which the Catholic Church corrupted the purity of apostolic Christianity. Other scholars have noted this relationship in Basnage's work, but they have tended to explain it away as a minor aberration, possibly the result of his antagonism to Catholicism's and Judaism's common materialist failings.<sup>16</sup> Without discounting Basnage's sympathy for the Jews, I believe that the anti-Catholic allegory defines the tenor of the work and must influence our assessment of it. Such an analogy between rabbinism and Catholicism allowed Basnage to weave a sustained attack on the Catholic Church into what was ostensibly a history of the Jews.

<sup>15</sup> Cited here from the English translation (reviewed and approved by Basnage), *The History of the Jews from Jesus Christ to The Present Time, Containing Their Antiquities, the Religion, Their Rites, the Dispersions of the Ten Tribes in the East, and the Persecutions This Nation Has Suffered in the West, Being a Supplement and Continuation of the History of Josephus*, tr. Thomas Taylor (London, 1708), with references to the 1716 edition, *Histoire des Juifs, depuis Jésus-Christ jusqu'à présent pour servir de Continuation à l'Histoire de Joseph. Nouvelle Edition Augmentée* (La Haye, 1716). An abridged version was published in Paris in 1710 by Louis Ellies Du Pin, *Histoire des Juifs, depuis Jésus-Christ jusqu'à présent contenant les dogmes Juifs, leurs confessions de Foi, leurs Variations, & l'Histoire de leur Religion, depuis la ruine du Temple. Pour servir de Supplément & de continuation à l'Histoire de Joseph*, in 7 volumes. On the differences in the English translation, see Lester A. Segal, "Jacques Basnage de Beauval's *l'Histoire des Juifs*: Christian Historiographical Perception of Jewry and Judaism on the Eve of the Enlightenment," *Hebrew Union College Annual*, 54 (1983), 304, n. 5.

<sup>16</sup> See Myriam Yardeni, "New Concepts of Post-Commonwealth Jewish History in the Early Enlightenment: Bayle and Basnage," in her collection of essays, *Anti-Jewish Mentalities in Early Modern Europe* (New York, 1990), 213; and Gerald Cerny, *Theology, Politics and Letters at the Crossroads of European Civilization: Jacques Basnage and the Baylean Huguenot Refugees in the Dutch Republic* (Dordrecht, 1987), 222; and Segal, "Perceptions," 314. There is a growing interest in Basnage's work. See the article by Francis Schmidt in "The Jews in the Republic of Letters" (see above, n. 9); and Miriam Silvera, "Contribution à l'examen des sources de *L'Histoire des Juifs* de Jacques Basnage: Las Excelencias de los Hebreos de Ysaac Cardosa," 25 (1991), 42-53 and 149-62.

Throughout his book, Basnage wrote about the Jews as human beings who persevered in the face of great suffering and persecution. This passage is typical: "These first Misfortunes were attended with so dismal Calamities, that even those who think it their Duty to hate the Jews, because they are not of the same Religion, cannot unconcernedly read the History of so hard and lasting a Misery." While the Church tried to cloak its cruel treatment of Jews in euphemisms, we should be honest, Basnage argues, in the language used to describe Jewish suffering. Does the Church have the power to transform punishment into gentleness? Did the thousands of exiles who were banished from Spain and who died of hunger not suffer?<sup>17</sup>

By dedicating such a massive work to the history of the Jews, Basnage asserted that the Jews have a post-biblical history that is worthy of study in and of itself. The sheer scope of Basnage's history of the Jews remains impressive. Basnage explored the history of the Herodian rulers and Jewish sects of the first century, the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, the subsequent development of rabbinic Judaism, the customs and rituals of Jewish religious observance, the unwarranted persecution of the Jews in the Middle Ages, the scholarly contributions and legacies of the great rabbis, and the condition of contemporary Jewish communities in Europe and the Near East. Basnage drew upon a wide variety of sources, although his knowledge of Hebrew appears to have been limited as he generally relied on translations of rabbinic material. Enlightenment writers like Voltaire and Diderot would exploit Basnage's work for information about Judaism, but they would use it to show the corruption and mediocrity of Judaism and, by implication, Christianity. In addition they would parrot Jewish attacks on Christianity that Basnage also preserved.<sup>18</sup>

By the end of the eighteenth century Basnage already had a reputation for tolerance in his treatment of Jews and Jewish history.<sup>19</sup> He was widely acknowledged to be the authoritative source for Jewish history up to the nineteenth century. Basnage's work on the Jews was apparently so appealing that even two Hebrew translations of the work survive. (A study of these works, particularly to see how the attacks on Catholicism were rendered, would be quite interesting.) In addition, a Yiddish history of the Jews was principally dependent upon Basnage.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Basnage, *History of the Jews* (hereafter cited as Basnage) I, i, 2, with references to the 1716 French edition in brackets (I [tome I], i, 8) and Basnage, VII, xi, 640.

<sup>18</sup> See Arthur Hertzberg, *The French Enlightenment and the Jews* (New York, 1968), and the discussions by Manuel and Segal cited above.

<sup>19</sup> See the approving comments in Boissy, *Dissertations critiques pour servir d'éclaircissements à l'histoire des Juifs avant et depuis Jésus Christ et de supplément à l'Histoire de M. Basnage* (Paris, 1785), preface, vii.

<sup>20</sup> See Segal, "Perceptions," 321, n. 75. On the Yiddish history of the Jews, see Menahem Mann's *She'erit Yisrael* (Amsterdam, 1743); and R. G. Fuks-Mansfeld, "Yiddish Historiography in the Time of the Dutch Republic," *Studia Rosenthaliana*, 15 (1981), 13-19.



Gibbon, for example, depended upon Basnage's account of early Jewish history and lavished praise upon him as an accurate and impartial historian.<sup>21</sup> Basnage's humane tone and interest in Jewish life earned him the favor of Jewish historians of the nineteenth century, most notably Heinrich Graetz.<sup>22</sup> More recent scholars like Myriam Yardeni and Arthur Hertzberg have also described him as particularly sympathetic to the Jews and therefore "modern" in outlook.<sup>23</sup>

I think we risk misunderstanding the *Histoire* by emphasizing its sympathetic and modern stance towards the Jews. I am not arguing that we discount Basnage's largeness of vision towards Jews and Jewish history as merely a cynical pose. I would insist, however, that the polemical motivations of Basnage's work must complicate our understanding of categories roughly described as tolerance and modernity. Basnage's work offers us an intriguing paradox. At the core of a work characterized by a language of tolerance and human sympathy for the Jews is an abiding antipathy for rabbinism and Catholicism.

We can only begin to reassess Basnage's work by first examining the intellectual and religious pressures that bore down upon him while he was writing the history of the Jews. On one level, which was not modern at all, Basnage wrote the history of the Jews in order to convert the remnants of the chosen people before the second coming, which he expected in 1716. He thought the forced conversions of the Jews by Christians in the Middle Ages had been meaningless. Only by proving the truth of the biblical prophecies concerning Christ to the Jews—to which their own history attested—did Basnage hope to convince them to abandon Judaism and sincerely embrace Christianity.<sup>24</sup>

Basnage wrote at a time when believers in Christian truth felt themselves surrounded by Spinoza-inspired atheists.<sup>25</sup> To counter the inroads of atheism, they had to prove that the Bible was indeed the most ancient and the most accurate account of human history. It could not be ignored

<sup>21</sup> Edward Gibbon, *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (8 vols.; Oxford, 1827), VI, 47.

<sup>22</sup> See the references to Graetz's *History of the Jews*, in Segal, "Perceptions," 303, n. 1.

<sup>23</sup> See Yardeni, "New Concepts of Post-Commonwealth Jewish History," *Anti-Jewish Mentalities*, 211-25; Hertzberg, in a review of Paul Johnson's *A History of the Jews* (New York, 1987) in *The New York Times Book Review* (April 19, 1987), 11; and Richard H. Popkin, "Jacques Basnage's *Histoire des Juifs* and the Bibliotheca Sarraziana," *Studia Rosenthaliana*, 21 (1987), 161; and a similar sentiment might be found in Miriam Silvera, "L'ebreo in Jacques Basnage: apologia del cristianesimo e difesa della tolleranza," *Nouvelles de la Republique des Lettres* (1987), 103-17.

<sup>24</sup> Basnage, VII, xi, 640.

<sup>25</sup> On atheism see Hazard, *The European Mind*, and now Alan Charles Kors, *Atheism in France 1650-1729*, I (Princeton, 1990), and R. R. Palmer *Catholics and Unbelievers in Eighteenth-Century France* (Princeton, 1939); also Ernestine G. E. van der Wall, "The Dutch Hebraist Adam Boreel and the *Mishna* Project," *Lias*, 16, pt. 2 (1989), 243.



in man's search for divine truth. The Bible's antiquity was bolstered by marshalling sources from all areas of human knowledge. Isaac Newton, for example, used astronomy to prove that the Israelites created the most ancient civilization.<sup>26</sup> Behind these efforts, and behind Basnage's, was the sense that religious belief could be rationally proved.<sup>27</sup> Establishing the validity of Scripture also meant demonstrating that the prophecies contained in the Old Testament had been fulfilled.<sup>28</sup> Again, every possible piece of evidence, including the habits of the Indians of the New World, was exploited to substantiate the prophecies foretelling Christ's appearance and his imminent return.<sup>29</sup> It was by assembling proofs of this kind that the religiously engaged scholars of the seventeenth century fought off doubt and the challenges of both Spinoza and the deists.

Basnage's detailed description of the dispersion of the Jews was his attempt to prove that the prophecies contained in the Old Testament had been fulfilled in Christian history. This certainly was the understanding of Basnage's English translator: "Because one of the chiefest Designs of this Book, is to lay before the Scoffers and Despisers of our Religion, an Argument of its Truth in a Language they understand."<sup>30</sup> Indeed, to Basnage's mind, the continued survival of the Jews was another demonstration of God's providence.<sup>31</sup>

Before the Jews were dispersed they had to be brought down. That fate, too, was contained in the Hebrew Bible. Basnage tried to explicate the coded message in his discussion of Jacob's prophecy to Judah (*Genesis* 49:10) in which the patriarch announced that Judah would lose the scepter—taken to mean political power—when the Messiah had come.<sup>32</sup> This was a polemic that went back to the *adversos judaeos* texts of the Middle Ages. By proving that the Jews had been abandoned by God, Basnage hoped to convince the Jews—at least those who would read his book—to

<sup>26</sup> Frank E. Manuel, *The Eighteenth Century Confronts the Gods* (Cambridge, 1959), 99.

<sup>27</sup> Andrew C. Fix, *Prophecy and Reason: The Dutch Collegiants in the Early Enlightenment* (Princeton, 1991), 13. See Edward Stillingfleet's *Origines sacrae* (1662) and *A Rational Account of the Grounds of the Protestant Religion* (1665); and John Locke, *The Reasonableness of Christianity* (1695). See also Barbara Shapiro, *Probability and Certainty in Seventeenth-Century England* (Princeton, 1983), 74–118.

<sup>28</sup> See Roy Porter, *Edward Gibbon: Making History* (London, 1988), 23. Porter, *Gibbon*, 23 on this "evidential theology"; also Richard H. Popkin, "The Third Force in 17th Century Philosophy: Scepticism, Science, and Biblical Prophecy," *Nouvelles de la République des Lettres* (1983), 35–65, "The Lost Tribes, the Caraïtes and the English Millenarians," *Journal of Jewish Studies*, 37 (1986), 217; and "The Rise and Fall of the Jewish Indian Theory," *Menasseh Ben Israel and His World*, 63–82.

<sup>29</sup> Van der Wall, "Dutch Hebraist," 243.

<sup>30</sup> Basnage, preface, iii.

<sup>31</sup> Basnage, VI, i, 466. [I (tome I), i, 8].

<sup>32</sup> Basnage, I, iv, 29, and IV, xxi, 345.

abandon Judaism and convert to Christianity.<sup>33</sup> When Basnage describes the abject ruins of Jewish political life during the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans, he means to demonstrate that “Judah” had really lost the scepter—that is political power—because the Romans had conquered Palestine. In fact even before the destruction, Basnage argues, Herod and his family were not independent princes. They did not truly hold the scepter. Unfettered Jewish rule over Palestine was an illusion.<sup>34</sup>

Indeed, Basnage argues, the impression from rabbinic literature that the Sanhedrin, the great council of rabbis, or the High Priest had independent power was a mistaken delusion of the rabbis.<sup>35</sup> The rabbis wrote corrupt and unreliable history:

In a Word, the Rabbins, who are but little acquainted with their own History, vend their Fables for Matters of Fact. Provided they are believ'd by their own Nation, they do not trouble their Heads to reconcile their Narratives with foreign Historians, whom they mightily despise. They boldly make Anachronisms, write the grossest Absurdities in Chronology; and without any scruple of Conscience, corrupt the Truth of History.<sup>36</sup>

Basnage could show that rabbinic history was corrupt by testing it against more reliable sources. For the period of the destruction of the Temple, his primary source would be the writings of Flavius Josephus, the Jewish military leader who defected to the Romans after the failure of the revolt in 70 AD. By claiming that his book was a continuation of Josephus's history, Basnage may have been hoping to benefit from the persistent enthusiasm and respect for Josephus among a Christian readership. He was countering criticism of Josephus by contemporary scholars like Baronius.<sup>37</sup> He was also offering a Christian version of Menasseh Ben Israel's projected history of the Jews.<sup>38</sup> In some ways Basnage was hoping to present himself as an eyewitness to Jewish history comparable to Josephus. Just as Josephus was a reliable and authoritative eyewitness for the destruction of the Temple, Basnage would provide an “eyewitness” account of the contemporary decline of European Judaism, which was further proof of God's continued vengeance.

They did have similar styles of history writing in that they both gathered and evaluated evidence relating to Jewish history and religion. Basnage explained that “I have only, as he hath done, unravell'd the Religion and Customs of that Nation, and related their Misfortunes. . . .

<sup>33</sup> On conversionist efforts, see David Katz, *Philo-Semitism and the Readmission of the Jews to England 1603-1655* (Oxford, 1982), 128.

<sup>34</sup> Basnage, I, ii, 12.

<sup>35</sup> Basnage, I, iv, 29-36.

<sup>36</sup> Basnage, I, i, 2, [I (tome I), 9-10].

<sup>37</sup> See Peter Burke, “A Survey of the Popularity of Ancient Historians (1450-1700)” *History and Theory*, 5 (1966), 135-52. On Baronius, see Basnage, I, i, 4.

<sup>38</sup> Basnage, *Histoire*, I (tome I), i, 22.

They both agree in Design and Matter, tho' not in Parts and Skill."<sup>39</sup> Just as other scholars were looking to science or archaeology to substantiate sacred history, Basnage reinforced the authority of his own account of Jewish history by associating himself with Josephus. Basnage knew that his book could not truly be compared with Josephus's work: "I am sensible, that this Title is rash; but my Design is not to pretend to be compar'd with this Historian, whose Genius and Knowledge were very different from mine."<sup>40</sup> There was a fundamental difference between them, for Basnage believed that "I am destitute of some helps, which this Historian had: His Guides were inspir'd by God." Josephus, however, betrayed these guides, and Basnage could not "conceive how he hath sometimes presum'd to deviate from them."<sup>41</sup>

Although Josephus may have committed errors, he was still the most reliable historian of the time. Basnage had to admit that "I have been forced, considering the great distance of time, to follow Josephus, because we find no better, or more exact Guide. This Historian hath his defects; but that can't be avoided."<sup>42</sup> Certainly he is better than the rabbis: "But when . . . nothing but Conjectures, or uncertain Writings are produc'd against him, is it not reasonable to prefer him to the Thalmudists, or those who vend their Whims as downright Matters of Fact?"<sup>43</sup> Basnage drew upon the critical tradition articulated by Bayle and could evaluate to a certain extent the reliability of evidence. However, he had not abandoned a divinely deterministic model of history. Josephus, he reminds us, could only be followed so far. The great historian was not able to see or acknowledge God's hand in the destruction of Jerusalem. That was left to Basnage.<sup>44</sup>

Basnage felt threatened not just by stubborn Jews and atheists, but by a genre of Christian scholarship on Judaism that he thought undermined the uniqueness of the Christian revelation. Christians studied the Jewish mystical tradition of the kabbala to find hidden evidence of Christian beliefs. Ever since Pico della Mirandola embraced the kabbalistic tradition, Christians had been trying to explore its secrets.<sup>45</sup> Johannes Reuchlin popularized the kabbala in Latin scholarship in his *De verbo mirifico* (1492) and *De arte cabalistica* (1517). For Reuchlin the kabbala allowed Christians to penetrate the mystical Hebrew letters and confirm that Jesus was the Messiah foretold by the Hebrew Bible.<sup>46</sup> He was followed by

<sup>39</sup> Basnage, I, i, 4. [I (tome I), i, 19].

<sup>40</sup> Basnage, I, i, 4. [I (tome I), i, 19-20].

<sup>41</sup> Basnage, I, i, 4. [I (tome I), i, 20].

<sup>42</sup> Basnage, I, i, 4. [I (tome I), i, 24].

<sup>43</sup> Basnage, I, i, 4. [I (tome I), i, 24].

<sup>44</sup> Basnage, VI, i, 467.

<sup>45</sup> Chaim Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism* (Cambridge, 1988).

<sup>46</sup> Oberman, "Discovery of Hebrew," 24.

Knorr von Rosenroth, whose *Kabbala Denudata* (1677-78) became the standard Latin sourcebook of the kabbala. Rosenroth was trying to search out Christian mysteries and to promote the conversion of the Jews by showing them the Christian message embedded in the kabbala. Basnage drew upon his work extensively in his long section on Jewish mysticism, and further detailed work on Basnage's selection and diffusion of kabbalistic material is warranted.<sup>47</sup>

Christian interest in the kabbala was part of the general scholarly endeavor in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries to study how, according to Momigliano, the "pagans preserved [usually by way of the Phoenicians] elements of the revelation to the Jews." The most famous examples of this effort are Samuel Bochart's *Geographia sacra seu Phales et Chanaan* (1646), G. J. Vos's *De theologia gentili* (1674), Theodore Gale's *The Court of the Gentiles* (1667-71), and Pierre-Daniel Huet's *Demonstratio evangelica* (1690). In general they tried to show that the pagan gods of antiquity were merely adaptations of biblical patriarchs and heroes. By coordinating the chronologies of ancient Egypt with the Bible, they hoped to show that Abraham had passed Israelite culture to the Egyptians. From there it found its way into Greek worship. Gerard Croese argued in *Homeros Hebraios* (1704), for example, that the *Iliad* was a reworking of Joshua's attack on Jericho. Earlier, Edmund Dickinson in *Delphis phoenicizantes* (1655) saw in the religion of Delphi traditions from the age of the Judges. Jacob Bryant's *A New System* (1744-46) carried this style into the eighteenth century. As late as 1786, Guérin du Rocher sallied forth with *Hérodote historien du peuple hébreu sans le savoir*.<sup>48</sup> If scholars could find Israelite religion behind the structures and symbols of paganism, they could also imagine that the pagans had known the doctrines of Christianity embedded in the Israelite traditions and in the mystical kabbala. One tangent of this effort claimed to find Christianity in the culture of the newly discovered Indians and the peoples of China.<sup>49</sup> To scholars like Basnage, all these attempts seemed to make the revelation described in the New Testament superfluous.

Scholars who were trying to use history and philology to prove the uniqueness of Christianity were particularly threatened by the enthusiasm

<sup>47</sup> Brian P. Copenhaver, "Jewish Theologies of Space in the Scientific Revolution: Henry More, Joseph Raphson, Isaac Newton and their Predecessors," *Annals of Science*, 37 (1980), 507-8; and Allison Coudert, "A Cambridge Platonist's Kabbalist Nightmare," *JHI*, 36 (1975), 633-52. Cf. Manuel, *The Broken Staff*, 146-47, where he argues that by the seventeenth century, Christian Hebraists had generally lost interest in the kabbala.

<sup>48</sup> François Laplanche, "Basnage historien des paganismes antiques ou la crise de l'apologetique chrétienne à l'aube des lumières," *Lias*, 15 (1988), 174; and Arnaldo Momigliano, "Historiography: Western Studies," Mircea Eliade (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion* (New York, 1987), VI, 387.

<sup>49</sup> See Manuel, *Eighteenth Century*, 60 and 115, and Anthony T. Grafton, *Defenders of the Text* (Cambridge, 1991), 17-19.

for the kabbala because Hebrew had an aura of holiness. The Talmud, Basnage recognized, was a seductive source for Christians: "And yet there are some Christians, who in imitation of the Jews, regard the Talmud as an abundant Mine from which we may be furnish'd with infinite Treasures." However, Basnage warned, the rabbinic language was being taken out of context. It only seemed to refer to Christianity: "But this method is abus'd; for the Rabbins are often made to say what they never meant, and at most these are Words only escap'd unawares, and reduc'd to Christianity by consequences against the Author's design."<sup>50</sup>

Basnage had to demonstrate that the "kabbala" found among the Egyptians had not been derived from the Israelites as enthusiasts like Kircher and Gale argued. Rather, it was a common failing of "oriental" cultures. To Basnage the Jewish mystical tradition was merely an extreme form of the allegorical style of reading by which the rabbis had interpreted the Bible according to their own interests. He tried to devalue the religious cachet of the kabbala by arguing that it was simply a particular style of using symbols and signs that the Jews learned from their "oriental" neighbors.<sup>51</sup> He notes that "it must be owned, that the sacred writers have frequently employed metaphors and Allegories; because it was the common Style of the Jews and the Eastern People that easily understood them."<sup>52</sup> The Greek philosophers, too, had fallen back on allegorical images, which distorted the truth.<sup>53</sup> As one historian has noted, since eighteenth-century scholars thought that "allegory was a natural primitive language of communication . . . [and] . . . an Oriental speech manner," it was likely that the chosen people had learned this potentially dangerous skill from other Eastern peoples like the Greeks and the Egyptians.<sup>54</sup> The kabbala, then, deserved no particular respect.

Indeed, reading texts in the allegorical style of the kabbala destroyed the original meaning of Scripture. According to Basnage, the "Cabbala . . . renders Notions unintelligible; Men feed themselves with words and crude Imaginations, whilst they let go the Substance of the Mystery, And those that are dazzled, still exceed their predecessors taking one Imagination to another, till they have entirely lost the end they aimed at."<sup>55</sup> In Basnage's view and that of much later scholarship, early Christian heresies, particularly Gnosticism, had their origins in the kabbala that the

<sup>50</sup> Basnage, II, vii, 17 [III (tome 5), vi, 177], and VII, xxxiv, 753-54 [IX (tome 15), xxxix, 1120].

<sup>51</sup> Laplanche, "Basnage Historien," 176-77. Laplanche is incorrect to locate the source of Basnage's opposition to the Jewish origins of Egyptian kabbala in his greater attention to chronology (Basnage, III, vii, 177).

<sup>52</sup> Basnage, IV, xvi, 204 [III (tome 5), v, 134].

<sup>53</sup> Basnage, III, xxi, 229.

<sup>54</sup> Manuel, *Eighteenth Century*, 267.

<sup>55</sup> Basnage, III, vii, 177 [III (tome 6), xxviii, 751-52].

Jews imported from the East.<sup>56</sup> Basnage's assessment of the kabbalistic influence on Gnosticism was complicated by his Protestant-inspired sympathy for the early heretics. He was at pains to mitigate their kabbalistic tendencies in order to redeem their opposition to the Church: "The Gnosticks have not always followed the Cabbalists step by step: They borrowed their general Ideas of them; but at the same time they diversified them; that they might be thought Originals." Basnage could not condemn them: "Hereby likewise we learn to cure our prejudices against antient Hereticks. They have been odious to the highest degree, and the Fathers have upbraided them, as perhaps the impurity of their Lives deserved."<sup>57</sup> He rationalizes that it is impossible to assess the early heresy accurately: "In such a vast distance of Ages, and the incapacity we are under of knowing them, especially since the Writings of these Antient Divines are lost, it is hard to penetrate into their real Sentiments; but it would be uncharitable to suspect everything of theirs to be Criminal, that is obscure." Ultimately, however the kabbala was too dangerous and corrupting to exonerate the early Gnostic heretics.<sup>58</sup>

Basnage feared that the dangers of the kabbala, imperfectly understood as casting the world as an extension of God, had led to the atheism of Spinoza: "However, it be, we find the grounds of Spinosism in the Theologie of the Cabbalists; that Spinoza has only clothed it with what Carthusianism [sic] cou'd furnish him, to prop up a sinking building that threat'ned the ruin of the whole."<sup>59</sup> The German orientalist Johann Georg Wachter (1663/73-1757) at the very end of the seventeenth century identified the same apparent kabbalistic influence on Spinoza in *Der Spinozismus im Judenthumb* (1699). Wachter had incorrectly thought that Spinoza had confused God and world. While retracting this point in a later book on the kabbala, *Elucidarius Cabalisticus, Sive Reconditae Hebraeorum Philosophiae Brevis et Succincts Recensio* (1706), Wachter insisted on Spinoza's dependence on the kabbala. Unlike Basnage who felt the kabbala to be a threat to Christian truth, Wachter believed it to be reconcilable with Christian ideas. He argued for its influence on Spinoza in order to make Spinoza's ideas consistent with established Christian beliefs.<sup>60</sup> Basnage, on the other hand, emphasized the kabbalistic undercurrents in Spinoza's thought in order to emphasize the dangers of ancient allegorical thinking as transmitted by the kabbala. By making Spinoza the culmination of kabbalistic allegorizing, Basnage showed the corrupt "pagan"

<sup>56</sup> Gedaliahu Guy Stroumsa, "Gnosis and Judaism in Nineteenth Century Christian Thought," *The Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy*, 1 (1992), 2.

<sup>57</sup> Basnage, III, xxvii, 254. [III (tome 6), xxviii, 750].

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> Basnage, IV, vii, 296 [IV (tome 7), vii, 144-45].

<sup>60</sup> David Bell, *Spinoza in Germany from 1670 to the Age of Goethe* (London, 1984), 16-17.



origins of Spinoza's thought while at the same time demonstrating that unrestricted allegorical thinking about God led to a pantheistic atheism.<sup>61</sup>

Basnage saw enthusiasm for the kabbala penetrating the work of respected scholars. Basnage chastized the famous scholar Petrus Cunaeus in his notes to Cunaeus's widely read *De Republica Hebraeorum* (1617). Cunaeus, following predominant Christian beliefs about the kabbala, held that there were two types of kabbala: one was the oral law of the rabbis, and the second was the mystical tradition that had been embedded in the ceremonies of the Israelite cult by Moses and passed down to the Christians and finally revealed in the New Testament.<sup>62</sup> Basnage felt that Cunaeus was wrong to cite this second type of kabbala. The kabbala was only "all the additions that [the rabbis] have made to the text of the Law, and the mystical and violent explications that they give for many passages, and which are authorised by certain ancient Doctors."<sup>63</sup> By giving in to the enthusiasm to see Christian truth in the Hebrew of the kabbala or as a result of traditions found in the Talmud, Basnage thought that Christians denigrate the unique revelation of the Gospel: "What then, could neither our Lord nor his Apostles imagine any thing, but was dictated to them by the Jews?" Jesus was only speaking in the allegorical style current among the Jews. He did not draw Christian truth from it.<sup>64</sup> Criticizing the respected scholar Cunaeus was no small matter, but the stakes were very high. Basnage is here following in the tradition of Joseph Justus Scaliger and Isaac Casaubon who were trying to uphold the unique revelation they saw preserved in the New Testament.<sup>65</sup>

Basnage's impatience with the way enthusiasts of the Kabbala allegorized Hebrew words into messages of Christian truth no doubt drew on a well of critical disdain at the embroidery of religious belief that was widespread in the eighteenth century.<sup>66</sup> Jean Le Clerc, for example, attacked allegorical interpretations of classical myths in a review of the English scholar John Selden's *De Diis Syris* (1617).<sup>67</sup> Critical minded scholars were reluctant to see pagan myths allegorized into images of a Christian God or human virtue. Bayle was the great critic of over-interpreting pagan myths. As one scholar has written, "Bayle derided allegorism and insisted that the pagans themselves were completely convinced of the

<sup>61</sup> J. G. A. Pocock, "Gibbon and the Idol Fo: Chinese and Christian History in the Enlightenment," David S. Katz and Jonathan I. Israel (eds.), *Sceptics, Millenarians and Jews* (Leiden, 1990), 24.

<sup>62</sup> *Antiquitez Judaïques, ou Remarques critiques sur la République des Hébreux* (Amsterdam, 1713).

<sup>63</sup> Basnage, *Antiquitez*, I, 66. See D. P. Walker, "The Prisca Theologia in France," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 17 (1954), 204-59.

<sup>64</sup> Basnage, III, vi, 171 [III (tome 5), vi, 179].

<sup>65</sup> Grafton, *Defenders*, 169-72.

<sup>66</sup> Manuel, *Eighteenth Century*, 26.

<sup>67</sup> Manuel, *Eighteenth Century*, 29.



literal truth of every myth.”<sup>68</sup> This insulated paganism from scholars who wanted to read into antiquity fundamental Christian doctrines.

At the same time, the eighteenth century was marked by a sympathy with “primitive” cultures. Studying backward peoples gave proto-enlightened scholars the chance to feel superior and free from primitive superstitions.<sup>69</sup> Whatever the motivation for studying other cultures, eighteenth-century scholars like Bayle and Fontenelle launched wide-ranging examinations of entire societies in the style of Montesquieu’s *Lettres Persanes*.<sup>70</sup> These *histoires totales* were “attempts to lay bare the anatomy and physiology of society, [while] showing the secret springs of socio-political growth and decay” in their own cultures.<sup>71</sup> The scope of Basnage’s project, while likely drawing on earlier models like Cunaeus’s study of the Israelite commonwealth, owes something to this enthusiasm for ambitious studies of “foreign” cultures. Ever since the Reformation, scholars on both sides of the confessional divide had looked to other cultures, most usually those of pagan antiquity, as sources from which they could draw to attack their opponents. We need to understand the pervasiveness of this mentality in order to appreciate Basnage’s use of Jewish history.

### Allegory and History

In the sixteenth century Protestant intellectuals had already begun to attack Catholics by accusing them of preserving rituals from pagan antiquity. What had been evidence of the antiquity and thus the legitimacy of Catholicism became for Protestants signs of the illegitimacy of Catholic rituals and institutions. Momigliano points to an early prototype of this effort by Henri Estienne, the *Apologie pour Hérodote* (1566). The *Magdeburg Centuries* (1559-74) by Mathias Flacius Illyricus (and others) was a sustained rehearsal of the penetration of pagan rituals into Roman Catholicism. This work would prompt the massive response contained in the *Annales* of Baronius.<sup>72</sup>

Protestant controversialists attacked on two fronts. They first tried to show that the Church had been undermined by the influence of pagan philosophers. That is, pagan converts to Christianity were embarrassed at the crude formulations of Jesus and the image of a god crucified, so they imported Platonic allegories in order to make their new religion more

<sup>68</sup> Manuel, *Eighteenth Century*, 26.

<sup>69</sup> Porter, *Gibbon*, 51.

<sup>70</sup> Porter, *Gibbon*, 51.

<sup>71</sup> Porter, *Gibbon*, 69.

<sup>72</sup> Momigliano, “Historiography: Western Studies,” 387.

palatable.<sup>73</sup> Basnage's deprecation of the oriental allegories of the kabbala and his "visible pleasure" in linking the corruptions of paganism with those of Catholicism no doubt reflects this widespread Protestant anxiety. N. Souverain's *Le Platonisme dévoilé, ou Essai touchant le Verbe Platonicien* (Cologne, 1700) and later work by J. L. Mosheim (1753) emphasized the extent of Neo-Platonic influence in corrupting early Christianity, particularly that of allegory as the source of error.<sup>74</sup>

Protestant scholars also tried to demonstrate that unsophisticated Christians had imported into the early Church comforting pagan rituals and habits (see for example the *De rerum inventoribus* of Polydorus Vergil [1499 and 1517]). The church elite, it was thought, then seized upon these imported rituals and institutionalized them. Some of these works describing this "pagano-papism" have rather obvious titles: *Heydisches Papssthum* and *Ethnico-Pontifica Conformitate*. Later efforts are best represented by the relatively sophisticated *Les Conformitez des cérémonies modernes avec les anciennes. Ou il est prouvé par des autoritez incontestables que les Cérémonies de l'Église Romaine sont empruntées des payens* (1667), by P. Mussard. The best known work of this style in English remains Conyers Middleton's *A Letter from Rome Shewing an Exact Conformity between Popery and Paganism* (1729).<sup>75</sup> Some writers dispensed with the pretense of studying an ancient subject and wrote as if they were travellers to the foreign country of the Roman church. "At times, their works are simply Herodotus-like ethnographies, presenting the curiosities of the 'popish' church and folk practice as if describing a foreign tribe." We have good examples of this in Th. Kirchmeir's *Das Papistisch Reich* (1555) or *The Popish Kingdome or reigne of Antichrist* (London, 1570) by B. Googe.<sup>76</sup> Basnage would adopt the style of these pseudo-ethnographic works as he journeyed into the foreign territory of the Jews, only to find the practices of Roman Catholics.

Not all of the attacks on Catholic paganism were so blatant. Some were more subtle and required readers, who were sensitive to the confessional antagonism, to decode the polemics. Guillaume du Choul wrote *Discours de la religion des anciens romains* (Lyons, 1556), which was a work "largely constructed as a commentary on a collection of coins and medallions. There are a dozen instances of brief, parenthetical, comparisons—much as one finds in travellers' reports—between some 'Roman praxis'

<sup>73</sup> Jonathan Z. Smith, *Drudgery Divine* (Chicago, 1990), 22. And see Bernard Dompnier, "L'église romaine, conservatoire des religions antiques. La critique protestante du culte des saints et des images au XVII<sup>e</sup> siècle," in *Les Religions Du Paganisme Antique dans L'Europe Chrétienne XVIe-XVIIIe siècle: colloque tenu en Sorbonne les 26-27 mai 1987*, (Paris, 1987), 51-69.

<sup>74</sup> Laplanche, "Basnage Historien," 185. Smith, *Divine*, 18-19, particularly n. 29.

<sup>75</sup> Smith, *Divine*, 20-21.

<sup>76</sup> Smith, *Divine*, 21, note 36.

and Catholicism.”<sup>77</sup> By the seventeenth century people had learned to write and read coded historical narratives. In England, one scholar has argued, history “provided the idiom for politics.”<sup>78</sup> Every subject, including exotic ones like the history of Islam, offered opportunities to strike at confessional opponents. In this world “renderings of Islam—favourable or unfavourable—were standardly read as covert analyses of the Christian Church itself.”<sup>79</sup> Just as with the attacks on Islam or, as we shall see, on Judaism, these revelations about paganism could be applied to “Parisian pagans” as well.<sup>80</sup> Skilled readers could make the connection between corrupt pagan practices and similar failings in Catholicism.<sup>81</sup>

Catholics responded to these attacks by trying to assert the antiquity of Church institutions. We have seen how Baronius and others tried to connect Church institutions with the rituals of the Israelites. At the same time they tried to discredit the innovations of the reformers. The Catholic Bishop Bossuet, prompting a fascinating response from the Calvinist Isaac de Beausobre (1659-1738), tried to link contemporary Protestantism to the distasteful and corrupt practices of the Manichees. In his *Histoire critique de Manichée et du Manichéisme* (1734-36), Beausobre tried to defend Manicheism against these charges and argued that the Manichean position was reasonable for its time. There is much in Beausobre’s work that is reminiscent of the “tolerant” attitude ascribed to Basnage. They both undertook to explore the customs and practices of infamous peoples and render a reasoned and sympathetic verdict on the nature of those practices. Just as Basnage had written sympathetically of the Gnostics, Beausobre saw Mani as a “precursor of Luther, fighting against the ecclesiastical authorities of his time.”<sup>82</sup> Beausobre was also mild in his view of heresy, arguing that it was often “honest error, arising from the prevalence of Pythagorean and Platonist philosophy.”<sup>83</sup> At the same time, the subject matter allowed Beausobre to attack Catholicism. He cited the similarity between pagans and Catholics to show that the Manichees had not been the only group to have seemingly irrational practices: “Les Payens pouvoient se tromper, comme les Catholiques se sont trompez une infinité de fois, en honorant des Saints fabuleux, et quelquefois des Schismatiques, des Hérétiques, des Brigands,”<sup>84</sup> In other words, “si l’on

<sup>77</sup> Smith, *Divine*, 21, note 35.

<sup>78</sup> Porter, *Gibbon*, 18.

<sup>79</sup> Porter, *Gibbon*, 130-32.

<sup>80</sup> Manuel, *Eighteenth Century*, 52.

<sup>81</sup> Porter, *Gibbon*, 51.

<sup>82</sup> Stroumsa, “Gnosis and Judaism,” 5.

<sup>83</sup> Pocock, “Gibbon,” 23, n. 22, and see Richard H. Popkin, “Manicheism in the Enlightenment,” Kurt H. Wolff and Barrington Moore, Jr. (eds.), *The Critical Spirit: Essays in Honor of Herbert Marcuse* (Boston, 1967), 32-34.

<sup>84</sup> Beausobre, *Histoire*, I, ix, 654.

excepte la différence des personnes, la Pratique Payenne, et la Pratique Chrétienne se ressemblent extrêmement.”<sup>85</sup>

Basnage was directly exposed to this style of historical allegory in the work of his friend Bayle (and in the works of other Protestant scholars). In his *Pensées Diverses sur La Comète*, which ostensibly discussed why natural phenomena cannot be considered divine warnings, Bayle provided a more sophisticated and subtle version of these allegorical blows to Catholic antiquity and legitimacy. Bayle used the pagans to move from a philosophical discussion to a theological attack on the validity of Catholicism. He ridiculed the ceremonies and rituals of Catholicism through their pagan counterparts. In Walter Rex’s analysis we read that “not only do Bayle’s pagans have pointedly Catholic features, but the Catholics he describes likewise have pagan features. Bayle makes certain that the identification of pagan and Catholic is firmly established in the reader’s mind.”<sup>86</sup>

Bayle used allegory to criticize other targets by drawing upon elements of Jewish history instead of paganism. Because Bayle and Basnage were such close intellectual and personal friends, it may be that Basnage wrote about the Jews under Bayle’s powerful influence. Or they may have learned to exploit Judaism simultaneously. In either case Bayle’s attitudes help set the stage for understanding Basnage’s treatment of the Jews. Bayle’s extended discussion of King David in the *Dictionnaire Critique*, for example, was an indictment of Pierre Jurieu, the Protestant leader who called for active resistance to the Catholic King of France.<sup>87</sup> Certainly, Henri Basnage felt that Bayle had cleverly hidden his attack on Jurieu. He wrote to Bayle that Jurieu, intent on persecuting Bayle, could not take umbrage at the discussion of David, because “you have taken care to soften the places where they were able to attack you. For example, the article, ‘David.’”<sup>88</sup>

Basnage could look to other specific linkages that had been drawn between Israelite history and aspects of the confessional debate between Catholics and Protestants. Numerous Protestant scholars drew analogies between the Karaites and reformed Christians. The Karaites, an eighth-century Jewish sect that rejected the oral law of the rabbis and insisted on strict adherence to the precepts of the Old Testament, seemed the perfect historical incarnation of Protestant ideology.<sup>89</sup> They were, as Rich-

<sup>85</sup> Beausobre, *Histoire*, I, ix, 656.

<sup>86</sup> Walter Rex, *Essays on Pierre Bayle and Religious Controversy* (The Hague, 1965), 46. See Ruth Whelan, “La religion à l’envers: Bayle et l’histoire du paganisme antique,” in *Les Religions Du Paganisme Antique*, 115-29; Manuel, *Eighteenth Century*, 33; and Smith, *Divine*, ch. 1.

<sup>87</sup> Rex, *Bayle*, 242.

<sup>88</sup> Rex, *Bayle*, 242.

<sup>89</sup> J. van den Berg, “Proto-Protestants? The Image of the Catholic-Protestant Controversy in the Seventeenth Century,” J. van den Berg and E. G. E. van der Wall (eds.), *Jewish Christian Relations in the Seventeenth Century* (Boston, 1988), 33-51.

ard Simon, himself a Catholic, called them, pure Jews.<sup>90</sup> Simon, who in correspondence with a Protestant friend often identified himself as “Le Rabbaniste” while addressing his Protestant friend as “Le Caraïte,” did not want to abandon the label of pure Jews to the reformers. He tried unsuccessfully to make Karaites into discriminating Catholics, who rejected only spurious traditions.<sup>91</sup>

Basnage, apparently the last Protestant to employ the analogy, summarized the relationship between Protestants and Karaites: “Just as the Reformed are the enemies of Tradition; because they reject the Dogmas that have been woven onto those of Jesus Christ, and they do not wish to submit blindly to its Authority, one should recognize the same aspect of the ancient and modern Caraïtes, who have precisely the same Repugnance for Traditions.”<sup>92</sup> He was, as one might expect, more absolute than Simon in the Karaites’ rejection of tradition. If the Protestants were new Karaites, then the Catholic Church, with its centuries of tradition and commentaries built upon Scripture, was the reincarnation of the obscurantist Pharisees and rabbis. Let us now examine how Basnage elaborated this allegory. By doing so, he was able to join the polemical battle against Catholicism.

### Rabbinism and Catholicism: Jewish History Allegorized

The similarity between rabbinism and Catholicism had not gone unnoticed in the Middle Ages. The suggestion has been made that the Church’s condemnation of the Talmud in the Middle Ages did not strike at the very nature of the oral law since the Catholic tradition itself was founded upon generations of commentary.<sup>93</sup> In Reformation Europe the Protestant Johannes Buxtorf attacked the legitimacy of the Talmudic tradition because he wanted to convince Judaizing Protestants not to emulate contemporary Jewish practice, which, he thought, did not follow authentic biblical traditions. Demonstrating that they had deviated from biblical custom would, he hoped, convince Jews to convert by showing that rabbinic Judaism was religiously bankrupt.<sup>94</sup> Buxtorf might have been trying to discredit the “authority of the oral law, rabbinic exegesis, and specific Talmudic legislation—perhaps because he saw in it the analog of Catholic

<sup>90</sup> Yosef Kaplan, “‘Karaites’ in Early Eighteenth-Century Amsterdam,” *Sceptics, Millenarians and Jews*, 221.

<sup>91</sup> Kaplan, “‘Karaites,’” 228.

<sup>92</sup> Basnage, *Histoire des Juifs* (1716), II (tome 4), xvi, 385, cited in Van den Berg, 44. On the afterlife of the Karaite metaphor, see Richard H. Popkin, “Les Caraïtes et l’émancipation des Juifs,” *Dix-huitième siècle*, 13 (1981), 138.

<sup>93</sup> Mark R. Cohen, “Leone de Modena’s *Riti*: a Seventeenth-Century Plea for Social Toleration of Jews,” *Jewish Social Studies*, 34 (1972), 302.

<sup>94</sup> Cohen, “Leone de Modena,” 293.

'distortion' of pristine Christianity."<sup>95</sup> His *Synagoga Iudaica* (1603) may have provided a model, then, for Basnage's allegorical treatment of Judaism and Catholicism. Certainly his language about rabbinic Judaism can be easily applied to Catholicism. He also was sympathetic to the Karaites.<sup>96</sup> Still, his comparative critique of rabbinism and Catholicism remained implicit. Basnage, as we shall see, makes the allegory explicit.

In Basnage's opinion the rabbis created illegitimate customs and unreliable history: "The Doctors that have made these Collections of Traditions, taking advantage of the Ignorance of their Nation, have thrown upon the Paper whatever came into their Heads, without troubling themselves with reconciling their conjectures with foreign history, to which they were utterly Strangers."<sup>97</sup> Basnage confronts the intimidating reputation of Scaliger who, Basnage thought, had been taken in by the rabbinic sources:

Scaliger denies this, and laughs at the Credibility of Eusebius, for blindly following so doubtful an Author as Hegesippus. . . . But Scaliger was deluded by his Prejudices. It is strange, that a Man, who will believe neither Hegesippus, nor Eusebius, will yet so obsequiously follow the Rabbins, whose Character he ought to have known.<sup>98</sup>

Their interpretations of Scripture and history distorted the truth of the prophecies, preventing the Israelites from recognizing the true Messiah.<sup>99</sup> The rabbis deliberately misinterpreted the prophetic verses and blinded the people to the new revelation. In the same way Basnage suggests that the distortions of Catholicism have hidden the true Reformed church from Christians.

The rabbinic conceit of the Oral Law, Basnage thought, gave the rabbis license to create their own religion. Whenever they wanted to invent a new tradition, the rabbis sought to anchor it in a verse from Scripture: "When they had formed a project, they considered the first Word that could be applied to it, as an Answer from Heaven." Indeed, Judaism had

<sup>95</sup> Cohen, "Leone de Modena," 302.

<sup>96</sup> Buxtorf, *Synagoga Iudaica*, tr. M. Hermannus Germbergius (Hanover, 1604), 465: "Christianus vero Lector satis ex hisce omnibus percipiet et intelliget, Judaicam fidem, totamque illorum religionem, non in Mose, sed in mendaciis, falsis et futilibus traditionibus, Rabbiorum et seductorum fabuli fundamentum suum ponere. . . ." For Buxtorf's sympathy for the Karaites, see Kaplan, "'Karaites,'" 227.

<sup>97</sup> Basnage, III, vi, 170-71 [III (tome 5), vi, 176] Cf. Yardeni, "Jews and Judaism as Viewed Through the Works of Pierre Bayle," *Anti-Jewish Mentalities*, 203, and Arnold Ages, "Les Rabbins et le rabbinisme dans le Dictionnaire de Pierre Bayle," *Révue de l'Université d'Ottawa*, 37 (1967), 70-79.

<sup>98</sup> Basnage, I, viii, 59 [I, (tome 2), xix, 596].

<sup>99</sup> Basnage, IV, xxvi, 371-72.



evolved into the accretions of rabbinic whim: "They make God say what they please, and give Divine Authority to their Imaginations."<sup>100</sup>

Basnage wove into this story of corruption the parallel account of how Catholic tradition corrupted the pristine word of God found in the New Testament. When Basnage called Jewish rituals and commentaries the "phantasies" of the rabbis, he alluded to similar failings in Church history. Just as the rabbis created an artificial and untrustworthy history, so too did the priests of the Catholic Church:

The Miracles [the rabbis] attribute to their Rabbins are bunglingly contrived, but the greater part of the Christians have nothing to reproach them with upon that Article. The Legends are full of Stories, that shew how far the Extravagance of an human Understanding may be carried. They have not even spared Jesus Christ; for they have attributed to him Miracles which he never did, and which, far from raising his Glory, sully it.<sup>101</sup>

Just as the rabbis sought out convenient oracles in the text of the Bible, this has "since been done [by] a great number of Christians. These latter dipt into a Book, as the Gospel of St. John, and the first Text they found, went for a Divine Oracle, which determin'd the good or ill success of their Designs."<sup>102</sup> Before the flourishing of the rabbis, Israel's relation to its holy book resembled that of the ideal Reformed church. Basnage imagined that "the original of the Law was, for many Ages, kept in the Holy of Holies, that by the perusal of it, People might be themselves convinced of its Precepts."<sup>103</sup> Over time the Jews, like the Christians, lost that intimate familiarity with the sacred text. Basnage admits that the Masoretic emendations and vowel points were relatively late additions to the text of the Bible, but he is able to salvage the innate holiness and sanctity of the text. He essentially recapitulates Richard Simon's solution of inspired transmission. Where there are errors or inconsistencies in the text, it is only in minor matters.<sup>104</sup> The crucial element in the corruption of the text remains rabbinic commentary.

The ignorance of the people encouraged the rabbis' oriental inclination for allegory and their "violent Propensions to Hyperbole."<sup>105</sup> Freed from adherence to the text by their exposure to eastern cultures, the rabbis began to fashion their own laws and histories and arbitrarily fasten them onto scriptural verses. Basnage's critique of the way the rabbis interpreted the Bible and wrote their own history became a model, for the attentive

<sup>100</sup> Basnage, III, v, 166 [III, (tome 5), v, 130] and Basnage, III, v, 163 [III (tome 5), v, 112].

<sup>101</sup> Basnage, III, vii, 179 [III, (tome 5), vii, 229].

<sup>102</sup> Basnage, III, v, 166 [III (tome 5), v, 130].

<sup>103</sup> Basnage, I, i, 1 [I (tome 1), i, 3].

<sup>104</sup> Basnage, III, ix, 181-83. On the vowel points, see Maurice Olender, *The Languages of Paradise*, tr. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, Mass., 1992), esp. 21-37.

<sup>105</sup> Basnage, III, v, 166 [III (tome 5), v, 134].



reader, of the way Catholics corrupted the Christian apostolic tradition. Just as the Jewish rabbis interpreted the Hebrew, Basnage wrote, so do “the Preachers of the Church of Rome cite their Vulgate, and the Passages of the Fathers in Latin, and afterwards interpret to the People what they think fit to let’em know.”<sup>106</sup> The Fathers of the Church, particularly Origen, Jerome, and Augustine, thought in the same Greek-inspired allegorical way as did the rabbis. Using symbols and signs, these Catholic exegetes expanded and distorted the meaning of Scripture in the same way as the rabbis of the Talmud.<sup>107</sup>

When Christians were in direct contact with the word of God, the religion was simple and pure, like that of the patriarchs or early Israelites. It had none of the offensive trappings of idolatrous Catholicism:

There were then in primitive Christianity no Images in the Temples, and upon the Altar, no Statues and Crosses in publick Places, That infinite crowd of Saints was unknown which has been worshipped since. The Christians could not be confounded with the Heathens, till a Worship like that of the Gentiles was introduced among the Christians.<sup>108</sup>

The Church, however, quickly became dependent upon translations, Talmud-like commentaries, and oral traditions.

For Basnage the process was the same in both Judaism and Christianity:

Thus the Canon Law of the Romish and Jewish Church, formed almost in the same manner. Both of them are made up of Tradition, or what they call the Oral Law, both are full of Canons and Decrees of Fathers that have preceded them; both abound with insignificant and ridiculous decisions; both tend to raise the Glory of their Church, and the heads of it; both contain contrary decisions, which leave the Mind in Suspence; both were hatched in the corruption of Ages, and the decay of Church and Religion. In Fine, the Romans have their Extravagants like the Jews and the Jews have their extravagants like the Romans.<sup>109</sup>

Basnage links the Catholics and rabbinic Jews in the same way that Bayle joined Catholics and pagans.

Basnage could also mimic the kind of ironic allegory that Bayle used in comparing Catholics to pagans. On the issue of whether the Egyptians took their religious ideas from the Jews, Basnage contends that the fact that there are similarities between two religions does not necessarily mean that one grew out of the other. Indeed, he asserts, there are religious ideas common to most nations. This is the way that Basnage responded to attempts to make the Indians of the Americas resemble Jews or Chris-

<sup>106</sup> Basnage, V, xi, 442 [VI (tome 9), xiv, 294].

<sup>107</sup> Basnage, III, ix, 184. In the French edition, see III (tome 6), xxv, 664ff.

<sup>108</sup> Basnage, III, vii, 180 [III (tome 5), vii, 234-35].

<sup>109</sup> Basnage, III, vi, 167 [III (tome 5), vi, 139].

tians.<sup>110</sup> So far, Basnage's discussion seems quite innocuous. However, just as Cameron and Bayle began by writing about pagans and then moved to Catholicism, Basnage too shifts quietly to a more pointed level.

To prove that the Egyptians did not inherit their religion from the Jews, Basnage gladly cites the more contemporary example of how Christianity did not necessarily arise from paganism:

An Example will demonstratively prove it. The Church of Rome worships Saints and Images, and the Protestants discover the Origine of this worship in Heathenism. And indeed there are twenty resemblances betwixt them; which can't be denied. In the mean time the Christians that pray to Saints, did not adopt the Worship of the Heathens. They invented it themselves; and on that respect there is a conformity betwixt the two Religions, tho'one was not the Parent of the other.<sup>111</sup>

True, Catholics did not take their apparently "pagan" customs from the Romans; they just invented their own. Basnage pursues the analogy to Catholicism with quite devastating results:

Images were placed in Temples by way of Ornament; to revive the Memory of the antient Heroes of Christianity, and to be the Book of the Ignorant. If we compare Popery with Paganism; their Heroes turn'd into Tutelar Gods of every Kingdom, Province, Profession or Family. . . . Yet who will venture to say that the Christians, who first paid their Devotions to Saints, or Images sought after the Books of the antient Heathens to form their Worship by them, and took so infamous an Idolatry for a Model of their own?"<sup>112</sup>

As Basnage catalogues and deprecates the particularities of rabbinic Judaism, each note keys a refrain drawn from the history of the Church. Basnage describes how the Jewish church had drifted from the ideal of the original revelation, but in describing this fall, he is really addressing his remarks to Rome and the Pope:

The Church, which should have set a Pattern of Obedience to the Supream Power, of Piety to God, and Respect for his Temple, prophaned it by enormous and continued Sacrileges. The High-Priest, when he bought his Office, thought of nothing but gratifying this Ambition . . . He neglected Divine Service, and only kept the outward Appearances of Religion, that the People might still be under his Jurisdiction.

The French is even stronger; it has the people "enchainez."<sup>113</sup>

The failings of the High Priest and clergy are subjected to special scorn and criticism. Referring to the corruption of the High Priests, Basnage

<sup>110</sup> Basnage, VI, iii, 477. On this, see Manuel, *Broken Staff*, 168-72.

<sup>111</sup> Basnage, III, xviii, 211 [III (tome 6), xviii, 442].

<sup>112</sup> Basnage, III, xviii, 211 [III (tome 6), xviii, 442].

<sup>113</sup> Basnage, I, viii, 53 [I (tome 2), xix, 542].

issues an indictment, equally true for his vision of the Papacy in Catholic history. The High Priests in Jerusalem, he wrote,

took up Arms to wrest the High-Priesthood from one another, as if they fought for a Dignity that was purely Temporal. . . . It is a most heavy and fatal Judgement of God, when the Clergy disgrace their Profession, and become profligate. Prophatation and Impertinency necessarily draw publick and general Calamities after them. Such was the condition of the Jewish clergy that begun by Crimes, and ended by the most dreadful Punishment that can be imagined.<sup>114</sup>

The result of such corruption was the flourishing of sects that weakened Judaism, just as contemporary Christianity was threatened by violent sectarian conflict.<sup>115</sup>

Catholics should not claim, Basnage argued, that the succession of bishops and Popes guaranteed the antiquity, and therefore the authority of the Church. By comparing this chain of succession to the one described by the Jews for their own high priests and rabbis, the Catholics gained nothing: "let us only observe, that we ought to be cautious of excess, since these Rites have not always the Antiquity that is pretended." Indeed, the origins of the Popes and bishops, Basnage concludes, was as fabulous as that of the rabbis.<sup>116</sup> Where Bayle set out to destroy the Church's claim to antiquity and legitimacy in his study of comets, Basnage tried to undermine what he believed to be Catholic claims (particularly by Richard Simon) to have invested ancient Jewish institutions with a new spirit. Indeed, in Basnage's view, the Church was reading into Jewish history evidence that would support its own presumptions and ambitions. It tried, for example, to invest the Jewish hierarchy with an aura of infallibility to justify its own contemporary doctrines. Basnage wrote in response that the "*Sanhedrim* was not infallible, no more is the College of Cardinals."<sup>117</sup> Indeed, the High Priest himself was never considered infallible or powerful enough to depose a king. The Pope, Basnage wrote, should not presume to overreach these precedents.<sup>118</sup>

Basnage also struggled against the long tradition, beginning with Eusebius, which tried to find the origins of monasticism in the ascetic Essenes and the *therapeutae*. Basnage was anxious to prove that the Essenes were not Christians as it would deprive Catholics of another piece of evidence for Catholic antiquity. To Basnage, the Essenes were Jews who had acquired particular habits and superstitions from the Egyptians. Woven into the discussion are passing jibes at Christian monks. The Essenes were Christians only in the degree that they resembled Christian monks, with

<sup>114</sup> Basnage, I, vi, 42 [I (tome 2), xvi, 464].

<sup>115</sup> Basnage, I, viii, 53, and I, vi, 43-48.

<sup>116</sup> Basnage, III, vii, 176, [III, (tome 5), vii, 210].

<sup>117</sup> Basnage, III, vii, 176.

<sup>118</sup> Basnage, I, v, 36.

all of their suspect and unpleasant characteristics: “Voilà, l’Obéissance aveugle pour les Décrets de Prêtres et des Status des Supérieurs clairement exprimée.”<sup>119</sup>

Much of the remainder of Basnage’s discussion of Jewish religious history is devoted to making comparisons between Jewish customs and those of Catholicism. To choose only a few central examples, Basnage appends an attack on Rome to a discussion of Jewish ideas about the afterlife. The Jews, he writes, “get the Souls out of that Place by many Prayers; and it is also by Masses, and by the Suffrages of the Saints, that the Romish Souls come out of their Purgatory.”<sup>120</sup> If the Jewish customs are reprehensible, how much more despicable are the comparable techniques among so-called Christians: “The Jews are not so Ingenuous as the Romish Priests. . . . Rome has been cunning enough to prolong the Punishment of the Dead to whole Centuries, and sometimes further, that they may still enjoy the Income.”<sup>121</sup>

Jewish fast days also provide a way to satirize Catholicism: “Some Christians that laugh at these Superstitious excesses, reflect not perhaps that they fall into the like themselves. How rigorously are the Feasts of the Saints observed? The Violator whereof is found miraculously Punished.”<sup>122</sup> In the parallel structure of Basnage’s work, rabbinic Jews and Catholics are thought of as having the same degenerate character. Basnage’s antipathy to Catholicism—or to any “materialistic” religion—is refracted through the prism of rabbinic Judaism. The Jews who cling to the rituals of the Talmud are like travellers to Rome, who “see there such gross Superstitions, and such a multitude of silly Ceremonies and comical Sights.”<sup>123</sup> The association between Judaism and Catholicism is complete. The two traditions have become almost indistinguishable. They share a history of corrupted revelation.

### Conclusion: Polemic, Allegory, and Ambiguity

The attack on Catholicism in the *Histoire* was echoed in Basnage’s other more overtly polemical writings. In response to Bossuet’s indictment of Protestantism, Basnage surveyed Catholic history in various works to show that apostolic Christianity was later corrupted by interpretations and superstitions.<sup>124</sup> Basnage also tried to strike at Catholicism using other metaphors that came to hand. A digression into the apparent similarities between the rituals of the American Indians and those of the Church gave Basnage a chance to mock the materialism and idol-worshipping quality

<sup>119</sup> Basnage, *Histoire*, II (tome 4), xxiii, 656.

<sup>120</sup> Basnage, IV, xxxii, 390 [V (tome 8), xix, 345].

<sup>121</sup> Basnage, IV, xxxii, 390 [V (tome 8), xix, 345].

<sup>122</sup> Basnage, V, xii, 446 [VI, (tome 9), xv, 319-20].

<sup>123</sup> Basnage, III, vii, 173 [III (tome 5), vi, 189-90].

<sup>124</sup> Cerny, *Crossroads*, 222.

of the Church.<sup>125</sup> The allegory drawn between rabbinism and Catholicism, then, was not simply a rhetorical flourish. It articulated Basnage's deep antipathy to Catholicism.

We can see the importance of the Catholic allegory to Basnage's work on the Jews in his response to an edited version of the *Histoire*. The Catholic Louis Ellies Du Pin, perhaps anxious about his own standing with the papacy, published a version of the *Histoire* with all the Catholic references expunged. The advertisement for this volume read that the original had been "imprimée en Hollande avec des Digressions et des Parenthèses contre la Conduite et la Doctrine de l'Église Romaine."<sup>126</sup> In a volume specifically designed to respond to the pirated Catholic version, Basnage wrote with indignation: "They have stolen the *History of the Jews* from me; they have erased my name, and after making many changes, they have added opinions that I do not hold."<sup>127</sup> In an amusing comment in the preface to the French edition of 1716 Basnage wrote of the honor of having Du Pin publish his work: "J'aimerois beaucoup mieux être privé de cet Honneur, que de voir mon Ouvrage déchiré." Basnage was certain that he knew the reason for the Paris edition's censorship: "La Religion a servi de Prétexte à ce Rapt."<sup>128</sup>

Throughout his rejoinder to the Paris edition, Basnage protests that he conducted himself as a rational and equitable historian in his study of the Jews: "Je lis sans préjugé, sans passion. J'examine un fait." This is, as we have seen, complicated by Basnage's extended critique of Catholicism. Richard Popkin's discussion of the fanciful 1650 meeting of rabbis, where they discussed accepting Christ as the Messiah, has offered another example of the fluidity in Basnage's critical ability. Basnage accepted the published accounts of this meeting and included them in his last edition. While Popkin argues that it was Basnage's anxiety for the conversion of the Jews that led him to legitimate the story, the reputed presence at the meeting of Roman Catholic clerics, who needlessly antagonized the Jews and derailed the conversion, may have also made the story irresistible to Basnage.<sup>129</sup>

<sup>125</sup> Basnage, VI, iii, 478.

<sup>126</sup> See note 15. On Du Pin, see J. Gres-Gayer, "Le Gallicanisme de Louis Ellies Du Pin (1657-1719)," *Lias*, 18 (1991), 37-82, esp. 40-41. Barbara de Negroni correctly identifies the ideology driving Du Pin's censorship of Basnage and Basnage's anti-Catholicism in her excellent study, "Les ciseaux du censeur—un découpage orthodoxe de l'*Histoire des Juifs* de Basnage de Beauval," *Revue de synthèse*, 111 (1990), 397-422.

<sup>127</sup> Basnage, *L'Histoire et la Religion des Juifs Depuis Jésus-Christ jusqu'à présent. Réclamée & Rétablie par son véritable Auteur Mr. Basnage. Contre L'Édition Anonyme et tronquée, qui s'en fait à Paris chez Roullan* (Rotterdam, 1711). Basnage quoted the advertisement in his preface to the 1716 French edition.

<sup>128</sup> Basnage, *Réclamée*, preface, fol. 1v, and *Histoire* (1716), preface, 4-5.

<sup>129</sup> Basnage, *Réclamée*, preface, f.7r-v. See Richard H. Popkin, "The Fictional Council of 1650: A Great English Pipedream," *Jewish History*, 5 (1991), 12-13. I am grateful to Professor William C. Jordan for this reference.

Basnage remained convinced, it seems, that he was not self-consciously trying to criticize Catholicism. He has been attacked only because he was trying to be honest and thorough. It was inevitable that some aspects of Catholicism would be criticized.<sup>130</sup> Basnage's rhetoric is here carefully modulated. He does not admit to outraging Catholic sensibilities on purpose. If he did say anything offensive, it was only what he could not avoid, like indicting clerical misdeeds or offenses against religion. What he wrote about the Catholics is what any historian would do:

Il est vrai que j'ai fait quelquefois des Réflexions, sur les événemens et sur la conduite des hommes, comme tous les Historiens, qui ont écrit avant moi, l'ont fait. Si elles sont exactes et justes, il ne falloit pas les retrancher, car elles peuvent contribuer à rendre l'Ouvrage plus utile au Public; et si elles sont mauvaises, on les reconnoitra sans peine.<sup>131</sup>

It is even harder to believe Basnage's protests in his preface to the last French edition. He was responding to the criticisms of his work by Simon and others, particularly on his treatment of the Karaites. For Basnage, he had done nothing unusual by comparing the Karaites to the Protestants: "Les Historiens comparent assez souvent les Moeurs, les Rites et les Dogmes des Etrangers avec ceux de leur Nation et de leur tems." He continued to insist that his work was historical and not polemical: "Enfin, j'ai comparé le système des Caraïtes avec celui des Réformez sur les Traditions; mais, je ne suis entré dans aucune Dispute. Je n'ai pas même nommé l'Eglise Romaine; et cette Comparaison des Caraïtes, odieu[se] au reste des Juifs, avec les Réformez ne doit faire peine à personne." Did Basnage really believe this?<sup>132</sup>

Despite Basnage's protests, the immediate publication of his *Histoire Reclamée*, and subsequent editions containing the anti-Catholic material, suggests that it was the allusions to Catholicism that made his work whole and gave it meaning. Other Catholic and Protestant readers also seemed to have understood the subtext of Basnage's work. Richard Simon reviewed the *Histoire* and was very severe on Basnage's factual and philological errors, and his reliance upon faulty translations. He wrote that "en un mot, le sçavant Ministre de Rotterdam n'est nullement exact en fait de citations, parce qu'il n'a pu lire les livres des Rabbins dans leur source."<sup>133</sup> Simon thought the book was "plutôt un tissu de fables et de rêveries Juives, qu'une véritable histoire."<sup>134</sup> Still, he was grateful to Basnage for collecting material from contemporary authors whose work was difficult

<sup>130</sup> Basnage, *Réclamée*, I, 5.

<sup>131</sup> Basnage, *Réclamée*, I, 8.

<sup>132</sup> Basnage, *Histoire* (1716), preface, 24-26.

<sup>133</sup> Richard Simon, *Nouvelle Bibliothèque Choisie*, II (Amsterdam, 1714), 254. The Jesuits of the *Mémoires de Trévoux* also reviewed Basnage critically. See Manuel, *Broken Staff*, 227.

<sup>134</sup> Simon, *Choisie*, 254.



to obtain in France “à cause des guerres, ou parce que l’entrée de ces sortes d’ouvrages de contrebande y est entierement fermée.”<sup>135</sup>

He was certainly aware of the anti-Catholic material in Basnage’s work, and I suspect this sharpened his critique. The polemical material interfered with Basnage’s scholarship:

Il seroit néanmoins à souhaiter, que lorsqu’il parle de la secte des Juifs Caraïtes, il ne se fut pas jeté aveuglément dans une controverse outrée, et qui est plutôt digne d’un Prédicant, que d’un Théologien habile. Il fait venir peu judicieusement dans son discours la controverse qui est entre les Catholiques et les Protestans, sur la matière des traditions, en quoi il ne fait pas le devoir d’un véritable Historien.<sup>136</sup>

More sympathetic reviewers also recognized the thrust of Basnage’s work and occasionally recapitulated similar allusions to Catholicism. As a contributor to the (1706) *Journal des Sçavans* remarked: “Il semble que l’Église Romaine ait emprunté d’eux [sectarian rabbis] des raisons pour défendre ses Traditions.”<sup>137</sup>

By concentrating on the polemical underpinnings of Basnage’s work, I do not mean to discount the essential tone of compassion with which he wrote about Jews and their suffering. I have not concentrated on the origins of this “compassion.” Protestant identification with the Jews and Jewish history no doubt encouraged it. The relatively tolerant and pluralistic atmosphere of the Dutch republic also facilitated it. Although an orthodox Calvinist, Basnage may have picked up some of the tolerant attitudes of the Dutch Arminians and Collegiants.<sup>138</sup> Basnage and some of his readers may have been truly challenged to question their ingrained negative attitudes towards Jews by his ambitious study of their customs and history. As Lionel Gossman has written about historians of the eighteenth century, “even among moderate spirits in England and France, however, reflection on early societies sometimes led beyond historical relativism and gave rise to genuine self-questioning.”<sup>139</sup>

Nor do I wish to discount the toleration towards Jews that existed in parts of the Huguenot tradition. The quiet heroism of the villagers of Le Chambon-sur-Lignon, who hid Jews in the Second World War, is the most admirable example of Huguenot sympathy for the people of the Old Testament.<sup>140</sup> I do think it is vital, however, to understand that the attention paid to Jewish customs, suffering, and history in Basnage’s work did not arise mainly from a precocious altruism or “modern” historical

<sup>135</sup> Simon, *Choisie*, 255.

<sup>136</sup> Simon, *Choisie*, 255.

<sup>137</sup> *Journal des Sçavans*, 37 March (1706), art. viii, 116.

<sup>138</sup> Fix, *Prophecy and Reason*, 15.

<sup>139</sup> Lionel Gossman, *Medievalism and the Ideologies of the Enlightenment: The World and Work of La Curie de Sainte-Palaye* (Baltimore, 1968), 338.

<sup>140</sup> See the documentary, *Weapons of the Spirit*, by Pierre Sauvage.



sensibility. If we are to give Basnage credit for undertaking a history of the Jews, we must understand why he did it.<sup>141</sup> Studying Basnage's history of the Jews leaves a modern reader wondering how his eighteenth-century audience reacted. Did they read the *Histoire* to learn about Judaism and providential history or to revel in its attacks on Catholicism? They were, we have been taught, used to ambiguity in the scholarly works of the eighteenth century:

This quality of openness to many interpretations is characteristic of a large body of literature in the eighteenth century. One of its most concrete manifestations is the literary mystification, by which the reader was made to take responsibility for ascribing the authorship or determining the authenticity, indeed the meaning of a given work.<sup>142</sup>

It is perhaps asking too much to classify Basnage's work as either history or polemic. Gossman's opinion about the way readers responded to the ambiguous work of the eighteenth-century medievalist Sainte-Palaye likely describes the way contemporaries read Basnage's allegorized Jewish history as well: "The most agile reader, however, knew how to adopt both these attitudes at the same time, so that he experienced the ambiguity . . . not in successive and alternating moments but simultaneously and directly, as its very essence."<sup>143</sup> Can we allow ourselves the same luxury?

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<sup>141</sup> We should not explain away the allegories as Jacques Proust does in *Diderot et l'Encyclopédie* (Paris, 1962), 243. "Emporté par sa verve, Basnage frôle souvent de près le Christianisme lui-même et il lui faut à chaque instant préciser que sa critique des textes hébraïques ne saurait atteindre de textes chrétiens qui pourtant leur ressemblent."

<sup>142</sup> Gossman, *Sainte-Palaye*, 347.

<sup>143</sup> Gossman, *Sainte-Palaye*, 348.

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