

Coleridge and Jews

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There is no encapsulation feasible on the topic of Coleridge and Jews. There are many themes or strands in Coleridge's mindset. These interact, and the interactions themselves are often complex. Then there is change throughout Coleridge's life span. The complexities are such that this article is really only an introduction.

First of all about Jews in Britain, more particularly London during Coleridge's lifetime.¹ The population was about 15,000 in London and growing, and the total population about 900,000 and growing. The locations for Jews, and they were by no means ghettos, were chiefly Whitechapel, East of the City and Holywell Street in the area North of the Eastern end of the Strand. A few very wealthy Jews operating high level finance owned mansions and estates in the scenic environs of London. The main occupations of male Jews including lads were old clothes traders, pedlars and small shopkeepers. Generally little or no capital was needed, and remuneration was often minimal. Synagogue worship enabled some bonding, as of course did use of Hebrew and Yiddish. The Great Synagogue at the East of the City had its Rabbi as the Chief Rabbi. There were two groups, almost denominations: the Sephardim, reckoned as superior, originally from Iberia and North Africa via Holland; and the Ashkenazi growing in numbers from Eastern Europe. There was some excellence in the education of boys, and it was free, but for tiny if growing numbers.²

How much did Coleridge know of this background? The answer must be largely bits and pieces. This did not prevent him from holding strong views under various heads. One of these strands and themes to be mentioned at the outset, was his occasional inclination to stereotype in accordance with the then generally prevailing social trend. This tendency to insult Jews never completely disappears but it should not be overestimated and I believe it derives mainly from his schooldays in London. It seems this tendency surfaces at times when Coleridge feels low self-esteem. One also has to see the common perspective that in England many minorities, in religion notably Roman Catholics though not confined to them, and 'foreigners' particularly Irish, Scottish and French were also victims of popular prejudice. Coleridge variously proclaimed disdain for the French for their alleged absence of principles, for the Irish for their alleged stupidity, and for the Scotch, Coleridge mostly insisting on that appellation, for their alleged thrifty materialism.³ Male Jews were often easily

¹ Generally about Jews in London Todd M Endelman *The Jews of Georgian England 1714-1830* (Philadelphia 1979 edition). See also Sheila A Spector (editor) *British Romanticism and the Jews* (Palgrave, 2002) and in relation to the then new University of London Siegfried Stein *The Beginning of Hebrew Studies at University College* (a lecture 1952). My thanks to Peter Larkin for his list of secondary sources.

² Fred Burwick in his lecture at the 2004 Conference at Cannington enlarged on the theme of the German Jew, Moses Mendelssohn (1729-1786), whom Coleridge admired, and who was influenced by the impact of the Enlightenment on Judaism. He also mentioned some free education for Jewish boys in London.

³ On Coleridge and Scots e.g. Seamus Perry in the TLS of 20 August 2004.

identifiable by face, dress, beard or sideboards. The Medieval defamation that they had been guilty of murdering Christ had largely gone out of fashion. Southey had as a schoolboy apparently witnessed another Westminster boy, a bully, cutting the straps of a Jewish pedlar's tray so that its contents spilled onto the pavement, who then attempted to justify himself by retorting to the master who reprimanded him, 'Why sir, did they not crucify our Lord?' But this seems to have been an isolated incident.

However, Coleridge does sometimes succumb to the prejudice that Jews are inherently ruthlessly and cunningly acquisitive, a prejudice supplemented by their traditional insistence on not becoming Christians and by Old Testament recordings of their malpractices as well as accomplishments. Thus he refers to one of his publishing contracts, where he himself has been in breach, as a 'Jew bargain'.⁴ He describes the Biblical Jacob as a 'regular Jew' because of his craftiness.⁵ Yet even in this field Coleridge falls far short of tavern gossip and sneering. He avoids retailing standard verbal victimisation: he is not known to have told the story of the Jew in a death cart at Tyburn, reprieved at the last moment, who does not move away because he intends to bargain with Jack Ketch for his two companions' clothes once they have been hanged. There are other such anecdotes. No one knows what if any of them was founded on fact.

Some Jews were regular theatregoers, certainly to licenced theatres. Tough young Jews were enrolled in 1809 to control thespians protesting against ticket prices being raised. Daniel Mendoza, the champion prizefighter, will have inspired many Jewish youths as a role model of his day. A mischievous story was that a mock fight was arranged by Jews in the foyer of Theatre Royal, Covent Garden so pickpockets could get to work. Coleridge did not indulge in these anti-semitic antics but he does in *Table Talk* relate an incident which can easily be misinterpreted.

I have had a good deal to do with Jews in the course of my life, although I have never borrowed any money of them. Once I sat in a coach opposite a Jew—a symbol of old clothes bags—an Isaiah of Hollywell (sic) Street. He would close the window; I opened it. He closed it again; upon which in a very solemn tone, I said to him, 'Son of Abraham! thou smellest; son of Isaac! thou art offensive; son of Jacob! thou stinkest foully. See the man in the moon! he is holding his nose at thee in that distaste, dost thou think that I, sitting here, can endure it any longer?' My Jew was astounded, opened the window forthwith himself, and said, 'he was sorry he did not know before I was so great a gentleman'.
(*Table Talk* 8 July 1830)

Whether this episode ever occurred is unknown. Possibly it is taken or

⁴ E.g. p 242 Richard Holmes *Darker Reflections*.

⁵ E.g. *Table Talk* May 16, 1830 among numerous references.

adapted from a stage play as yet unidentified, and the Jew, like Coleridge was, a thespian. Possibly they recognised each other, and conversed boyishly. In support of this interpretation stage plays quite often dealt with Jews as striking characters, for example Thomas Dibdin's *Family Quarrels and the Jew Boy*. In novels the presence of Jews must have been intended to titillate some readers, for instance Scott's *Ivanhoe* and Maria Edgeworth's *Harrington*, where the beautiful Jewess turned out to be an English Protestant in disguise. Disraeli senior wrote *Vaurien*. Some of Byron's poems of 1816 enjoyed the title of *Hebrew Melodies*. Remember Leigh Hunt's *Rabbi Ben Ezra*. Blake was basically sympathetic.

So Coleridge's undoubted tendency to stereotype must be highly qualified. At times he deplored the persecution of Jews especially when his intellect was at his best. The earliest instance may be in a letter to his spouse when he is in Germany with John Chester—he refers to dreadful persecution there, and approvingly to a group of Jews including a very beautiful boy.⁶ This was at a time when the legend of *The Wandering Jew* may have been in his mind, and note Wordsworth's 'Song For The Wandering Jew' in the *Lyrical Ballads* of 1800, but there appears to be no linking the theme with any living person. There is an *exceedingly* lucid article in *The Courier* of 18 June 1816. Here is an ideological onslaught on the persecution of Jews in part of Germany, and Coleridge goes unusually far for him when after presuming that a bad image of Jews is justified, he comments

If they have been hard and griping in their dealings, may it not have been occasioned by the treatment they have received? To treat men as if they were incapable of virtue is to make them so. If it be said that the Almighty has decreed them to be wanderers and outcasts, we reply that Divine Being has no where told us to persecute them. If we wish to make them Christians, is persecution the best method?

To summarise his cogency, he wants social justice for Jews. Coleridge comments rarely on *The Merchant of Venice* but in his lengthy letter of 1820 to Hyman Hurwitz, mentioned later, he wrote 'I never read the Speech of Shylock (Act 3 Scene1) without a glow of indignant Brotherly Love towards the persecuted race.' In his letter of 17 May 1825 to J.A.Hessy (CL V 1462) he wrote, 'A certain Person remonstrated with me that I should cry up the work of a Jew, and an enemy to Christians—adding a degrading epithet to the word 'Jew'—I could only answer—Would to Heaven, for your sake, that you were only half as good a Christian as this—(sic) Jew & sent it off in a pet of indignation.' The next four strands of Coleridge's mindset conveniently run together: personal friendship, commitment to his vast edifice basically of theology and philosophy, looking after his own self-interest, and his urge or duty to convert to Christianity Jews whom he personally liked and respected.

⁶ See p 219 Richard Holmes *Early Visions*

Coleridge's habitation with the Gillmans at Highgate from 1816 marks a new mode of life. Coleridge himself commented that, with a few exceptions, for the first time in his life he learned the meaning of friendship (CN V 6225). Gillman observed that Coleridge's friendships took little or no account of a person's religion but that the key to intimate and affectionate relationship and respect relied on the other person's personality.⁷ The Jew Hyman Hurwitz (1770-1841) became a close friend of Coleridge in 1816 and this friendship continued even when he left Highgate to reside at nicely named 'Grenada Cottage' in Southwark. Few people have now heard of Hurwitz. He was an eminent Hebrew scholar, accomplished linguist, author of 17 books, and in 1828 due partly to Coleridge's recommendation he became the first Jewish professor in England, Professor of Hebrew at the new University of London. Coleridge described him as the Luther of Judaism. His eulogies of Hurwitz in his Notebooks and letters were copious from 1816 onwards.

The two co-operated in the field of Hebrew learning, each of use to the other as they both well knew. Coleridge relied on Hurwitz for much of his understanding of meanings in the Old Testament, as Hurwitz was authoritative regarding the subtleties of Hebrew, 'the science of words' Coleridge's own phrase.⁸ Without his help Coleridge's vast erudition would have been seriously diminished. And he helped Hurwitz with publication of a least two of his books, one a study of the Hebrew Language, then innovative though ultimately superseded, and the other *Hebrew Tales*, a best-seller in the 19th century. Coleridge himself contributed three of its many insightful and telling anecdotes. Each of them used the other's knowledge openly and with attribution.

Their co-operation is also evident regarding two of Coleridge's poems which were free translations from two Hebrew dirges which Hurwitz composed for chanting in the Great Synagogue. Coleridge described Hurwitz as a 'Jew without guile', almost certainly implying that each of them possessed about the same degree of acumen.⁹ This is perhaps most conspicuous in relation to these two laments of royal deaths—the first of 1817 for Princess Charlotte, a likely ultimate heir to the throne as the only legitimate child of the Prince Regent, and her baby. The second dirge may be of greater interest. This is a lament for the death of King George III in January 1820; bear in mind lines 4 & 5 of C's poem, 'The wonted words refuse to flow/ A fear on every face I find' reminiscent of Blake's *Song Of Experience*, 'London', which Coleridge knew. The poet Byron in his justly famous *The Vision of Judgement* has at its climax a partial recital of Southey's earlier poem of the same name. Southey, in Byron's poem, begins to read his verse and lines 4 and 5 lead to total chaos at the celestial gate.¹⁰ Yet Southey's lines are insipid and

⁷ Pp 164/165 James Gillman *The Life of Samuel Taylor Coleridge* (1838).

⁸ Pp31/32 Marie Anne Perkins *Coleridge's Philosophy* 'The Logos as Unifying Principle' OUP, Clarendon.

⁹ My acknowledgement to Madeline Huxstep for *John* 1: 47 relating to 'guile'.

¹⁰ Southey's lines 4 & 5: 'Pensive, though not in thought, I stared at the window beholding/ Mountain and lake and vale, the valley disrobed of its verdure.'

inoffensive, whereas Coleridge's two lines quoted above arguably powerfully endorse low self-esteem immensely distressing to and fuelling absolute anger for angels, devils and others. Byron would have avoided anti-semitism: so was he using Southey as a stalking horse for Coleridge? Both the dirge in Hebrew and Coleridge's free translation were intended to display genuine loyalty to the House of Hanover in gratitude for religious toleration. This was important for both Coleridge and respectable Jews. George IV himself desperately needed a more friendly public.

There was a personal reward for at least one Jew, David Moses Dyte (1770-1830), a great great grandfather of mine. He received a royal warrant for the supply of pens and quills to His Majesty's household. Probably the fact that in 1800 he had initiated, suffering a personal injury, the arrest of the would-be assassin of George III at Theatre Royal, Drury Lane, also contributed. Moreover he was able to open a shop first in the City in 1824, and eventually in the Strand, Westminster. The City Fathers discouraged or often forbade Jews, even if converts to Christianity, from trading in the City.

Further major influences of Jewish origin in addition to those of the Old Testament and Hyman Hurwitz assisted Coleridge's thought. Coleridge had begun to study Benedict Spinoza in the 1790s. He much admired Spinoza as a good and honest person and erudite and persuasive but of course condemned his beliefs as virtually atheist, albeit formally Pantheist, though arguably he treated the other's philosophy as helpfully contrasting with his own. Spinoza was a Jew, though Coleridge doubted this as the Synagogue in Amsterdam had expelled him. He also attacked the philosophy of Rousseau, whose *Emile* was like a Bible for the Jacobins. In a passage in *Emile* (p 268 Everyman, 1911 or 1955), Rousseau is scathing about the way some authoritative French persons i.e under the *ancien regime* treat Jews, that is they intimidate them and/or bribe them to convert to Christianity. 'You may convert some poor wretch whom you have paid to slander his religion; you get some wretched old clothes-man to speak, and he says what you want'. (*Table Talk*, 8 July 1830). A Jewish Old Clothes dealer was shouting 'Ogh Clo' and Coleridge told him off for speaking improperly. The Jew replied speaking perfectly to the effect that he constantly repeated his street cry so oddly, pronouncing it was common sense. Coleridge was so impressed he followed him, a little hard to believe that, and he gave the dealer a shilling, 'the only one I had'. If, as seems probable, Coleridge recalled the passage in *Emile* above, he would have been inwardly thrilled at this spontaneous repudiation of a claim of Rousseau's—well worth his last shilling. Here there is only a summary of the episode. I add that in England there was an organisation which was committed to bribing Jews to become Christians but in the event too much of the money subscribed went to the administrators themselves so ultimately their venture folded amidst evidence of financial and sexual abuses. Coleridge did not approve of such an approach to Jews.

Evidently Coleridge deeply felt Christianity demanded that he did his best to convert Jews where he assessed that they were worthy and erudite. He tried

to convert the father of the well-known philanthropist Moses Montefiore at Ramsgate in 1833, reading him chapters 9, 10 & 11 of *Epistle to the Romans*, so 'that fine old man' shed tears.¹¹ Hurwitz received a long letter from Coleridge (CL V 1219 of 4 January 1820) persuasively, emphatically and tactfully drawing attention to the convergences of Christianity and Judaism. It was an exceptionally enthusiastic belief for Coleridge that the Old Testament only made sense as anticipating the New Testament. His spiritual crisis around Christmas 1827 which led to his attending Anglican communion for the first time for 36 years seems to have been linked with his sense of failure adequately to exert himself to the task of converting eligible Jews (CN V 5706). The vast majority of Jews in London were not in the social class that Coleridge felt comfortable with, and thus he felt some disdain for them.¹² He evidently overlooked his 1816 article in the *Courier* about poor people being oppressed, worn down by their struggle for existence so at times acting as dehumanised. A proposed appeal to Hurwitz in the form of an intended letter would appear only to have been drafted (CN V 6412, August 1830). Coleridge met with difficulty in believing all non-Christians must be consigned to hell. He finally decided the issue was beyond him, a decision which he had taken in or before 1821 when writing to a junior sophomore at Cambridge. He had ducked the issue ending his letter 'But here I must break off, Yours most affectionately'.¹³ In the last few years of his life he seems to have given the problem only occasional further attention and shedding much anxiety in this precise field, probably considering he had done his best for his own salvation in this respect. He made it clear that he approved Jews being treated with parity with Christians for nearly all purposes, though the right to be an MP or peer excluded. In contrast Basil Montagu, after Roman Catholic emancipation (1828), propagandised for total legal equality i.e. for Jewish men. Regarding women, both Coleridge and Jews classed them as belonging to an inferior gender, though there were exceptions for Coleridge and perhaps for Jews, but this is a topic for further elaboration.

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¹¹ My acknowledgement to Allan Clayson for this identification as highly probable.

¹² *Table Talk* April 14 1830 in particular.

¹³ See pp 940 – 948 of *Shorter Works and Fragments* vol 1. Some doubt may exist whether the addressee is fictitious.