

Carsten Niebuhr, Johann David Michaelis, and the Politics of Orientalist Scholarship in Late Eighteenth-Century Germany¹

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Abstract

Known for his role in promoting and advising the famous Danish expedition to Arabia in the 1760s, the Göttingen scholar Johann David Michaelis was one of eighteenth-century Europe's leading Orientalists, and his works were widely read among both scholars and lay people who were fascinated with the ways he brought secular knowledge about the natural world and culture of the Near East to bear on his understanding of scripture. At key junctures in his career, Michaelis also played a prominent role in political debates, using the expertise on ancient Judaism that propelled and was promoted by the Arabia expedition to style himself as an authority on the conditions under which contemporary Jews might be granted rights. This paper investigates the relationship between Michaelis's vision of Oriental scholarship and his interventions in the debates on Jewish emancipation, exploring the distinctly modern form of antisemitism that Michaelis came to articulate as a leading figure in the field of Oriental Studies. Ultimately, the goal of this exercise is not to locate in Michaelis the origins of forms of nineteenth-century scientific racism that would have made little sense to the Göttingen Orientalist (and even less sense to Niebuhr returning from Arabia). Rather, the relationship between Michaelis and Niebuhr is important because it enables us to reconstruct the complex ways in which knowledge of the ancient Near East mediated by travel could become political, particularly when it came to conceptualizing the relationship between Judaism, Christianity and a modern European political order grounded in the principle of universal citizenship.

Arabs, Jews and the Political Imagination

In an uncharacteristically sentimental moment in his scientific travelogues, Carsten Niebuhr noted that, "coming among [the Arabs], one can hardly help fan-

cing one's self suddenly carried backwards to the ages which succeeded immediately after the flood. We are here tempted to imagine ourselves among the old patriarchs, with whose adventures we have been so

1. Some of the ideas presented here were first worked through in series of earlier publications. See here Hess (2000); the chapter on "Orientalism and the Colonial Imaginary: Johann David Michaelis and the Specter of Racial Antisemitism," in

Hess (2002), pp. 51-89; and Hess (2006), pp. 203-12. Nevertheless, the fundamental question this essay asks as to the motivations beyond Michaelis's interventions in the debates over Jewish emancipation and the specific role of the Niebuhr expedition in this context is completely new.

much amused in our infant days. The language, which has been spoken for time immemorial, and which so nearly resembles that which we have been accustomed to regard as of the most distant antiquity, completes the illusion which the analogy of manners began.”² Opening this essay with this passage makes sense less because it is typical of Niebuhr—tellingly, it appears in the Herron translation but not in Niebuhr’s German original³—than because it exemplifies the worldview Niebuhr inherited from Johann David Michaelis, the scholar of Oriental Studies who designed and directed the expedition from his chair at the University of Göttingen. Whatever the advances that the expedition brought about in archaeology, geography, and the natural sciences, its original goal was to mine the modern Near East for data to be used in interpreting the Hebrew Bible. In this context, travel through space became a substitute for travel in time, and the Arabs in Yemen were of interest not in their own right but as a window into the customs of the ancient Israelites. As Michaelis explained in a 1756 letter encouraging the Danish minister Baron von Bernstorff to embrace the idea of the expedition, “the customs of the Jews ... among the Persians, Greeks and Romans, and since their European Diaspora, have changed so much that one can no longer see in them the descendants of the people of whom the Bible speaks.”⁴ Unlike Jews, who cannot claim continuity with their Biblical ancestors, Yemenite Arabs are living remnants of the ancient Near East, immune to the progress of time, offering eighteenth-century Christian biblical critics a treasure trove of insights into the world of their progenitors.

In my paper, I want to focus on how scientific travel helped mediate this triangular relationship between Christian biblical criticism, Arabs and contemporary Jews, concentrating on one prominent context in

which this relationship became politically charged. In this sense I deal less with the Arabian expedition itself than with the ways in which the global knowledge it produced was used locally, in eighteenth-century Germany, in reflecting on whether, how and under what conditions Jews might be granted rights. Michaelis himself intervened directly in the debates on Jewish emancipation unleashed by Christian Dohm’s *On the Civic Improvement of the Jews* in 1781. He did so, moreover, as a leading expert on ancient Judaism, challenging Dohm from within the pages of his *Oriental and Exegetical Library*.⁵ Dohm, an ambitious Prussian civil servant, presented Jews as “unfortunate Asiatic refugees” who, with the proper treatment by the state, would be able to be transformed into productive members of a secular political order that would define citizenship without reference to religion, estate or professional standing.⁶ Michaelis, who found his scholarship cited at several junctures in Dohm’s treatise, rejected Dohm’s vision of regenerating the Jews at its most basic level. In an essay that became a touchstone in future debates, he claimed that Mosaic law promoted a level of clannishness that was incompatible with Dohm’s vision of universal citizenship, and he argued that Jews, as an “unmixed race of a more southern people,” would never have the proper bodily stature to perform military service. “Such a people,” he wrote, “can perhaps become useful to us in agriculture and manufacturing, if one manages them in the proper manner. They would be even more useful if we had sugar islands which could depopulate the European fatherland, sugar islands which, with the wealth they produce, nevertheless have an unhealthy climate.”⁷

Certainly, it makes little sense to claim that Michaelis’s fantasy of deporting Jews to the West Indies was caused by, or even derived directly from, his

2. Niebuhr (1792), vol. 2, p. 2.

3. This passage also appears in the French translation which Heron used as the basis for his edition of *Travels Through Arabia*: Niebuhr (1780), vol. 2, p. 2.

4. August, 30, 1756, letter from Michaelis to Baron von Bernstorff in Johann David Michaelis (1794), vol. 1, pp. 299–305.

5. Michaelis, review of Dohm, *Orientalische und exegetische Bibliothek* 19 (1782): 1–450, reprinted as “Hrn. Ritter Michaelis Beurtheilung. Ueber die bürgerliche Verbesserung der Juden von Christian Wilhelm Dohm.” In: Dohm (1783), vol. 2, pp. 31–71.

6. On Dohm, see Hess (2002), pp. 25–50.

7. “Hrn. Ritter Michaelis Beurtheilung,” in Dohm (1781–1783), Vol. 2, here pp. 40–41, 51, 63.

involvement with the Danish expedition to Arabia. Indeed, rarely does one find anything in Michaelis linking the scholarly ambitions of scientific travel to fantasies of empire. Quite to the contrary, he indulged in recurrent diatribes against colonialism, trade and the progress of empire; like Niebuhr, Michaelis envisioned scientific travel as the antithesis of imperial expansion. The question this paper explores is why the architect of the Arabian expedition was so prone to colonialist thinking when it came to dealing with the Jews living in his midst. On one level, of course, Michaelis's fantasy of colonial deportation is but a simple inversion of Dohm's project of regeneration, a vision of external colonialism in response to what I have described elsewhere as a project of internal colonization.⁸ But why did the revered Orientalist intervene in these political debates to begin with, much less publicly voice fantasies about banishing the Jews from Europe? On some level, Michaelis's objections to Jewish emancipation in the 1780s certainly match up with reservations he voiced in the 1750s about Jews' moral character in a critical review of Gotthold Lessing's drama *The Jews*.⁹ In what follows, however, I want to refrain from speculating about deeply held personal animus Michaelis may have held toward Jews.¹⁰ I'd like instead to return to the question of his relation to the Niebuhr expedition, exploring his concept of Oriental Studies as a means of understanding his subsequent intervention in political debates.

Michaelis's Moses: Arabs, Jews, and the Academic Study of Mosaic Law

Let me outline his understanding of Oriental studies by focusing on a few examples, looking primarily at his magnum opus *Mosaic Law* (1770-75). Inspired by Montesquieu, Michaelis presented Moses as an en-

lightened legislator whose legal system needed to be studied in its historical specificity, as a relatively humane code of laws created to govern the ancient Israelites. The Israelites, to be sure, were a primitive people in need of a type of jurisprudence that was out of sync with eighteenth-century norms, but their legal system needed to be understood and appreciated as a model legislative system, one of the crowning moments of the ancient Orient. Michaelis's objective for writing the work was not to indulge in Romantic fantasies about the Oriental past. He wanted, rather, to understand the "foreign" and "Asiatic" laws of Moses in their historical specificity in order to enable Europeans to gain distance from their Oriental heritage.¹¹ By setting the laws of Moses in historical context and demonstrating that "according to God's will they were supposed to be binding to no other people than the Israelite," he sought to destroy their lingering hold on the present, to purge the contemporary judicial system of its Oriental past.¹² Relegating Mosaic law to ancient Jewish history meant de-Orientalizing the present, and this effort hinged on an eighteenth-century model of history that celebrated modern Europe as the *telos* of world-historical progress. Michaelis routinely juxtaposed the modern age's "maturity" to the "childhood" of humanity he located in the ancient Near East.

What, though, made Mosaic Law the crowning moment of the ancient Orient? Drawing on the long Christian tradition of contending that Moses was "instructed in all the wisdom of the Egyptians" (Acts 7:22), Michaelis argued that his legislative wisdom was largely Egyptian in origin. For Michaelis, Moses's genius lay in superimposing Egyptian jurisprudence onto an ancient law that the Israelites had transmitted orally. Moses, he argues, borrowed nearly all of the key elements of Mosaic law from Egypt, introducing them in the face of significant opposition on the part of the "disobedient Israelites." Michaelis's challenge here is how to gain access to the ancient Israelite oral law that Moses allegedly "improved" and

8. See Hess (2002), pp. 25-50, also Hess (1998), pp. 92-100.

9. See on this question, Hess (2013).

10. Löwenbrück's excellent monograph on Michaelis, in contrast, tends to stress deep continuities in Michaelis's thought that get expressed in a new vocabulary in the 1780s in the midst of the debates on Jewish emancipation (see Löwenbrück 1995).

11. Michaelis (1770), Vol. 1, pp. 1-25.

12. Michaelis (1770), Vol. 1, p. 6.

“invalidated” with his Egyptian-inspired legal code.¹³ Scripture, he concedes, offers few clues here. Luckily, however, the historian has other options:

Without assuming Moses’s laws, I can find precisely this unwritten ancient law in those peoples who are most closely related to the Israelites, namely, Arabs. Their customs elucidate the ancient law Moses sought to amend. If we did not have these Arab customs, we would very rarely be able to elucidate the laws of Moses with reference to an older customary law. The ancient customs have been preserved in this people, who have been cut off from the world and who have seldom been brought under a foreign yoke. Indeed, when reading a description of the nomadic Arabs one believes to be in Abraham’s hut. Travel descriptions of Arabia, and of neighbouring Syria, will be of much greater help for us than one might dare to think given the great distance of time at stake here.¹⁴

Nomadic Arabs have remained trapped in the state of childhood Michaelis saw as characteristic of the ancient Israelites. Travel descriptions of Arabs such as Niebuhr’s can thus easily stand in for the work of the historian, giving modern Europeans access to that world they need to understand in order to gain dominance over their Oriental childhood. As a stagnant people unable to make steps toward “maturity,” Arabs are of value to Michaelis solely as a window into the customs of the Israelites—an issue reinforced by his near total disregard of the way in which Islam, for one, might serve to disrupt this image of the absolute continuity of Arab life since Abraham’s time. The Arabs appear here as a people outside of history who are of great historical value for modern Europeans: it is through Arabs that Christian Europe can have access

to the Israelite childhood it needs to recover and supersede on the path toward legal maturity.

For Michaelis, European intellectual hegemony over the Orient—whether ancient Israelites or modern Arabs—has nothing to do with power relations. Indeed, throughout his work, as mentioned earlier, he coordinates his search for intellectual authority with an explicit critique of imperial politics. It is telling here what he insists Moses found so exemplary in Egypt:

[The Egyptians sought a] great and powerful state without foreign trade, which they detested. ... Indeed, Egyptian politics aimed not at conquering foreign lands but at cultivating and making use of its own land. What ancient people do we know whose politics is more sublime than that of the Egyptians? ... If we only knew more of the highly developed legislative wisdom of this people, perhaps our modern politics could learn from it, as it too is concerned with cultivating the land and peacefully enlarging its power over its interiors. For those who are concerned with desolating other lands, of course, the ancient kings of Egypt are children compared to the Romans, who have bequeathed to us a perfect exemplar of the wisdom governing a predatory state.¹⁵

Egypt here is not the nation that keeps Israel in slavery but the model for the peaceful expansion of domestic power, a politics of economic self-sufficiency Michaelis juxtaposes here to the Roman Empire, and elsewhere to the unhealthy obsession with international trade he sees as characteristic of contemporary British and French colonialism.¹⁶ Unlike contemporary Arabs and the ancient Israelites, Egyptians appear not as “children” but as precocious adolescents with a “highly developed legislative wisdom” worthy of being imitated by modern Europeans.

Michaelis’s model of Oriental Studies hinges thus on an explicit critique of imperialism. Clearly, he asserts European superiority over the Orient, but this hierarchical relationship is one of knowledge, not of power. So how do we reconcile this position with his

13. Michaelis (1770), Vol. 1, pp. 10, 15, 46-47. As Assmann (1997) makes clear in *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism*, the figure of Moses the Egyptian underwent a major revival in the late eighteenth century. Contemporaries of Michaelis such as Karl Leonhard Reinhold, Friedrich Schiller and Friedrich Heinrich Jacobi tended to undertake much more radical projects with this figure, invoking the Egyptian origins of Mosaic Judaism to challenge the rigid distinction between polytheism and monotheism.

14. Michaelis (1770), Vol. 1, pp. 12-13.

15. Michaelis (1770), Vol. 1, pp. 15-16.

16. Michaelis, (1770) Vol. 1, pp. 238-242.

fantastical suggestion of German colonies populated by Jewish slave labour? At one key moment in *Mosaic Law*, Michaelis's neat distinction between imperial power and Orientalist knowledge falls apart. In his effort to relegate Mosaic law to the childhood of humanity, Michaelis concedes that there are those in his midst for whom the laws of Moses are still considered to be binding:

I often do not know this [ancient Israelite customary law], and in such cases I take the liberty of indicating the lacuna myself—unlike those who claim to know everything and would fill such lacunae with fictions that pass as scholarly investigations, with Talmudic legends and Rabbinic decisions. ...The Talmud, which consists of oral traditions of somewhat ignorant Rabbis, can tell us much about the common law of the Jews at the time these men lived, not, however, about the meaning of Mosaic law. Indeed, Moses's laws would make a very strange figure if one were to understand them in the manner of the Pharisees, whose interpretation was, according to Christ's own pronouncement, often the direct opposite of that which Moses commanded... Anyone who believes to encounter a Talmudic Law here will be very much mistaken. I do not even deign to mention the names of those men whose sayings are collected in the Talmud, and I do not deal at all with the Rabbis. ... The Talmud is an impure source for studying Jewish law: a book that was written so late—and one that relies solely on oral traditions at that—can tell us nothing credible about the customs under the First Temple, certainly nothing about the age of Moses.¹⁷

The Talmud, Michaelis insists, is useless for the historical study of ancient Judaism. As the product of “ignorant Rabbis,” this collection of fictions and unreliable oral traditions is marred by its belatedness. Whereas Michaelis captures the spirit of Mosaic law, contemporary Jews lack a proper historical understanding of their Oriental origins. They often interpret Mosaic law as “the direct opposite of that which Moses commanded,” perpetuating the sort of Judaism Jesus sought to destroy. Contemporary Jews constitute an anachronism, out of sync with modernity both in their adherence to an antiquated legal tradi-

tion and in the ahistorical manner in which they interpret this tradition. For Michaelis, modern Arabs are the only legitimate descendants of the Israelites, and not surprisingly, in his autobiography, he comments that Niebuhr made one fatal error in his voyage. Without the advantage of having studied Hebrew with Michaelis, he failed to grasp “that in seeking to answer my questions one should not have made inquiries to Jews and Rabbis but only to native and full-blooded Arabs; for we in Europe know better what scholarly Jews say about many such things, and those Asian Jews who are scholars get their information from European Rabbis.”¹⁸

Michaelis establishes his credentials as an Orientalist thus by degrading Jewish exegetical practices, invalidating the arguments and methods of Jewish exegesis with the authority of Jesus himself in such a way as to sever any and all connections between Judaism and Christianity. Arguments that Rabbinic Judaism corrupted the spirit of Mosaic law were nothing new in the eighteenth century.¹⁹ But Michaelis goes further here, presenting contemporary Jews as a dispersed group that fundamentally lacks a sense of its own history. Bound together by a network of Rabbinic perversions of Mosaic law, contemporary Jews are neither authentically Oriental nor European, neither trustworthy remnants of ancient Judaism nor connected to the modern world. Like the childlike Arabs, they too reside in a realm seemingly immune to historical progress, but they lack both the innocence and the geographical situatedness of Arabs, emerging instead as a group of shabby scholars lacking the acumen to understand Mosaic law historically.

Described in this manner, Jewish interpretive practices mark the antithesis of Michaelis's own scholarship, a grotesque alter ego to *Mosaic Law*, and it makes sense that he introduces these impassioned polemics against Jewish exegesis at such a key juncture in his work. The continued existence of Jews disrupts nearly all the distinctions central to his project—the differences between Orient and Occident, ancient

17. Michaelis (1770), Vol. 1, pp. 56-58.

18. Michaelis (1793), pp. 74-75.

19. See here, for instance, Breuer (1996).

and modern, childhood and adulthood. In order for Michaelis to secure his intellectual authority over the Orient, he needs not merely to relegate Arabs to the position of Oriental children. Contemporary Jews, too, must be put in their proper place, yet given *Mosaic Law*'s visions of Europe and the Orient, it is unclear what and where this place would be.

The Presence of the Oriental Past: Jewish Emancipation and the Challenges of Disinterestedness

Michaelis's vision of Oriental Studies hardly exemplifies the simple equation between discourse and empire, knowledge and power, that was the earmark of Edward Said's critique of Orientalism.²⁰ For the most part, indeed, Michaelis was an anticolonial thinker, a supporter of disinterested scholarship who challenged the tide of European expansion. Colonial thinking erupts in his oeuvre only when it becomes difficult for him to sustain his vision of the apolitical production of historical knowledge. The voyage to Arabia itself, tellingly, ended up doing little to change the Göttingen professor's worldview. Whatever advances the expedition provoked in other realms of scholarship—and however transformative it was for Niebuhr – for Michaelis, the basic vision of the Orient as stagnant, childlike and immune to the progress characteristic of Europe was only perpetuated by the seven years of travel. The challenges to Michaelis's vision of Oriental Studies came not from the Near East but from the heterogeneity of his native land, from those displaced Asiatic refugees who continued to insist on the relevance of ancient Judaism for life in Diaspora—those “ignorant” Rabbis disrupting the natural flow of history from antiquity to modernity, from Judaism to Christianity, and from the Orient to the Occident. In his review of Moses Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* in his *Oriental and Exegetical Library* in 1783, Michaelis took offence at the Jewish philosopher's argument that Jesus was an exemplar of the Rabbinic principle. Michaelis sought here, contra Mendelssohn, to rein-

state the scenario he presented in his *Mosaic Law* of a clean break between Judaism and Christianity.²¹ What provoked Michaelis's anticolonial rhetoric to unravel in the midst of the debates on Jewish emancipation was precisely what he had been seeking to work against for the last two decades and precisely what Mendelssohn himself saw as normative for modernity: the presence of the Oriental past.

For all his objections to Jewish emancipation, Michaelis had no distinctly political agenda. He entered these political debates not just *as* a scholar but, more importantly, to defend his mode of scholarship. He resorted to colonial thinking to resolve difficulties in sustaining the worldview central to his vision of Oriental Studies, to contain the unthinkable possibility that the descendants of his ancient objects of study were alive, well and on the brink of acquiring rights for themselves in the modern world he himself inhabited. For all his fantasies of deporting Jews to the West Indies and his creative appropriation of emergent discourses on race, Michaelis was motivated as little by politics as he was by the type of racial anti-Semitism that came to prominence in the second half of the nineteenth century. His politics was largely a defensive one. He indulged in fantasies of colonial power over Jews only in order to maintain the hierarchies between East and West, Orient and Occident, antiquity and modernity, crucial to his own professional identity as a disinterested scholar of ancient Judaism. Michaelis's Orientalism became political thus not in an effort to secure power over the Near East, but in an effort to manage the potential threat that Jews themselves posed to Orientalist discourse on the domestic front. To Niebuhr, who had the poor judgment to consult with Jews on matters concerning Judaism during his voyage, this may not have been an issue. But for a scholar of ancient Judaism keen on using scientific expeditions to the modern Near East as a substitute for time travel to the ancient Orient, Jews necessarily got in the way. It is thus no surprise that the radical proposals of a young Prussian civil servant to grant rights unconditionally to these Asi-

20. Said (1979).

21. Michaelis (1783), pp. 92ff.

atic refugees proved extremely unsettling, a fundamental challenge to his scholarly ethos that demanded a rapid response in the pages of his *Oriental and Exegetical Library*.

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