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Eschatology and Conversion in the Sperling Letters¹

When conversion and eschatology joined forces during Europe's long Reformation period, it was usually to underscore religiously exclusivist claims. Eschatological expectations heightened the sense that those who adhered to the wrong beliefs, did not follow the correct practices, and did not belong to God's sole favored religious community, should convert before it was too late. Thus, eschatologies of this period, also known as the Age of Conversion, tended to ground demands for conversion in exclusivist terms.² This was the case for Christian communities in the Reformation, but it was also characteristic of contemporary Jewish eschatologies, which abandoned older traditions that had allowed for righteous Gentile 'Sons of Noah' to find salvation outside the Jewish community. Elisheva Carlebach, among other scholars, portrays early modern eschatologies – Christian as well as Jewish – in these terms:

Jews knew that if Christian expectations materialized, their own millennial hopes would prove vain; Christians understood that messianic redemption for the Jews would undermine the foundation principles of the Christian religion. Each group remained certain that their own prophetic vision of the endtime would ultimately materialize. Each sought to assure its members that the signs of the endtime identified by the other were fraudulent, products of deliberate deception.³

The fact that religious rapprochement was generally regarded in a negative light confirms this image of Christians and Jews during the long Reformation. A Lutheran woodcarving from the 1550s illustrates this point. Its subject is the Augsburg Interim agreement, in which Emperor Charles V made important concessions to the Protestants. The carving depicts the Interim as one of three de-

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2 For the use of the term 'Age of Conversion', see Dieter Breuer, "Konversionen im konfessionellen Zeitalter," in *Konversionen im Mittelalter und in der Frühen Neuzeit*, eds. Friedrich Niewohner and Fide Rädle (Hildesheim, 1999): 59–69.

3 Elisheva Carlebach, "Jews, Christians, and the End time in Early Modern Germany," *Jewish History* 14:3 (2000): 331–44, here 331.

monic characters (alongside the pope and the Turkish sultan) being trampled by a muscular risen Christ. A caption beside the demon's head reads, "*Der Teuffel kumpt in einer gstal ein Engels*" – the devil comes in the guise of an angel. Beneath the angelic appearance of religious peace, suggests the print, a demonic actor lurks. The Savior's return forebodes disaster for those who make religious concessions to the wrong religions or denominations.⁴

The reactions of writers and artists to the Peace of Westphalia in 1648, which brought an end to the bloody Thirty Years War, demonstrate that such attitudes continued into the seventeenth century. What today is upheld as an example of religious peace-making was portrayed at that time by artists and authors on both sides in eschatological exclusivist terms, as the victory of their own denomination.⁵ In this Christian eschatological exclusivism, converts and the phenomenon of conversion were generally taken to signify that, with the end imminent, there was only one road to salvation.

Many of the Christians who converted to Judaism in the Calvinist-dominated Dutch Republic maintained this attitude, and accepted those contemporary Jewish claims that salvation can only be attained through living fully in the Law of Moses.⁶ For instance, while in Amsterdam visiting a fellow German who had recently converted to Judaism, a traveler encountered another convert. This was a former Catholic priest, now named Daniel ben Abraham, who expected the messiah to come in 1703. While the traveler was talking with his host, this Daniel ben Abraham:

[...] sat quiet for a while, but finally talked, saying: "Dear friends, it happens now like it happened at the days of Noah, when the good and pious man was ridiculed, and he and his ark were mocked until the Flood, and those who had mocked him begged he would take them in his ark, but in vain. Also the People of God have been laughed at with their hope and waiting for the messiah, which many for certain to their own damage all too late will regret [...]."⁷

⁴ Erasmus Alber, *Also spricht Gott: Dis ist mein lieber Son an welchem ich wolgefallen hab Den Sollt Ihr Hören* (s. l., n.p.: c. 1550).

⁵ For an overview, see Hartmut Laufhütte, "Der gebändigte Mars: Kriegsallégorie und Kriegesverständnis im deutschen Schauspiel um 1648," in *Ares und Dionysos: Das Furchtbare und das Lächerliche in der europäischen Literatur*, eds. Hans-Jürgen Horn and Hartmut Laufhütte (Heidelberg: Winter, 1981): 121–35.

⁶ For such exclusivist Jewish views in the Dutch Republic see, for instance, the writings of the polemicist Isaac Orobio de Castro described in Yosef Kaplan, *From Christianity to Judaism: The Story of Isaac Orobio de Castro* (Oxford and New York: Published for The Littman Library by Oxford University Press, 1989), 353–59.

⁷ "niedergesetzt und ihren Discours in der Stille fleißig zugehöret, endlich aber darein geredet und gesagt, geliebte Freunde, es gehet jetzo, wie zu den Zeiten Noae, da man den guten from-

Typical of the kind of wide-scope conversion narrative that relied on eschatological expectation, the aforementioned converted priest's combination of promise (for the Jews) and threat (to the Christians), and expectation that the fortunes of the two religious communities would be reversed, mirrored as well as legitimized Ben Abraham's own religious change.

Yet, not all early modern converts thought of their religious affiliation in exclusivist terms, or at least did not express this exclusivism in practice. As recent studies of early modern interreligious relations such as that of Benjamin Kaplan show, converts did not necessarily demand their unconverted family members' conversion or sever ties with relations who remained in their old faith.⁸ Moreover, as is amply demonstrated by the rich recent scholarship on Iberian New Christians, the religious self-perception of early modern converts was complex. To continue with the example of Iberian Jewish converts to Christianity, whereas older scholarship assumed that Jewish converts to Christianity either fully embraced their new religion or clandestinely remained loyal to the religion they had publicly been forced to abandon, more recent scholarship such as that of David Graizbord has shown that for these converts, the "threshold" between the Jewish and Christian worlds was "at once a boundary and a crossroads."⁹ In other words, early modern converts were markers of religious difference and exclusivity as they embodied the possibility to dwell in two religious worlds simultaneously.

Likewise, the demand for exclusive commitment in the face of an impending separation of the wheat from the chaff was not endemic to the Age of Conversion's eschatological expectations. Augustine Bader (c. 1495–1530), Quirinus Kuhlmann (1651–1689), Menasseh ben Israel (1604–1657), and Oligier Paulli (1644–1714), for instance, offered another possibility, namely, that the Last

men Mann wohl wird verlacht, und mit seiner Arche verspottet haben, biß die Sünd-Fluth eingebrochen, da ihrer gar viele die ihn zuvor verspottet, werden angeflehet haben, daß er sie doch auch zu sich in seine Arche nehmen mögte, aber vergeblich; Also ist das Volck Gottes Israel jetzo mit seiner Hoffnung und Warten des Messiae verlachtet und verspottet, welches gewißlich aber viele mit ihrem Schaden allzuspäth dereinstens [b]ereuen werden;" Johann Jacob Schudt, *Jüdische Merckwürdigkeiten: vorstellend, was sich Denkwürdiges in den neuen Zeiten bey einigen Jahrhunderten mit den in alle 4 Theile der Welt, sonderlich durch Teutschland zerstreuten Juden zugetragen. Sammt einer vollständigen Franckfurter Juden-Chronick, Darinnen der zu Franckfurt am Mayn wohnenden Juden, von einigen Jahr-Hundertten, biß auff unsere Zeiten, Merckwürdigste Begebenheiten enthalten*, vol. 1 (Frankfurt and Leipzig: s.n., 1714), 275–76.

⁸ Benjamin J. Kaplan, *Divided by Faith: Religious Conflict and the Practice of Toleration in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007), esp. 266–93.

⁹ David L. Graizbord, *Souls in Dispute: Converso Identities in Iberia and the Jewish Diaspora, 1580–1700* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 2.

Days called the believer to resolve inter-religious strife – albeit mostly without giving up at least one religious denomination in the role of adversary – rather than to unequivocally choose sides. Put differently, early modern eschatology, although predominantly exclusivist, also had the potential to bring different religious groups together.

The present article will explore this side of early modern conversion and eschatology by analyzing two extraordinary letters written in Amsterdam in 1682, and their immediate and broader religious *Umwelt* such as Bader, Kuhlmann, Menasseh ben Israel, and Paulli.¹⁰ The letters are found today in a collection of miscellaneous documents in Hamburg's State Archive, and were formerly held in the archive of the Hamburger *Geistesministerium*, an institution that served as the highest authority of the Lutheran Church in Hamburg and functioned as an advisory body to the city government in the early modern period. They were written by a certain Benedictus Sebastian Sperling to his mother, to explain his conversion from Christianity (presumably the Lutheran faith) to Judaism. Sperling, who by then also used the name Israel Benedeti Ger (*ger* meaning 'proselyte'), tried to comfort his mother who apparently had been greatly upset by the news of his conversion, by presenting her with a scenario of the imminent eschaton that allowed for the salvation of people of different religions.

What is striking about Sperling's letters is the lack of religious exclusivism they convey. This is not what we would expect from an early modern convert in the confessional age of the Reformation, particularly not from a convert in expectation of imminent eschatological events. Nevertheless, as I will show, Sperling recognized Christian scripture as authoritative scripture, claimed that good Calvinists and Lutherans would also be saved, hinted at universal salvation, and depicted the eschaton as a cooperative effort of Protestantism and Islam to return the Jews to their promised land.

It is important to mention that each of these elements – scriptural promiscuity, the claim of multiple paths to salvation, and an eschatology that attributes positive roles to more than one religious group – has, at various times, been exploited to serve exclusivist claims. Sperling's letters can indeed be read in that way: as with many Jewish polemicists before and after him, he used Christian scripture to undermine the dogmas of Christian churches. Furthermore, while Sperling envisioned hosts of Calvinists, Lutherans, and Muslims gathering and aiding Israel to return to its promised land, he also imagined Roman Catholics

¹⁰ Staatsarchiv Hamburg 511-1 Ministerium III A 1 d Band 2 (1553-1686), further as "Sperling letters." Translations are mine, and the original German is found in the footnotes.

as their common enemy. As in most eschatologies, Sperling's scenario drew a clear line between the forces of light and darkness.

Yet, to focus on this feature is to ignore the spirit of the letters, in which dualism between the Catholics and the Protestant-Muslim-Jewish alliance plays a minor role relative to the positive elaboration of that alliance. In the following, I explore Sperling's remarkable combination of (on the one hand) personal conversion and thus commitment to a particular religion, and (on the other hand) commitment to a non-exclusive attitude toward different religions. Before addressing Sperling's inclusivist eschatology in the letters themselves, however, I will first briefly explore the historical Sperling as well as the religious environments of Hamburg, whence he came, and Amsterdam, where he converted and wrote his letters.

The Historical Sperling

Benedictus Sebastian Sperling as a historical person has thus far been somewhat of a mystery. The absence of documentation on Sperling's life should have raised the question of whether the letters were perhaps, rather than correspondence written by a son to his mother, literary artifacts: fictive missives composed to further the agenda of a specific religious group somehow associated with the Jewish community of Amsterdam. Neither Wolfgang Philipp, who published Sperling's letters in their original German in 1958, nor Gerald Strauss, who published an English translation in 1974, ever considered this option, and took the letters as authentic.¹¹ Moreover, because the letters ended up in a governmental archive

¹¹ Wolfgang Philipp, "Der Philosemitismus im geistesgeschichtlichen Feld: Bericht über eine neue Quelle und Orientierungsversuch," *Zeitschrift für Religions- und Geistesgeschichte* 10:3 (1958): 220–30. Philipp published the letters also in idem, ed. *Das Zeitalter der Aufklärung, Klassiker des Protestantismus* (Bremen: C. Schönemann, 1963), 106–10; and see idem, "Spätbarock und Frühe Aufklärung: Das Zeitalter des Philosemitismus," in *Kirche und Synagoge: Handbuch zur Geschichte von Christen und Juden: Darstellung mit Quellen*, eds. Karl Heinrich Renngstorff and Siegfried von Kortzfleisch (Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag, 1988), 54–7; Gerald Strauss, "A Seventeenth-Century Conversion to Judaism: Two Letters from Benedictus Sperling to his Mother, 1682," *Jewish Social Studies* 36:2 (1974): 166–74. Strauss claims that, based on the handwriting, the archived letters must be eighteenth-century copies. The archival locations Philipp and Strauss noted are not accurate anymore. Sperling is also mentioned in other research, often merely as a convert to Judaism. The most detailed discussions are by Elisheva Carlebach, who argued that Sperling's claim to be of Jewish descent served to legitimize his conversion, and Paul Thraugh, who used Sperling as a 'Jewish' perspective on Luther; Elisheva Carlebach, "'Ich will dich nach Holland schicken ...' Amsterdam and the Reversion to Judaism

in Hamburg, Philipp and Strauss presumed that Sperling was from Hamburg. The letters themselves, however, do not indicate their destination.¹²

But Sperling did exist, and the records of the Portuguese Jewish congregation in Amsterdam document that he was indeed from Hamburg. It is not known whether Sperling arrived in Amsterdam already intent on converting, or whether he traveled to Amsterdam for other reasons and found Judaism once there.¹³ The former is more likely, though, because in his second letter he claims to be in possession of a bequest from his father to his children, stating that his ancestors had been Jews forcibly converted to Christianity “during wars.” His only two appearances in Amsterdam’s records are in the Portuguese congregation’s *Livro Longo*, where the charity donations, among others, were registered. It lists that on 15 Adar I, 5442 (23 February 1682), thus, six weeks after sending his first letter, two florins were given to “Israel Benedito guer de Hamb^o”: Israel Benedito the proselyte from Hamburg. Three and a half months later, on the first of Sivan (Sunday, 7 June), “Israel Benedito” – this time it is not mentioned that he is a convert – is again given charity, specifically, 3: 3 florins.¹⁴ This is the last we hear of Sperling in the annals of Jewish Amsterdam.

Thus, it seems that Sperling arrived in Amsterdam at the latest in early January 1682, the date of his first letter, and remained there, receiving financial support from the city’s prosperous Portuguese community, at least until June of that year. His subsequent fate is unknown, but additional clues about his social and religious environment in Amsterdam can be found in his letters. Having received charity from the Portuguese congregation does not mean that he had joined the Sephardic community, for the Portuguese provided charity to both Sephardic as

of German-Jewish Converts,” in *Secret Conversions to Judaism in Early Modern Europe*, eds. Martin Mulsow and Richard H. Popkin, Brill’s Studies in Intellectual History 122 (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2004): 51–70, here 61; eadem, “Converts and their Narratives in Early Modern Germany: The Case of Friedrich Albrecht Christiani,” *The Leo Baeck Institute Year Book* 40:1 (1995): 65–83, here 79; Paul Pitchlynn Traugh, “The Image of Martin Luther in German-Jewish Literature: From Israel Benedeti to Leo Baeck” (PhD Dissertation, University of California, 1972).

12 My own inquiry with Hamburg’s archives had no result. Sperling was never registered as a citizen of Hamburg, nor was he listed in its registers of inhabitants without citizenship and strangers. E-mail communication from Anke Hönnig, Staatsarchiv Hamburg, 9 April 2015.

13 The fact that he does not surface in the records of Amsterdam’s Christian churches, such as Amsterdam’s Lutheran congregation, might be an indication that he was already interested in converting when he arrived. E.g. Stadsarchief Amsterdam (further as SAA) 213 (Archief van de Evangelisch-Lutherse Gemeente te Amsterdam; Kerkenraad en Ouderlingen), 520–5 (Communicanten registers, 1677–1682).

14 SAA 334 (Archief van de Portugees-Israëlietische Gemeente), 217 (*Livro Longo: Kasboek betreffende salarissen, lijfrenten en andere periodieke uitkeringen, 1676–1685*), 310 and 339.

well as Ashkenazi Jews. In fact, the name Sperling adopted in Amsterdam, Israel Benedeti, and his chosen term of address, “signor,” suggest contact with Italian Ashkenazi Jews rather than, as Philipp assumed, the Sephardic community.¹⁵ The hypothesis that he joined the Ashkenazi community rather than Amsterdam’s Portuguese Sephardic congregation is further supported by his postal address, namely, the residence of “Rabbi Gaim Lubbeliner” on the Uilenburg. This was Haim Lubliner, a well-respected rabbi in the Ashkenazi congregation.¹⁶ Unfortunately, too few of the Ashkenazi congregation’s records of this period survived World War II to reveal more about Sperling’s identity. If, after June, Sperling remained in Amsterdam’s Jewish community and died there, he was not buried under the name he had chosen for himself and under which he had received charity, but under a generic proselyte name such as “Abraham Ger of Hamburg.”¹⁷

Sperling and Lutheran Hamburg

The background of Sperling’s eschatological beliefs, then, should be sought in both Hamburg and Amsterdam. Philipp in particular, and Strauss while offering a more general contemporary context, only considered Hamburg. Philipp suggested that Sperling’s beliefs ought to be understood in view of late Baroque philosemitism in Lutheran Hamburg (an idea adopted by later studies such as those of Hans-Joachim Schoeps).¹⁸ Noting the presence in Sperling’s letters of

¹⁵ Philipp, “Der Philosemitismus,” 224.

¹⁶ Sperling letters, p. 1529; Hindle S. Hes, *Jewish Physicians in the Netherlands, 1600–1940* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1980), 66.

¹⁷ The Ashkenazi burial society buried a proselyte Abraham in 1707 and the “old man” Abraham Ger in 1733; see Jits Van Straten, *De begraafboeken van Zeeburg: indexen van personen begraven op de joodse begraafplaats Zeeburg tussen 11 oktober 1714 en 21 juni 1811* = *The Burial books of Zeeburg: Indexes of Persons Buried at the Jewish Cemetery Zeeburg Between 11 October 1714 and 21 June 1811* (s.l.: Stichting Bevordering Onderzoek Joodse Historische Bronnen, 1997), 16, 24. Although it would be most likely that he would be buried in one of the Ashkenazi cemeteries, occasionally converts to the Ashkenazi community, such as the well-known convert Moses Germanus, were buried at the Portuguese cemetery at Ouderkerk. There are several proselytes buried in the Portuguese cemetery who might be him, such as Abraham Guer in June of 1682 (in his letter, Sperling wrote that he was severely ill), and in 1705 Abraham Ger of Hamburg (Stadsarchief Amsterdam 334 (Archief van de Portugees-Israëlietische Gemeente) 916 (Livro de Bet Haim. Register van besluiten van de maamad betreffende de begraafplaats 1703–1722; journaal van begraven 1680–1716; grafboek 1691–1733), 34, 160.

¹⁸ Hans-Joachim Schoeps, *Barocke Juden, Christen, Judenchristen* (Bern and Munich: Francke, 1965), 88; Lutz Greisiger, “Chilisten und ‘Judentzer’ – Eschatologie und Judenmission im Prot-

millenarian Paul Felgenhauer's (1593–1677) philosemitic ideas, Philipp sketched a broad image of philosemitic culture in Hamburg. Its components included the influence of the Swede Andress Pederson Kempe, the presence of a flourishing Sephardic Jewish community and the messianic Sabbatian movement that had seduced many of this community's members, close contacts with English philosemites, and (later in the seventeenth century), a group of scholars centered around the theologian Johann Friedrich Mayer (1650–1712).¹⁹

Like Philipp, Strauss too placed the letters in the context of scholarly interest in the Jewish roots of Christianity and the attraction to Judaism by Christians grown weary of Christendom's internal divisions. Moreover, Strauss regarded Sperling's letters as an example of the late seventeenth-century rapprochement between spiritual Christian messianic expectations and more earthly Jewish ones. Strauss also identified specific eschatological beliefs which were in circulation when the letters were written – for instance, a series of claims focused on the comets that had appeared in the three years preceding Sperling's letters and on the rare astrological conjunctions expected for the years immediately to come.²⁰ When describing Hamburg's religious climate, Strauss, in contrast to Philipp, emphasized the hostile Christian environment by which it was marked in the second half of the seventeenth century, rather than its philosemitic intellectual milieu.

How might one account for the difference between Philipp's positive and Strauss's negative characterizations of Hamburg? In this regard, it might be useful to recall Hamburg's political division, that is, its relatively tolerant civil leadership on the one hand, and its clerical opposition on the other.²¹ The city magistrates' economic interests and distrust of clerical ambitions enabled the Sephardic Jewish community to prosper and reach a peak in the 1660s.²² The philosemitism evinced by a select group of intellectuals described by Philipp further fueled this cooperative attitude. Nonetheless, the city's Lutheran clergy, generally in opposition to the city's leadership, tended to be hostile towards a

estantischen Deutschland des 17. und 18. Jahrhunderts," *Kwartalnik Historii Żydów*, no. 4 (2006): 535–75, here 564–5.

19 Philipp, "Philosemitismus," 224–7.

20 Strauss, "A Seventeenth-Century Conversion to Judaism," 166–9.

21 For a detailed analysis of this conflict in the period that Sperling converted to the end of the century, see Hermann Rückleben, *Die Niederwerfung der hamburgischen Ratsgewalt: Kirchliche Bewegungen und bürgerliche Unruhen im ausgehenden 17. Jahrhundert*, Beiträge zur Geschichte Hamburgs herausgegeben vom Verein für hamburgische Geschichte (Hamburg: Hans Christians, 1970).

22 Joachim Whaley, *Religious Toleration and Social Change in Hamburg, 1529–1819* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 79.

non-Lutheran presence in Hamburg, including that of Jews.²³ The second half of the century saw an increase in this hostility following the arrival of Jewish refugees (which may have included Sperling's own paternal ancestors), who were fleeing the Khmelnytsky massacres and other pogroms in the East.²⁴ This antipathy towards Jews was reinforced by aggressive missionary efforts including the foundation of the Edzardische Proselyten Anstalt in 1667, one year after the conversion to Islam of the Jewish messianic claimant Sabbatai Tsevi (1626–1676), who had many adherents among Hamburg's Jews. Exploiting the Jewish messianic disappointment to convince Jews that Jesus Christ was the true messiah, this missionary institute attracted a great number of converts.²⁵

Particularly if his claims about his father are true, Sperling was likely already in contact with Jews when still in Hamburg, making Philipp's suggestion that public interest in Sabbatianism may have contributed to Sperling's conversion highly significant.²⁶ Pawel Maciejko has recently shown how in the Sabbatian movement "fusing interreligious elements became a positive, and possibly even a supreme, value."²⁷ Following their messiah, who, in contrast to the historiographic tradition, seems to have sincerely embraced Islam while continuing to observe a number of Jewish practices, Sabbatians became

[...] the most ecumenical of early modern Jews. While mainstream Jewish discourse habitually bundled all 'nations of the world' and their faiths together, Sabbatianism carefully distinguished between different creeds and denominations, often drawing lines not only between large religious formations such as Islam and Christianity, but also between different sects and subgroups, such as different Protestant churches or different Sufi orders.²⁸

Hamburg, where Sabbatianism survived the demise of the Sabbatian mass movement, thus offered a Jewish subculture that combined religious conversion and an ecumenical attitude, breathing the same spirit of Sperling's eschatological beliefs described below.

23 Jutta Braden, "Die Hamburger Judenpolitik und die lutherisch-orthodoxe Geistlichkeit im 17. Jahrhundert," *Zeitschrift des Vereins für Hamburgische Geschichte* 89 (2003): 1–40, here 3–4.

24 Whaley, *Religious Toleration*, 76; Braden, "Hamburger Judenpolitik," 26.

25 On the institution, see Whaley, *Religious Toleration*, 86–7. On its conversion successes, see Braden, "Hamburger Judenpolitik," 29.

26 Philipp, "Der Philosemitismus," 225. These contacts would have been likely with Ashkenazi Jews, who from a mere forty to fifty families in the early 1660s had rapidly grown in numbers by the time of Sperling's conversion; see Whaley, *Religious Toleration*, 81.

27 Pawel Maciejko, ed., *Sabbatian Heresy: Writings on Mysticism, Messianism, and the Origins of Jewish Modernity* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2017), xxiv.

28 *Ibid.*, xxv.

Hence, Hamburg was home to two attitudinal extremes. Whereas a strong Lutheran exclusivist sector tried to either aggressively bar Jews from Hamburg or convert them to Christianity, several subcultures sheltered by Hamburg's magistrates that ranged from philosemitic Lutherans to Sabbatian Jews explored more ecumenical connections between Christianity and Judaism. Sperling's journey to Amsterdam epitomized his own preference for the latter, since these inclusive attitudes could also be found in Amsterdam.

Sperling's Amsterdam: German Boehmists and International Proselytes

In his second letter to his mother, when Sperling presents his eschatological scenario, he refers to what he "has also heard in the sermons," in which it was claimed that the first angel of the Apocalypse of John refers to "the great angel, the archangel D. Martin Lutherus."²⁹ It is unlikely that this phrase came from the mouth of an Ashkenazi rabbi. Possibly, Sperling was alluding to a sermon remembered from a German Lutheran past that he had left behind – after all, he mentions sermons while discussing Luther. Nevertheless, the depiction of Luther as an archangel is an integral part of the eschatological belief system he held after his conversion – suggesting that he may have heard the description in sermons he was still attending at the time he wrote the letter. It is also noteworthy that he uses the definite article in his letter ("the" sermons) and chooses the perfect rather than the past perfect tense.

While Boehmists – followers of the German mystic Jakob Böhme (1575–1624) – might not have had the pulpits necessary to directly spread their message, Boehmist elements in the letters, already noted by Philipp, indicate that these sermons might be linked to the presence of German Boehmists in Amsterdam around 1680, such as Johann Georg Gichtel (1638–1710) and Friedrich Breckling (1629–1711).³⁰ Other suspects are the chiliasts Johannes Rothe (1628–1702) and

²⁹ "Meines Verstandes nun nach, und wie ichs auch woll habe gehört in den [Pred]igten [...] der Mann Gottes der große Engel und Erz Engel der D. Martinus Lutherus"; Sperling letters, 1568.

³⁰ Lucinda Martin, "Jacob Boehme and the Anthropology of German Pietism," in *An Introduction to Jacob Boehme: Four Centuries of Thought and Reception*, eds. Ariel Hessayon and Sarah Apetrei, Routledge Studies in Religion (New York: Routledge, 2014): 120–41, here 121–5. See also Caspar G. C. Visser, "Die mystisch-pietistische Strömung in der niederländisch-lutherische Kirche in der zweiten Hälfte des 17. Jahrhunderts," in *Pietismus und Reveil: Referate der internationalen Tagung: Der Pietismus in den Niederlanden und seine internationalen Beziehungen*, Zeist 18–22. Juni 1974, eds. Jan van den Berg and Jan Pieter van Dooren (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1978):

Quirinus Kuhlmann. Like Sperling, Kuhlmann wrote about an eschatological alliance among Lutheranism, Calvinism, and the (Muslim) Ottoman Empire.³¹ Unlike Sperling, however, Kuhlmann attributed to himself a central role in the upcoming messianic events. These or other German-speaking Boehmists in Amsterdam, some of whom were such fervent Hebraists that they spoke Hebrew at home, were likely instrumental in Sperling's turn to Judaism. Moreover, the fact that the Revelation of John figures prominently in Sperling's eschatology points to some continued connection with this Boehmist milieu after joining the Jewish community.³²

An important clue about another religious environment in Amsterdam can be found at the end of Sperling's first letter, where he cryptically hints in an underlined sentence: "Please know that I am not the first Christian who has become a Jew, and I will not remain the last."³³ As burial and other records from both Amsterdam's Ashkenazi and Sephardic communities show, Amsterdam numbered many converts at the time.³⁴ These include converts from Hamburg or those with some other connection to it: in the two years before Sperling's conversion, for instance, the English convert Elias Bar Abraham traveled to

169–81; Magdolna Veres, "Johann Amos Comenius und Friedrich Breckling als 'Rufende Stimme aus Mitternacht'," *Pietismus und Neuzeit* 33 (2007): 71–83.

31 Wilhelm Schmidt-Biggemann, "Salvation through Philology: The Poetical Messianism of Quirinus Kuhlmann (1651–1689)," in *Toward the Millennium: Messianic Expectations from the Bible to Waco*, eds. Peter Schäfer and Mark R. Cohen (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 1998): 259–98, esp. 267–8.

32 For another possible factor, namely the rich and various scene of Dutch philosemites and their interactions with Jews, such as the Dutch millenarians and their contacts with Jews like Menasseh ben Israel, see Richard H. Popkin, "Christian Jews and Jewish Christians in the 17th century," in *Jewish Christians and Christian Jews: From the Renaissance to the Enlightenment*, eds. Richard H. Popkin and Gordon M. Weiner, *Archives internationales d'histoire des idées = International Archives of the History of Ideas* (Dordrecht and Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994): 57–72.

33 "wisset daß ich nicht bin der Erste Christ der da ist ein Jude geworden, Ich werde auch der letzte nicht bleiben;" Sperling letters 244/1529.

34 On the Ashkenazi cemeteries, see Jits Van Straten, *De herkomst van de Aschkenazische joden: De controverse opgelost* (Bennekom: [the author], 2009), 159. The Portuguese burial register from the period in which the Sperling letters were written: *Stadsarchief Amsterdam 334* (Archief van de Portugees-Israëlietische Gemeente) 916 (*Livro de Bet Haim. Register van besluiten van de mahamad betreffende de begraafplaats 1703–1722; journaal van begraven 1680–1716; grafboek 1691–1733*). Two other sources mentioning multiple converts contemporary to Sperling are the aforementioned *Livro longo* (SAA 334: 217), as well as the Portuguese "Manual" that also reported welfare gifts to converts: SAA 334: 175 (Manual, 1677–1689).

Hamburg twice.³⁵ The Portuguese community's charity lists also include several converts from Hamburg in the years following Sperling's letters, who, like Sperling, had come to Amsterdam.³⁶

Social interactions between converts was common in Amsterdam. The aforementioned Moses Germanus and Daniel ben Avraham interacted with fellow converts, as did Abigail Guer ("Abigail the proselyte"), who in the 1640s stipulated that part of her large donation to the Portuguese Jewish community should be reserved as a yearly allowance for Dinah Guer ("Dina the proselyte").³⁷ In addition, at least some of these converts, as Sperling implies, expected that there would be more conversions to Judaism in the near future.

The use of the Book of Revelation as authoritative prophecy by a Jewish proselyte who received his mail at the address of a renowned rabbi comes as something of a surprise. But proselytes, it might be helpful to recall here, occupied a rather liminal status in the Jewish community. Beginning at the end of the seventeenth century, the Portuguese community required the permission of the *maamad*, the synagogue board, for the burial of proselytes, and one instance in its burial book shows a separate plot for proselytes.³⁸ Thus, the Portuguese community, at least, may have deemed converts as belonging to a socio-religious category distinct from that of born Jews.³⁹ If the Portuguese community perceived proselytes differently, the Ashkenazi Jewish community, financially dependent

35 SAA 334: 217 pp. 212, 274. In 1688, the proselyte Abraham Guer of Tunis traveled from Amsterdam to Hamburg: SAA 334: 218 p. 230.

36 At the end of the decade, the Portuguese community twice gave money to proselytes from Hamburg in the house of Sebatay Coen; *ibid.* 422, and SAA 334: 219, p. 64. In the fall of 1692, money was given for the burial of a child of Abraham Israel Ger of Hamburg; *ibid.*, 104. Around the same time, proselytes from Hamburg, possibly the same as those at the house of Sabetay Coen, were given money; *ibid.*, 138, and again in 1694–5 (p. 301). In 1694, Rachel Israel the proselyte from Hamburg was buried in Amsterdam: SAA 334: 916, pp. 91 and 258.

37 On Abigail Guer and Dina Guer see, for instance: Stadsarchief Amsterdam 334 (Archief van de Portugees-Israëlietische Gemeente), 172 (Manual, 1639–1646), 178, 309. On Germanus and Clericus, see Schudt, *Jüdische Merckwürdigkeiten* vol. 1, 275–6.

38 Burial 'segregation' begins in this period, when former slaves began to be buried in the "negroes section." In addition, converts begin to be listed as "buried by the order of the maamad," suggesting that their burial in the Jewish cemetery was not self-evident. For an instance of separate burial, see Sarah Ben Abraham's placement in the "row of the giores" in 1712: Stadsarchief Amsterdam 334 (Archief van de Portugees-Israëlietische Gemeente) 916 (Livro de Bet Haim. Register van besluiten van de mahamad betreffende de begraafplaats 1703–1722; *journaal van begraven 1680–1716; grafboek 1691–1733*), 201.

39 See for this argument also Yosef Kaplan, "The Self-Definition of the Sephardic Jews of Western Europe and their Relation to the Alien and the Stranger," in *Crisis and Creativity in the World: 1391–1648*, ed. Benjamin R. Gampel (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 121–45.

on their richer Portuguese brethren, likely followed suit. One of the effects of this *différence* may have been a greater toleration – albeit by virtue of neglect – for the peculiar religious views of proselytes.

While the gradually growing distinction between born Jews and proselytes in Jewish Amsterdam might have afforded a certain degree of doctrinal liberty for the city’s converts, there seems to have been a more positive factor at play as well. This was the presence of heterodox tendencies among Amsterdam’s Jews themselves, in particular among its Portuguese community. Yosef Kaplan and Yirmiyahu Yovel, among others, have shown how Amsterdam’s Jews’ converso past resulted in widespread heterodoxy in its community – Spinoza being its most famous example – which included positive engagements with Christianity and Christian-Jewish hybridities.⁴⁰

Sperling’s statements about the origins of his prophetic beliefs provide additional evidence about the subculture to which he belonged. Combining the principle of *Sola scriptura* with assertions of their own insights and authority, Protestant non-conformists often claimed that their personal interpretations of scripture were equally, if not more, valid than official doctrinal positions. One of the ways *Sola scriptura* was invoked was to argue that God’s eternal commandments to Moses were never, and could never be, nullified.⁴¹ As I will show in due course, Sperling shared both this viewpoint and its *Sola scriptura* justification.

Sperling also gave his own readings of the 12th, 14th, and 19th chapters of the Book of Revelation, of Daniel, and of the traditional Jewish life-saver Zechariah 8:23. To his mother, Sperling stressed the personal nature of his reading of scripture, writing, for instance: “I believe the woman clothed with the sun is [...]” “I have read in the book of Daniel.”⁴² Of course, this does not rule out the possibility that these readings were shared within an interpretive community.

A further source for Sperling’s interpretations emerges in the more lyrical passages of his missives. At the end of his second letter, Sperling writes about the “Spirit of Prophecy” (Rev. 19:10).⁴³ Elsewhere, after a dazzling interpretation

⁴⁰ See Kaplan, *From Christianity to Judaism*, 110–78; Yirmiyahu Yovel, *Spinoza and Other Heretics: The Marrano of Reason* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 20–6. See also Graizbord’s revealing description of Iberian renegades in Graizbord, *Souls in Dispute*, 171–6.

⁴¹ There are multiple examples in seventeenth-century Amsterdam of Judaizers appealing to *sola scriptura* to legitimize their religious claims. For one example, see Alexander van der Haven, “Conversion on Trial: Toleration of Apostasy and the Hoorn Trial of Three Converts to Judaism (1614–15),” in *Contesting Inter-Religious Conversion in the Medieval World*, eds. Yaniv Fox and Yosi Yisraeli (New York: Routledge, 2017), 41–60, here 47–8.

⁴² “Den ich vermeine daß Israel daß weib sey daß mit der Sonne bekleydet ist;” “Ich hab gelesen bey dem Propheten Daniel” Sperling letters, 1569, 1568. My italics.

⁴³ “der Geist der weißagung.” *Ibid.*, 1570.

of biblical prophecy, Sperling halts – perhaps suspecting that his mother, reading the letter, might have begun to doubt his sanity – and writes:

Many would ask me: How do you know that? Wisdom, who is the judge of all the arts, has taught me. I want to praise her, make her known, show her clearly so that everybody knows what that wisdom is. For through her one gets to know God and his holiest name, which cannot be uttered and which teaches everything [...] She knows God's will and counsel, for she was there when God created the world [...] Through her we will resurrect from the dead and live in eternity, because she inhabits in all that is, and whoever seeks for her finds her. Whoever seeks her from the heart will receive her.⁴⁴

“Wisdom,” who appears in Proverbs 3 and 8 and Ecclesiastes 1, was a particularly popular character in the early modern period. Consequently, the origin of Sperling's loyalty to her is hard to assess. He could have picked her up from the Boehmist tradition already mentioned, from Jewish or Christian kabbalists, or even from Sabbatians (who were present both in Hamburg and in Amsterdam), or possibly, from a combination of these. More importantly, however, Sperling's reading of scriptural prophecies stemmed not only from *Sola scriptura* and the discourses of exegetical communities, but also – so he believed – from divine inspiration. Sperling must have belonged to, or at least have been socialized by, one or more groups that upheld individual divine inspiration.⁴⁵

Wisdom was as “pure,” “noble,” and “careful” as Sperling portrays her: Sophia was able to do something with Revelation, the prophetic text at the core of Sperling's beliefs, that few others have been able or willing to do. Although she left one villain in place (in the person of the pope), the thrust of Wisdom's work was to turn the Book of Revelation into a call for and forecast of inter-religious alliance at the end of times.

⁴⁴ “Da möcht mich mancher fragen, wie weißt Du daß. Die Weißheit die aller Kunste richter Ist hat es mich gelehret dieselbe wil ich dermahlen Ein rühmen und kundt machen und sie deutlich zu erkennen geben daß jedermann weiß waß die weißheit sey, den durch sie erkennet man Gott und seynen Allerheylichsten Nahmen, der doch unaussprechlich ist der alles lehret. [...] Sie weiß Gottes willen und Rath, den sie ist dabey gewesen da Gott die Welt gemacht hat. Nach den Worten des weisen Königs Salomons, sie wird auch bleiben in Ewigkeit. Durch sie werden wir wieder aufferstehen von den Todten und leben in Ewigkeit, den sie wohnet bey alles waß da lebet, wer sie suchet der findet Sie, wer sie von Herten suchet der erwirbet sie;” Sperling letters 1569–70.

⁴⁵ On individual revelation in early modern Protestantism: Volkhard Wels, “Unmittelbare göttliche Offenbarung als Gegenstand der Auseinandersetzung in der protestantischen Theologie der Frühen Neuzeit,” in *Diskurse der Gelehrtenkultur in der Frühen Neuzeit: Ein Handbuch*, ed. Herbert Jaumann (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2011): 747–808.

Sperling's Eschatology

Sperling was not the first to design eschatological alliances among different religious groups. In the rapidly globalizing early modern world, many sought to make room for different religions in their end-time scenarios. A Jewish example is Menasseh ben Israel's well-known appeal to Oliver Cromwell (1599–1658) that the English Christian readmission of Jews would hasten the arrival of the Messiah.⁴⁶ In Christian eschatology, Quirinus Kuhlmann (mentioned above as a possible influence on Sperling) outlined an alliance between Lutheranism and Calvinism. Two similar eschatological proposals to join Jews and Christians under a single religious banner were those of Augustin Bader (c. 1495–1530) from South Germany, and the Dane Oliger Paulli, from Amsterdam. Each claimed to be the messiah, or representing the future messiah, of both Jews and Christians and attempted, unsuccessfully, to forge a Jewish-Christian alliance against the Roman Catholic Church.⁴⁷

Sperling's case, however, is different. Even if his letters are literary artefacts rather than personal documents, they lack the obvious strategic interests of something like Menasseh ben Israel's appeal. Nor did Sperling share the messianic religious ambitions of Bader, Kuhlmann, and Paulli – ambitions that set these religious entrepreneurs apart from, and above, the regular human realm with its various religious commitments. This difference makes Sperling's religious eschatology remarkably gentle. One can hear this in the tone of the letters, which is, as Strauss mentioned, unusually tender and conciliatory for someone who believes himself to be witnessing the last events unfold. Thus, we read:

Dearest beloved mother, I cannot neglect to write -- my filial love for you, mother, burns constantly -- regarding the fact that I have become a Jew because of God and his Holy Name. I know that this is already known to my mother, my friends, and my enemies. I in-

⁴⁶ Menasseh ben Israel and Lucien Wolf, *Menasseh ben Israel's Mission to Oliver Cromwell: Being a Reprint of the Pamphlets Published by Menasseh ben Israel to Promote the Re-admission of the Jews to England, 1649–1656* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

⁴⁷ On Bader, see Rebekka Voss, *Umstrittene Erlöser: Politik, Ideologie und jüdisch-christlicher Messianismus in Deutschland 1500–1600* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2007), 138–52; Anselm Schubert, *Täufertum und Kabbalah: Augustin Bader und die Grenzen der radikalen Reformation, Quellen und Forschungen zur Reformationsgeschichte 81* (Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2008). On Paulli, see Schoeps, *Philosemitismus im Barock*, 53–67, and Jeannine Kunert, “Der Juden Könige zwei: Zum deutschsprachigen Diskurs über Sabbatai Zwi und Oliger Paulli. Nebst systematischen Betrachtungen zur religionswissenschaftlichen Kategorie Endzeit und sozio-diskursiven Wechselwirkungen” (PhD Dissertation, Erfurt University, 2018), 331–436.

tend also to live and die as a Jew in the name of the Lord of Hosts. I beg my mother, brother, sister, and brother-in-law that they will not be hostile because of religion. For I desire to remain in friendship with my friends and blood relatives. For what good is enmity? At all times we should remember that at one point we will appear in front of God's judgment seat to account for ourselves in order to enjoy God's compassion. So let us practice love, and know, that God is pure compassion.⁴⁸

Sperling's rhetorical question – "For what good is enmity?" – supplies an implicit answer – "nothing at all" – by his claim that we all will be judged individually for our actions rather than our denominational commitments. Indeed, in the second letter, in which Sperling mentions that he had heard how badly his mother had taken his conversion, he writes:

The question now is why could I not have become saved in the Lutheran faith, or whether the Lutherans [Sperling added initially "and Reformed," but crossed that through] are damned. I answer and declare that the upright Lutherans and Reformed will all achieve salvation. Let my soul stand for yours if I write this out of hypocrisy.⁴⁹

Further on in the second letter, Sperling writes also that the third angel, which "I hope will be the messiah, will bring redemption to all people, and all that is evil will be destroyed." Not only good Lutherans and Calvinists could achieve salvation, then, but salvation could be universal.⁵⁰

Let us now turn to the content of Sperling's eschatological views. Two of the passages from the Book of Revelation that he focused on were Revelation

48 "Hertz vielgeliebte Mutter Ich kan nicht unterlassen zu Schreiben den die kindliche liebe von mir brennet alle Zeit gegen der Mutter was anlanget daß ich von Gott und seines Heyligen Namens wegen bin ein Jude geworden. Daß weis ich daß solches der Mutter meinen freunden und feinden schon bekandt ist. Ich gedenke auch im Namen der HERRN der Herrscharen ein Jude zu leben und zu sterben. So gereicht nun meine bitte an der Mutter Bruder und Schwester und Schwager daß sie wegen glaubens halber keine feindschaft ausüben. Den ich habe Lust freundschaft zu halten mit meinen freunden und Bluts Verwandten. Denn was soll uns die feindschaft [phrase striked through] wir müssen doch alle Zeit gedenken, daß wir alle Zeit ein mahl müssen auftreten für den Richter Stuhl Gottes und Rechenschaft geben, damit wir nun Gottes Barmherzigkeit genieSen. So last uns Liebe üben, und wisset, daß Gott von lauter Barmherzigheit Ist"; Sperling letters, 1529.

49 "[So] ist nun die frage ob ich den nicht hette können Selig werden in den Lutherschen glau[ben] Oder ob ander Lutheraner ~~und reformirten~~ verdampt sind. So antworte Ich und [be]kenne daß die aufrichtigen Lutheraner und reformierten alle selig werden und [gro]ße Seeligkeit erlangen. Schreibe ich solches auß Heucheley so stehe meine Seele für die ihrige"; *ibid.*, 1567.

50 "verhoffe daß soll Messias sein und al[er] Menschen Erlösung soll zu der Zeit kommen und alles übels soll außgerot[tet] werden können"; *ibid.*, 1568.

14:6–11, concerning the three successive angels, and Revelation 12: 1, concerning the woman clothed with the sun. Either Sperling copied Revelation 14:6–11 from Luther’s translation, or he remembered it by heart (only a single “and” is missing), and he cites it in full. Notably, he ends his exegesis of verse 12 just *before* the point at which it commands belief in Jesus.

According to my understanding, and how I have also heard it in the sermons, the first angel [...] as the man of God, the great angel and archangel Martin Luther. The other angel who followed the first and shouted “She is fallen Babylon the great city” was the man of God the great angel and archangel John Calvin [...]. The third angel, with a great voice will speak, saying: Those who worship the Beast and its idol receives the mark on his forehead and the mark of its name, after which the papacy will perish. This angel, the third one, I think has not come yet. I expect the third angel [and] hope it will be the messiah who will bring redemption to all people, and all that is evil will be destroyed. Now I let you know that these two angels, these two men of God Martin Luther and John Calvin, stand for the Lutheran and Reformed host, they are archangels, from the seven of them who stand there and serve God day and night. They are two peaceful angels of one being and hence the Lutherans and Reformed will not wage war with another over religion.⁵¹

Clearly, Sperling, like those who preached the sermons he had attended, believed himself to be witnessing the fulfillment of the very prophecies described in Revelation. The first two phases, in which the first two angels appeared, had already been completed by the arrival of the Lutheran and Calvinist churches. Sperling was waiting for the third angel to come.

God has placed his judgment seat in these two religions, Sperling wrote, and will judge the entire world when the third angel appears. At this point, the Jewish

51 “Meines Verstandes nun nach, und wie ichs auch woll habe gehört in den [Pred]igten, So ist der Erste Engel [...] das ist gewesen der Mann Gottes der große Engel und Ertz Engel der D. Martinus Lutherus. Der andere Engel aber der dem ersten ist nachgefolget und hat geschrie[en] Sie] ist gefallen Babilon die große Stadt. daß ist gewesen der Mann Gottes der große Engel und Ertz Engel der D. Johannes Calvinus.

Der dritte Engel aber der mit große Stimme soll sagen. So jemandt [daß] Thier anbetet und sein Bilde und nimpt an sein Mahl Zeichen an seiner [Stirn] und das mahl Zeichen seines Namens, worauff daß Pabsthum wird vergehen. Dieser Engel, nemlich der Dritte meine ich der sey noch nicht gekommen. [Ich] Erwarte den dritten Engel, verhoffe daß soll Messias sein und al[er] Menschen Erlösung soll zu der Zeit kommen und alles üfels soll außgerot[et] werden können. Nun thue ich auch zu wissen, namelich daß die Zween Engeln der Zween Män[ner] Gottes deß Doctor Martinus Lutherus und deß D. Johannes Calvi[nus] ihre Engeln welche stehen für daß Luthersche und Reformitische Herr, d[ab]ß sind Ertz Engeln, und sind von den Sieben, die da stehen zu dienen für Gott [Tag] und nacht. Und sindt Zween friedtsahme Engeln in einem wesent [da]rumb werden die Lutheraner und Reformierten keinen Krieg mit einand[er] führen wegen religion”; *ibid.*, 1568–9.

people become part of the eschatological scenario. According to Sperling, the woman clothed in the sun of Revelation 12:14 is not, as in traditional Christian interpretation, the true (Christian) church. Rather, she stands for the Jewish people who, pursued by the great dragon, will be saved by being given the two wings of a great eagle. These wings are the Lutheran and Reformed communities:

So the two communities, namely the Lutherans and Reformed, will be to the Jews as the two wings of a great eagle. And they will bring them to the barren land, to their place, namely the promised land. That the holy city Jerusalem and the temple of God and the land that has so long lain in ruins will be rebuilt.⁵²

This Protestant alliance will help the Jews return to their land in order to rebuild it and its Temple. Failing to predict the appearance of the Ottoman army at Vienna's gates the coming year, Sperling foretold that the Turkish sultan, the caliph of Sunni Islam, would build a "neat road" so the Jews could travel to their promised land.⁵³

With the important exception of Roman Catholicism, Sperling described eschatological cooperation among different religions. Together, they would bring about universal redemption by enabling the restoration of the Jews to the land promised to them by God. To support his view, Sperling offered an astrological interpretation of the passage about the woman who is clothed with the sun, has the moon under her feet, and on her head a crown of twelve stars. In so doing, he drew on a traditional identification of the different heavenly bodies with the different religions that stretched back to the illustrious eighth-century astrologers Al Kindi (c. 800–873) and Abu Mashar (c. 787–886). The latter's *De magnis coniunctibus* was a standard item in learned households of the early modern period.⁵⁴ Sperling wrote this part of his exegesis in an inspired style:

You should know that the Lutherans are the mother from whom everything good is born. Luther, you are the clear morning star that heralds every good, oh power of Venus.

The Reformed are a strengthening of the good, prepared to fight against the dark power of the papacy. They are the evening star. Mars, guard Venus with your sword so

⁵² "So werden die zween gemeinen, nemblich die Lutherianer und Reformirten. denen Jüden sein wie Zween flügel eines großen Adellers. Und werden sie bringen in daß verwüst landt an ihren Orth. Nemlich ins gelobte Landt. Daß die heylige Stadt Jerusalem. Und der Tempel Gottes und daß Landt so lange wüßte gehele gelegen Izt wieder gebauet wird"; *ibid.*, 1569.

⁵³ "ein Reinlich straßen;" *ibid.*

⁵⁴ Robin Bruce Barnes, *Astrology and Reformation* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 23, 55, 72.

that she will not become a whore. The Turks are the upholders of the good and archenemies of everything evil, namely the darkness of the papacy. Mahomet, your power is in the moon.

And the three communities, namely the Turks, Lutherans and Reformed are trusted friends of Israel.

The pope with his cardinals, bishops, abbots, prelates, monsignors and whatever belongs to that which is the dark night, the mother of all evil and all whoredom and idolatry. Yes, the dark night that is friend to no-one, pope, your power is fickle. Mercury is [your] star.⁵⁵

Here, with the papacy as the sole negative force, the different religions/heavenly bodies play complementary roles. Like the first angel, Venus/Luther – standing for the Lutheran faith – heralds the good news. Calvin takes over from there with a sterner, more martial role, making sure to keep in line the ex-monk who once proclaimed that “He who loves not wine, women and song remains a fool his whole life long.” The sultan, who keeps the pope at bay, is also assigned a disciplinary duty.

Conversion and Universal Salvation

Sperling’s inclusivist eschatology raises the question of his conversion. Why did Sperling convert to Judaism when he did not regard Judaism as the sole road to salvation? The explanations Sperling himself provides suggest an interesting model, one that couples religious pluralism with commitment to one religion alone.

Sperling gives two reasons for his conversion. The first is that he had arrived at a personal conviction that God had never abolished the law given to Israel. Sperling supported this claim with, among other texts, Christian scripture, namely, Matthew 5:17–20 and Luke 16:17, in which Jesus states that he has not come to abolish the Law. Christians who denied that the law of Moses had been abolished

55 “Zu wissen die Lutheraner daß ist die Mutter da alles guts ausgebohren wird Luther. Du bist der Helle Morgen Stern, der alles gutes ankündigt O Venus Gewalt.

Die Reformirten sind eine verstärkung deß guten bereit zu fechten wider die finstere Macht des Pabstthumb, der Abend Stern Ist ihr Mars bewache mit deinem Schwerdt daß Venus nicht zur Huren werde, die Türken daß sind Erhalter deß guten, und Erbfeinde alles übels Nemlich der finsternis deß Pabstthumb. Mahomet deine Gewalt bestehet in dem Mondt.

Und die drey gemeinen nemlich die Türken, Lutheraner und Reformirten sindt vertraute Freunde Israel. Der Pabst mit seinen Cardinälen, Bischöfen, Abten, Prelaten, Monsigniors und waß darzu gehört daß ist die finsternacht die Mutter alles Übels aller Hurerey und Abgötterey. Ja die finsternacht die keines Menschen freundt ist, Pabst dein Gewalt ist leichtfertig, Mercurius daß ist Stern;” Sperling letters 1569.

were not an infrequent phenomenon in the Dutch Republic. This can be seen in the complaints recorded throughout the seventeenth century by Amsterdam's Reformed Church, which kept a watchful eye on what happened in other religious communities as well.⁵⁶ Although 'Judaizing' was often limited to insistence on a specific commandment – most often the observance of the Jewish Shabbat – it occasionally resulted, as in Sperling's case, in conversion to Judaism.⁵⁷

Although Sperling thus maintained that Scripture, correctly interpreted, proved Judaism to be the only true religion, and although he himself converted to Judaism as result of this conviction, he did not hold that adhering to another religion would automatically preclude salvation. This "salvific pluralism" has roots in the Jewish tradition itself, from which the aforementioned attitudes of the proselyte Daniel ben Abraham and many members of Amsterdam's Portuguese community had deviated. Sperling's pluralistic attitude could also be found in seventeenth-century Dutch Jewish discussions of Noahites (initiated by Christian Hebraists such as John Selden (1584–1654), as Miriam Bodian has recently shown), in which the possibility of multiple paths to salvation also appears.⁵⁸

Sperling's views also echo tolerant Christian philosophies, such as those of the influences discussed above, as well as those popular in the Dutch Republic since its early days. For instance, in criticizing Calvin's execution of Michael Servetus (c. 1509–1553), Sebastian Castellio (1515–1563) had argued that "the truth is to say what one thinks, even when one is wrong." And Dirck Volckertsz Coornhert (1522–1590) had written that pagans, too, could attain salvation as long as they followed the "spirit."⁵⁹

The second reason Sperling gave for deciding that he should "live and die as a Jew" was that, as mentioned above, he had Jewish ancestry. In his second letter, he wrote:

56 One example is a schoolmaster insisting on observing the Shabbat. Stadsarchief Amsterdam 376 (Archief van de Hervormde Gemeente): 5 (Notulen kerkeraad Amsterdam, 1621–1627), 225, 228.

57 This seems to have been the case with a certain glass maker, whom the consistory for several years tried to discipline: Stadsarchief Amsterdam 376 (Archief van de Hervormde Gemeente): 7 (Notulen kerkeraad Amsterdam, 1633–1644), 196, 202, 206, 300, 301, 339, 341.

58 Miriam Bodian, "The Geography of Conscience: A Seventeenth-Century Atlantic Jew and the Inquisition," *The Journal of Modern History* 89 (2017): 247–81, esp. 267–72. For a broader discussion of Jewish views on Christians in Seventeenth-Century Amsterdam, see eadem, "The Portuguese Jews of Amsterdam and the Status of Christians," in *New Perspectives on Jewish-Christian Relations*: In Honor of David Berger, eds. Elisheva Carlebach, Jacob J. Schacter, and David Berger (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2012): 329–58.

59 Bodian, "Geography of Conscience," 265.

I desire to live according to such a wonderful law, all the more so since I descend from the Jewish race, just as my brother and sister, because we come from one father. This will seem quite strange to mother because she knows nothing of it, nor do my brother and my sister. I, however, know it and I let mother know that my father has left behind in writing a bequest and declaration to us children so that we will know from what kind of tribe we are. Because my father's forefathers have been forced [to convert] in wars. They wanted to save their lives. This report I have in the document of my father and can give testimony of it under oath.⁶⁰

Sperling thus claimed that, unbeknownst to his mother and siblings, his father had given him documents proving his and his siblings' Jewish ancestry. Whether Sperling possessed such documents or whether this was a case of invented Jewish ancestry, we will never know.⁶¹ What we do know is that Sperling believed he was of the seed of Abraham through patrilineal descent, and that he was thus called upon to observe other commandments than those of the gentiles.

Eschatology and conversion often accentuated the differences among religious communities. The Sperling letters in their Amsterdam context show that the opposite was also possible. The convert who sought to preserve his or her social and familial ties to a religious past could serve as a bridge between different communities, and even as a guide for them to fulfill – together – their respective roles at the end of time.

60 "Habe ich Lust nach solchem Herrlichen Gesetz [zu] leben, über daß weil ich doch von Jüdischem geschlecht bin hergekommen Ingleichen meine Brüder und Schwester weil wir von einem Vater sind hergekommen. Solches wird der Mutter seltsam vorkommen, nach demahlen sie nichts davon [we]iß auch mein Bruder nicht noch auch meine Schwester nicht. daß ichs aber weiß [thu]e ich der Mutter zu wissen daß mein Vater es in schrift hat nachgelaßen, [und] zum Erbgut und uns Kindern Zurnachricht auff daß wir wissen solten [von] waß vor geschlecht wir sind Den meines Vaters vor Väter sind durch Kriegswesen gezwungen worden. haben sie anders Ihr lebent wollen salviren Diese nachricht habe [ich] durch die Schrift meines Vaters und kan es Eydlich außsagen;" *ibid.*, 1567.

61 A great number of victims of the anti-Semitic Chmielnicki massacres of 1648–1649 and subsequent persecutions settled in and near Hamburg, and among these were also Jews who had been forced to convert during these persecutions, and thus arrived as Christians. A famous example is the wife of the Jewish messiah Sabbatai Tsevi, Sarah the Ashkenazi; see Alexander van der Haven, *From Lowly Metaphor to Divine Flesh: Sarah the Ashkenazi, Sabbatai Tsevi's Messianic Queen and the Sabbatian Movement* (Amsterdam: Menasseh ben Israel Instituut, 2012), 25–30. For a source that appears to be inventing Jewish ancestry to legitimize conversion, see the Graanboom chronicle: Lajb Fuks and R. G. Fuks-Mansfeld, "The Hebrew Chronicle of the Swedish Family Graanboom," in *Aspects of Jewish life in the Netherlands: A Selection From the Writings of Leo Fuks* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 1995): 100–30.

