

## Oswyn Murray: The Western Traditions of Ancient History<sup>1</sup>

The study of ‘ancient history’ in western Europe has always been connected with the classical tradition and the influence of Greece and Rome on the formation of European culture. The critical and comparative study of this tradition with other ancient civilizations such as Israel, Egypt, the Near East, India, China, and Japan to create an ‘ancient world history’, arrived late and has remained peripheral to the study of the origins of western culture. My purpose in this brief paper is to explore the consequences of this fact.

The western outlook on ‘Ancient History’ is therefore limited, and has since the eighteenth century centred around two distinct concepts; these are imperialism and liberty. The first interest, imperialism, explains the fundamental importance of Roman history with its exemplification of the fate of empires, to rise, decline and fall. It began with the discussion provoked by the famous French author Montesquieu in his work *Considérations sur la grandeur et décadence des Romains*, published in Holland in 1734. In this short essay Montesquieu traced the growth of the Roman empire in the second century BC and attributed it to the *vertu* of the Romans, their moral and political character. He showed how moral and political corruption followed, until the traditional liberty of the Romans was extinguished in a monarchic form of government, and their moral character was corrupted by the luxury consequent on empire. This analysis was part of a general movement in the early 18<sup>th</sup> century to

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<sup>1</sup> These reflections were first formulated as a keynote speech for the 2012 International Symposium on Ancient World History in China, June 16-18, Nankai University, Tianjin. They were subsequently developed for a meeting of the European Network for the Study of Ancient Greek History at Tel Aviv University in October 2012, and delivered to seminars at Duke and Northwestern Universities during a visit to the USA. In 2013 they were presented to the Hong Kong Academy of Sciences, Tokyo University, and at seminars in Oxford and Durham. I am very grateful to all the participants for their comments, often in opposition.

contrast the declining power of the French monarchy under its greatest ruler, Louis XIV, in the face of the rise of the English version of constitutional monarchy, in a country essentially governed by the merchant classes after the Glorious Revolution of 1688. The success in war of the English armies under the Duke of Marlborough and the creation of an English naval empire around the world were making it clear that absolute monarchy and territorial conquest were incompatible with the modern expansion of overseas trade based on government by the landed aristocracy and the merchants of the city of London. The message of Montesquieu was accepted by all the thinkers of the Enlightenment, and became the basis of the new critical historiography which reached its zenith in the famous work of Edward Gibbon, in which the whole history of Europe from antiquity to the Renaissance was incorporated into a *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1776-88).

This perception has dictated the shape of Roman history ever since. The fundamental questions remain the same today as they were formulated in the 18<sup>th</sup> century: how did Rome become an imperial power, on the basis of what political structures was her success achieved, how was her political, social and economic development affected by the consequent advent of luxury and wealth, and why did the system end by only finding stability under a form of absolute monarchy that was incompatible with political liberty? It was only the advent of a new religion, Christianity, and the impact of nomadic barbarian invasions that introduced a new dynamic to history; but that required a break with the past that was only partially resolved in the Renaissance. From this perspective of ancient history as Roman history, it is empire, its rise and fall, that provides the questions to which we still seek answers. And much of the justification of western imperialism in the modern age has

been based on the model of the Roman example, from Edmund Burke's eighteenth century analysis of the faults and virtues of English imperialism in Ireland, north America and India, to the systematic education of administrators for the British Indian Empire on principles that were directly derived from Roman provincial administration. The French and German empires were no different: throughout Europe the virtues and vices and indeed the methods of imperialism have always been conceived in terms of the ancient Roman example.

The second interest, the history of liberty, includes the history of political liberty and democratic forms of government, together with personal liberty and the rise of the concept of the individual: this is seen in terms of a continuing process of development from antiquity to the present, and as especially exemplified in the history of ancient Greece. It explains the obsession of historians of ancient Greece with Athens and the principles of democratic government. We still idealise Athenian democracy as the best form of government, and discuss modern governmental systems in relation to this ancient example. We are still obsessed with the idea of liberty, both political and personal; and as a consequence we judge all forms of government, whatever their historical traditions, in relation to standards that are seen as absolute. This strand in the history of the ancient world is often seen as consequent on the Hegelian view of history as the history of liberty, and on the concern of the Romantic period with the idea of the creativity of the original artistic genius, standing outside tradition. And it is believed that the nineteenth century philosophical movement known as Utilitarianism established the apotheosis of democracy and liberty in the *History of Greece* (1846-56) composed by the Utilitarian radical politician George Grote.

But in fact this concern with liberty and democracy is too a product of the eighteenth century, and of much the same impulse that inspired Montesquieu. The catalyst was the presentation by the Frenchman Nicolas Boileau in 1674 of an obscure ancient work of literary criticism known as *Longinus On the Sublime*. In the last chapter of this work the author mentions an ancient theory that relates artistic creativity to political liberty. This work with its emphasis on the importance of the sublime was fundamental to literary theory in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and its conclusion was interpreted as an explanation and a vindication for the renewed literary activity in contemporary Britain after the Glorious Revolution. The literature of ancient Greece and especially Athens was interpreted as being a consequence not of aristocratic patronage but of political liberty and Athenian democracy. This view of the benefits of democracy became widespread in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and lies behind the change from an almost universal dismissal of democratic forms of government as dangerous, unjust and anarchic to an increasing idealisation of democratic institutions. This in turn led to a close identification of ancient Athens with modern Britain and subsequently modern America. The difference between ancient and modern democracy was rightly seen as a difference between direct and representative democracy: the most important innovation in 18<sup>th</sup> century political theory, due largely to Montesquieu again, was the realisation that representation could be harnessed to the idea of democracy. Despite this obvious difference it was believed that ancient and modern democracy shared common characteristics. The consequent rise of the principle of democratic representative government justified the historical movement from aristocratic forms of government to a new 'democratic', capitalist, oligarchic control of government by the bourgeoisie.

These two strands, imperialism and democracy, have in our generation come together in the new democratic imperialism of the United States of America, which seeks to promote the principles of democracy and capitalism under an American imperial hegemony held to be self-evidently the teaching of human history, for in Hegelian terms the triumph of the individual and of liberty is the lesson of history.

Yet each of these theoretical approaches is problematical in a number of respects, and concentration on them to the exclusion of all others represents an impoverishment of the varieties of human experience. Let us consider each concept in turn.

Imperialism is not synonymous with exploitation and expropriation; it requires an ideology to persuade the master race to conquer and even more to maintain control over other societies: you must believe in your mission or the rulers will lose the will to rule. The Romans came to believe that their version of Greco-Roman civilization was a gift that would benefit all who came under their domination; in this they were helped by a conception of citizenship that (with certain conditions) was perhaps the most inclusive that the world has experienced. The result was that in the end all subjects of the empire became Roman citizens, and were eligible for the benefits of empire; these benefits of course changed over time, but always remained real enough, and could and did include the possibility of even becoming the emperor himself. The later western model built on this conception of the benefits of civilization, and added to it the principle of conversion to Christianity as the true faith. But it was always recognised that in principle, if in the distant future the subject peoples should embrace

these western principles of government and western religion, such empires would dissolve themselves into some unspecified relationship, whether of universal citizenship or of independence. Moreover whereas the Roman conception of empire had been of an eternal empire (*Roma aeterna*), there was built into its successor, the 18<sup>th</sup> century conception of empire, the notion of decline and fall; there was therefore always a 'dying fall', a sense of a future ending embodied in western imperialism: the end of empire is envisaged in its beginning. Of course history falsified or usurped these dreams in a variety of ways. But the pure conception of imperialism as exploitation never existed in the west (with the possible exception of the Belgian Congo); and while the analysis of imperialism in terms of its economic benefit to the ruler may help, it is not sufficient to explain all human motivation involved.

The ideas of democracy and freedom are equally problematic. Direct and representative democracy have been recognised to be wholly different forms of government since the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Direct democracy is only suitable for small scale institutions in which the members of the group can meet and make decisions in a form of assembly which contains only those who will execute those decisions. It is today seldom practised even in groups small enough to qualify, and the right to decide or even influence decisions has become simply a residual right confined to occasional almost ritual events. No-one believes in direct ancient democracy as practised by the ancient Athenians, and few people would wish to see it return as a viable form of government. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was agreed to be dependent on a form of political education which was essentially unattainable, and the 20<sup>th</sup> century added the even less democratic idea of the need for expertise. These criticisms of democracy go back at least to Plato's Protagoras.

They have been incorporated into the theory of representative government, which allows an elite to rule with the consent of the majority. The problem that results is that of all forms of government in all periods, the creation of a divide between the rulers and the ruled. In ancient Greek terms all modern forms of government are not democracies, but either tyrannies or oligarchies, depending on whether they obey the rule of law or not.

At least since the time of Benjamin Constant's famous essay 'On the liberty of the ancients compared to the liberty of the moderns' (1819) it has been recognised that this difference between ancient and modern democracy is the determining factor behind the difference between ancient and modern conceptions of liberty:

[Ancient] liberty consisted in exercising collectively but directly most aspects of ancient sovereignty, deliberating in the public square about war and peace, concluding with foreigners treaties of alliance, voting on laws, pronouncing legal judgments, examining the accounts and the decrees and the decisions of magistrates, making them appear before the assembled people, putting them on trial, condemning or acquitting them. But at the same time that this was what the ancients called liberty, they admitted as compatible with their collective liberty the total subjection of the individual to the authority of the community.

Modern ideas of liberty in contrast privilege the freedom of the individual from interference by a system controlled by the ruling classes. Far from deriving from ancient world conceptions of liberty it is a consequence of centuries of conflict between the various sects of the Christian religion, which resulted in the assertion of the freedom of the individual conscience in religious matters. In the modern age this has become extended beyond the sphere of religion to all aspects of the private life of the individual.

Modern writers have wrestled with these differences between ancient and modern democracy and ancient and modern liberty; Isaiah Berlin for instance tried to distinguish between a positive '*freedom to*' (act), which was more akin to ancient political freedom, and a negative '*freedom from*' (interference) which seemed to him to be exemplified in the modern concept of the freedom of the individual. The most recent attempts to relate ancient and modern ideas of freedom and democracy tend to emphasise the importance of duties or responsibilities in the ancient ideas of community life leading to a constraining of the freedom of the individual, in contrast to the absolute selfishness and the anarchic consequences of modern liberty. In that sense the modern western conceptions of democracy and liberty might well indeed learn the limitations of these ideas from studying the ancient world view.

My reflection is however intended to contrast these two conceptions of history derived from ancient western ideas, with the traditions of history that are found elsewhere. It is clearly not true that these two sets of problems exhaust all the historical possibilities that the long history of human society exemplifies. If we reflect on other world histories, we can see that this western conception has many faults. It does not consider the necessity of order or decorum in the construction of civilizations, or the significance of continuity and tradition, as exemplified for instance in the Chinese tradition.

Even within western culture this dual tradition almost completely ignores one of the most powerful forces in historical formation, the importance of religion and the way that beliefs about the divine world structure and permeate almost all social

systems: after the collapse of the grand nineteenth century theories of universal religion, it was not until J-P Vernant offered a social and psychological interpretation of ancient religion that it escaped from the sterile grip of myth and ritual antiquarianism. Ancient western history has indeed been inclined until very recently to regard ancient religion as unimportant and irrelevant, no doubt partly due to the bias against all forms of polytheism as primitive and faulty representations of a divine world that was only revealed by God through the true religion of Christianity: so, while apparently ignoring religion, ancient western history has also been profoundly conditioned by a negative reaction to the advent of Christianity.

But it is not of course only Christianity that appears to be marginalised by the dominant western conception of ancient history. Another religion has claims to be far older than Christianity, and possesses a complex historical tradition at least as old as the Chinese – Judaism. The question of how Jewish history might be incorporated into ancient history also began as early as the eighteenth century, as a part of the enlightenment revival of the study of history. This built in turn upon a much neglected aspect of the work of the sole surviving Jewish historian in the ancient classical tradition, Josephus. For it was really Josephus who, in his *Jewish Antiquities*, even more than in his account of the Jewish War, set out to normalise the Jewish historical tradition in terms of classical historiography: he was indeed himself an ancient historian, and shared with them many of the political and rational attitudes that made his account compatible with the canons of ancient history. Independently of the holy texts of Judaism and Christianity it was he who made it possible for later generations to compare and contrast the Jewish historical tradition with that of Greece and Rome. In terms of later generations he therefore bridged the gap between sacred and secular

history, and may be regarded as perhaps the most important of all ancient historians for the future of historical writing.

Already in antiquity Josephus was performing this function for the early Christian Church. This explains their interest in copying his works, and even in improving them at a very early date, by interpolating the notorious references to Jesus Christ, his brother James and John the Baptist; by this means Josephus could be made to offer historical support not just to the Old Testament, but also to the Gospel narrative. Josephus has indeed always been more highly regarded in the Christian tradition than in Judaism itself.

Translations of Josephus into the modern European languages were very popular, and especially in Protestant England. At first they were simple translations. The earliest was by Thomas Lodge, the contemporary of Shakespeare in 1602, 'faithfully translated out of the Latin and French'.<sup>2</sup> This was arranged as a continuous historical narrative, from the Antiquities to the Life, the Jewish Wars, Against Apion, and the martyrdom of the Maccabees. Exactly a century later in 1702 Sir Roger L'Estrange offered a new translation, following almost the same order, but with the Life coming after the Jewish Wars and Philo's Legation added to extend the historical account. He added two 'discourses' and several 'remarks', on the veracity and chronology of Josephus.<sup>3</sup> This edition was reprinted in Dundee in 1766.<sup>4</sup> But in the meantime the most popular of all the translations of Josephus, that by William

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<sup>2</sup> The Famous and Memorable Workes of Josephus, A Man of much Honour and Learning Among the Jews. Faithfully translated out of the Latin, and French, by Tho. Lodge, Doctor in Physicke. Humfrey Lownes 1609. First edition 1602 acc to catalogue

<sup>3</sup> The Works of Flavius Josephus: translated into English By Sir Roger L'Estrange, Knight. London Richard Sare 1702

<sup>4</sup> Published by Henry Galbraith, Dundee.

Whiston had been published in 1737. This became the most widely read and most widely owned book after the Bible in the English speaking world for the next two centuries.<sup>5</sup>

Whiston had been the successor of Isaac Newton as Professor of Mathematics at Cambridge, and like Newton he combined an interest in ancient chronology with scriptural scholarship<sup>6</sup> To him Josephus appeared to present a narrative of Jewish history exactly comparable to that found in classical ancient historians, and like his predecessors he arranged his translation of the various works to provide a chronological narrative. But in many later editions of his translation an interesting transformation occurred: the narrative of Josephus was combined with a section usually entitled something like ‘Sequel to the history of the Jews; continued to the present time.’

The first person to realise the possibility of recording a continuous history of Judaism in this manner was the Huguenot antiquary and friend of Pierre Bayle, Jacques Basnage, Sieur de Beauval (1653-1723), who published in 1706-7 in the Netherlands a work that was immediately translated into English with the author’s approval.<sup>7</sup> The English title-page reads:

The History of the Jews from Jesus Christ to the Present Time:  
Containing their Antiquities, their Religion, their Rites. The Dispersion of the  
Ten Tribes in the East, and the Persecutions this Nation has suffered in the  
West. Being a Supplement and Continuation of the History of Josephus.

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<sup>5</sup> The Genuine Works of Flavius Josephus the Jewish Historian. London 1737. The standard bibliography of Josephus by L.H. Feldman claims, but does not list some 217 editions of this translation.

<sup>6</sup> James E. Force Furze, William Whiston Honest Newtonian 2002 ; Memoirs of Life and Works of WW 1753

<sup>7</sup> *L’histoire et la religion des Juifs depuis Jesus-Christ jusqu’à present. Pour servir de supplément et de continuation à l’Histoire de Josèphe* (5 volumes) Rotterdam 1706-7, 1711, 1716.

Written in French by Mr Basnage. Translated into English by Tho. Taylor, A.M. London 1708.<sup>8</sup>

Despite its claim to be a supplement to Josephus, Basnage's work did not include the text of Josephus itself. The earliest edition of Josephus to have combined the two elements in a single volume appears to have been the lavishly illustrated folio of George Henry Maynard, which claims to be a new translation prepared under the royal licence of George III and contains, after the usual works of Josephus and Philo and an appendix defending the authenticity of his references to Christianity, 'a Continuation of the History of the Jews from Josephus down to the present Time Including a Period of more than One thousand seven hundred Years.'<sup>9</sup> The 'Translator's Address to the Reader' ends with the statement:

To compleat the work, we have annexed a Supplement, collected from authentic Manuscripts, bringing down the Jewish History to the present times, which, being an attempt entirely new, we flatter ourselves, will stamp an additional value upon our undertaking, and make it in every respect worthy the patronage of a judicious and candid public.

I say that it appears to be the earliest because there is also a second similarly undated but contemporary illustrated edition by 'Thomas Bradshaw D.D. Late of Emmanuel College Cambridge, Lecturer of Painswick, near Gloucester; Master of the Grammar School of Painswick; Chaplain of Pentonville-Chapel and Afternoon-Preacher of Allhallows-Barking, published by Royal Authority and Act of Parliament.' This similarly claims 'The whole Newly Translated from the Original in the Greek and Hebrew Languages, and Diligently Revised, Corrected, and Compared with other

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<sup>8</sup> There is a copy of this relatively rare work in Balliol College Library. For Basnage see A. Sutcliffe, *Judaism and Enlightenment* (Cambridge 2003) 79-89.

<sup>9</sup> *The Whole Genuine and Complete Works of Flavius Josephus, the learned and authentic Jewish Historian and celebrated Warrior*. Translated from the Original in the Greek Language To which is added Various Useful Indexes also a Continuation of the History of the Jews from Josephus down to the present Time Including a Period of more than One thousand seven hundred Years, by George Henry Maynard, L.L.D. The date of this work is 1785 according to the Harvard University catalogue.

Translations .. to which is added a Continuation of the History of the Jews from the Death of Josephus to the Present Time, including a period of more than 1700 Years.<sup>10</sup> I have not yet investigated the relationship between these two competing editions, but they cannot be independent of each other.

The tradition of updating Josephus to provide a complete history of Judaism continued. In the (again undated) nineteenth century family edition of Whiston's Josephus that I inherited from my grandfather I find that this long sequel of 222 pages terminates with a full account of the debate inside and outside the British Parliament on the Jewish Emancipation Bill of 1847, which was provoked by the election of Lionel de Rothschild as MP for the City of London, and his inability to take up his seat because he would not swear the normal religious oath required of Members of Parliament. The debate was indeed the highpoint for the articulation of English philosemitism; speakers included Lord John Russell the Prime Minister, Gladstone, Disraeli, Sir Robert Peel and Lord Ashley the evangelical Zionist (who surprisingly spoke against the Bill). The Bill passed in the Commons by a majority of 73 (277 votes to 204) but was rejected by the House of Lords, and Rothschild did not take up his post until another election success in 1858.<sup>11</sup> It was however the debate in 1847-8 that saw the most memorable and thoughtful speeches. Since it does not mention the final triumph of Rothschild I deduce that my family edition was published between 1848 and 1858. It would indeed be an interesting study to follow the successive stages of this conception of the continuity of Jewish history under the protection of Josephus.

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<sup>10</sup> The date of this work is given as [1792?] in the Harvard catalogue.

<sup>11</sup> There is an excellent account of the Jewish Question from 1833 to 1858 in Gertrud Himmelfarb, *The People of the Book: Philosemitism in England from Cromwell to Churchill* (New York 2011) ch. III.

The first modern Jewish history was not therefore as revolutionary as it might have seemed, for it built on this tradition. H.H. Milman's three volume work *The History of the Jews* of 1830 begins, like Josephus, with Moses, and in its earlier stages is essentially a rationalistic account of his narrative and the Old Testament.<sup>12</sup> For the later period, Milman disparages Basnage and prefers the German Jewish historian Isaac Jost.<sup>13</sup> Milman's work was published contemporaneously with the earliest English translations of the new German scientific histories of the ancient classical world by August Boeckh (1828), B.G. Niebuhr (1828-32) and C.O. Müller (1830).<sup>14</sup> Milman was a close friend of many of the translators who were responsible for these works, and his book is (as his first reviewers saw) an early product of the new interest in German critical history and theology that came to be known as the Higher Criticism. Although his History was generally welcomed in orthodox Jewish circles, it caused an immense scandal in the English Protestant community because it applied rational historical principles to the narrative of a sacred text: the ideas that Abraham was a simple Arab sheikh and that the Jews were a Palestinian tribe fighting for their existence among hostile neighbours were simply too much to accept. The publisher was forced to abandon the series that Milman's book was intended to inaugurate, and Milman himself remained theologically suspect for the rest of his distinguished career: a liberal churchman, who compounded doubts about his orthodoxy when he edited the standard nineteenth century edition of Gibbon, he never rose beyond the status of Dean of Canterbury. Ultimately of course Milman's History, revised to take

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<sup>12</sup> I have used primarily the second edition, also of 1830, which seems to differ in only minor details from the first. Milman revised his text for the 1863 edition, shortly before his death in 1868; this is most easily available in the Everyman's Library.

<sup>13</sup> *Geschichte der Israeliten seit der Zeit der Maccabäer*. For the verdict see Milman vol III p. 158f: 'We differ from Jost, who is a pupil of Eichhorn, on many points, particularly the composition of the older Scriptures, but we gladly bear testimony to the high value of his work, which, both in depth of research and arrangement, is far superior to the desultory, and by no means trustworthy, volumes of Basnage.'

<sup>14</sup> On these see my account in the *History of Oxford University*.

account of later German scholarship, became the standard narrative history of the Jews in English, and remained in print for most of the twentieth century.<sup>15</sup>

Milman defends his approach in the introduction to the third volume of the first edition, and again towards the end of his life in the preface to the edition of 1863:

What should be the treatment by a Christian writer, a writer to whom truth is the one paramount object, of the only documents on which rests the earlier history of the Jews, the Scriptures of the Old Testament? Are they, like other historical documents, to be submitted to calm but searching criticism as to their age, their authenticity, their authorship; above all, their historical sense and historical interpretation? ... (Everyman edn. p. 4)

Lawgivers, prophets, apostles, were in all other respects men of like passions (take the word in its vulgar sense) with their fellow-men; they were men of their age and country, who, as they spoke the language, so they thought the thoughts of their nation and their time, clothed those thoughts in the imagery, and illustrated them from the circumstances of their daily life. They had no special knowledge on any subject but moral and religious truth to distinguish them from other men; were as fallible as others on all questions of science, and even of history, extraneous to their religious teaching....

This seems throughout to have been the course of providential government: lawgivers, prophets, apostles, were advanced in religious knowledge alone. In all other respects society, civilisation, developed itself according to its usual laws, The Hebrew in the wilderness, excepting as far as the Law modified his manners and habits, was an Arab of the Desert. Abraham, excepting in his worship and intercourse with the One True God, was a nomad Sheik. The simple and natural tenor of these lives is one of the most impressive guarantees of the truth of the record. (ibid p.7-8)

But problems always remained. While allowing for the insertion of Jewish history into the prevailing conceptions of the progress of civilisation, and for the possibility of comparisons such as Moses with Solon, it was not entirely possible to reconcile the principles of Jewish history with those adopted in the new scientific history of ancient Greece and Rome. Even discarding miracles and the direct intervention of God in history in favour of a rational approach, there remained two

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<sup>15</sup> The preface to the 1863 edition lists a number of more recent writers that Milman has used (Everyman edn. pp16-28).

fundamental problems. Throughout the long tradition of Sacred History the Jews had been regarded as the Chosen People, and their history was the history of the fulfilment of God's covenant to grant them the Promised Land. These were in turn justified in Christian terms by their divine role in producing the Messiah. Christian writers could of course escape from these aspects of the Jewish tradition by claiming that the failure of the Jews to recognise the Messiah had caused them to pass on their special status as chosen people to the Christian community, and they had thereby forfeited their right to a promised land. But it nevertheless made it extremely difficult to produce a historical account that would enable Judaism to be directly compared with Greece and Rome. And Milman himself believed in the divine dispensation of human history: he ends with the declaration:

History, which is the record of the Past has now discharged its office: it presumes not to raise the mysterious veil which the Almighty has spread over the Future. The destinies of this wonderful people, as of all mankind, are in the hands of the All-Wise Ruler of the Universe; his decrees will be accomplished, his truth, his goodness, and his wisdom vindicated. (vol III p. 424)

Milman did his best to create a modern scientific version of history from the biblical tradition, explaining the interventions of God on rationalistic principles and even playing down the historical significance of the Crucifixion to the same extent as the (interpolated) narrative of Josephus:

We leave to the Christian historian the description of this event, and all its consequences – inestimable in their importance to mankind, but which produced hardly any *immediate* effect on the affairs of the Jewish nation. Yet our history will have shown that the state of the public mind in Judaea, as well as the character of Pilate, the chief agent in the transaction, harmonize in the most remarkable manner with the narrative of the Evangelists. (vol. II p 158)

The crucifixion, despite the earthquake and unnatural solar darkness that accompanied it according to the gospel narratives, created no more perturbation than the fall of Icarus in Brueghel's famous painting.

Milman had of course many fewer problems to contend with than either his predecessors or his twentieth century successors. He could leave behind the notion that the sufferings of the Jews in the Diaspora were a consequence of their refusal to recognise Christ, and admire the Jewish community for its tenacity and its ability to overcome persecution; he could welcome the new era of mutual tolerance and even assimilation of 19<sup>th</sup> century western Europe. The future, fortunately for him, as he says was 'in the hands of the All-Wise Ruler of the Universe'. To him classical history and Jewish history were indeed flowing together, and comparison was simply a question of selection from tradition. But how does Milman's problem seem now? What sort of Jewish history do we want to write today, and how far will it be compatible with the dominant conception of a secular Greco-Roman history? These are the problems with which my teacher Arnaldo Momigliano wrestled throughout his life.

Before we consider this question we need also to recall a quite different tradition of the writing of Jewish history, that which arose out of the needs of the Jewish community to understand its own past. In his early editions Milman had already recognised the importance, if only as a source, of the work of Isaac Jost, and he refers in the preface to the edition of 1863 (p.20) to other recent works of Jewish scholars. But he was scarcely aware of the profound reinterpretation of Jewish history that emerged in the age of Romanticism amid the struggles between the various

traditions of German Judaism. In 1846 the young Heinrich Graetz published his famous manifesto ‘Die Construction der jüdischen Geschichte’<sup>16</sup> and in 1853 began his multi-volume *History of the Jews* with volume 4 on the period 70-500 C.E.: ‘Another history of the Jews’ said Leopold Zunz, the eminent rabbinic scholar – ‘But this time a Jewish history,’ Graetz replied.

In starting his enterprise from the destruction of the Temple by the Roman authorities, Graetz indicated a new interpretation of Jewish history based on the concept of the Diaspora, which made it fundamentally different from the standard histories of other peoples. His narrative was to combine the political story of the persecutions of the Jews with the history of their inner life, which in the spirit of Maimonides revolved around their moral or divine mission to uphold the true principle of monotheism against their Christian persecutors.

The Christian conception of history, as is well known, fully denies to Judaism any history, in the higher sense of the word, since the loss of its national independence, an event which coincided with another of great importance to the Christian world structure.<sup>17</sup>

In contrast, Graetz proclaims the idea of history as the story of a cultural or spiritual mission:

There is scarcely a science, an art, an intellectual province in which Jews have not taken a part, for which Jews have not manifested an equal aptitude. To think was as much a characteristic feature of the Jews as to suffer.<sup>18</sup>

History still has not produced another case of a nation which has laid aside its weapons of war to devote itself entirely to the peaceful pursuits of study and poetry, which has freed itself from the bonds of narrow self-interest

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<sup>16</sup> Translated with an important preface and other material in Ismar Schorsch, *Heinrich Graetz, The Structure of Jewish History and Other Essays* (New York 1975), from which I take the following translations.

<sup>17</sup> *o.c.* p. 93.

<sup>18</sup> Introduction to vol. 4 of the *History*, *o.c.* p. 126.

and let its thoughts soar to fathom its own nature and its mysterious relationship to the universe and God.<sup>19</sup>

And on the completion of his *History* in 1874 he reflected on the twin legacy of western history in Hellenism and Hebraism:

The classical Greeks are dead, and toward the deceased posterity behaves properly. Envy and hatred are silent at the grave of the dead; their contributions are, in fact, usually exaggerated. It is quite different with that other creative nation, the Hebrews. Precisely because they're still alive their contributions to culture are not generally acknowledged; they are criticized, or given another name to partially conceal their authorship or to dislodge them entirely. Even if the fair-minded concede that they introduced the monotheistic idea and a higher morality into the life of nations, very few appreciate the great significance of these admissions. They fail to consider why one creative nation with its rich talents perished, whereas the other, so often on the brink of death, still wanders over the earth having rejuvenated itself several times.<sup>20</sup>

Graetz concludes by characterising the Jewish tradition:

The history of the Israelite nation manifests, therefore, at the beginning a thoroughly irregular pattern. Two factors determine its rise and fall, a physical and spiritual one, or a political and a religious-ethical one.<sup>21</sup>

Thus Graetz's *History* has a dual structure, as a celebration of Jewish philosophy and learning, but also a history of a religious culture surviving persecution. Despite the romantic language of its formulation and the somewhat unsatisfactory nature of his essentially biographical narrative, this alternative vision of the meaning of ancient history surely deserves more attention than it is given today as a future direction for the study of world ancient history. At the start of the fateful age of the creation of national histories as national myths, Jewish history liberated itself; in this respect it stands alongside the earlier Enlightenment traditions of Greek and Roman ancient history, but it transcends them in offering a new sort of history based on the cultural life of the spirit. No wonder this escape from the political history so

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<sup>19</sup> Introduction to vol 5 of the *History*, *o.c.* p. 136

<sup>20</sup> Introduction to vol 1, *o.c.* p. 175.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.* p. 187.

dominant in second half of the nineteenth century earned in 1879 the wrath of the most extreme of the German nationalist historians, Heinrich Treitschke.<sup>22</sup>

What is revealed by reflecting on the presuppositions of the western traditions of ancient history is the extent to which the modern western world has continually developed a myth of the past in order to justify contemporary preoccupations. That is of course true of all history that is not pure antiquarianism, but it is important to know why we think in this particular way in order to understand that it is not the only way that world history can be structured. And when we westerners criticise other historical political traditions for their inability to translate, or understand or even to see as important, concepts like liberty and democracy, we should remember that these are not transcendental human values. The western tradition of ancient world history rests on the 18<sup>th</sup> century foundations established by the Enlightenment, that combined imperialism with democracy and the free market economy of Adam Smith to create a western interpretation of history; to this it married a Judaeo-Christian tradition of a religion capable of being translated into rational history because it was ultimately based on historical narrative rather than myth. But the example of Graetz suggests that this dominant western view is not the only way to structure ancient history. Perhaps the 21<sup>st</sup> century will enable us to construct a new vision of ancient world history that is inclusive of other cultures like China and the Near East, and is not based solely on western European values.

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<sup>22</sup> Graetz's emphasis on the centrality of the Diaspora is perhaps no longer in fashion. In the modern post-holocaust world, Jewish history may be turning back from this cultural interpretation of the Jewish tradition to a form of national historiography based on that evolved by its persecutors in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in a search for a political myth based on the Promised Land.

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