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Dmitri Levitin studied History at Selwyn College, Cambridge as an undergraduate between 2004 and 2007, going on to do an MPhil in Political Thought and Intellectual History. His PhD (2008-10) entitled 'Histories of philosophy in England, c.1650-1700', is now being prepared for publication as a monograph. In 2010 he was appointed to a Research Fellowship at Trinity College, Cambridge.

His research interests are in all aspects of intellectual culture from c.1580 to c.1750, with a particular focus on the history of scholarship and the interaction of humanism with other intellectual disciplines (especially natural philosophy), on church-state relations, and on what the historiography commonly labels the 'early enlightenment'. This paper is the first product of a second monograph project, provisionally entitled *Sacred history, confessional dispute, and the republic of letters: scholarship and intellectual change in Europe, c.1580-1750*.

## Publications

*Ancient wisdom in the age of the new science: Histories of philosophy in England, c.1650-1700* (in preparation)

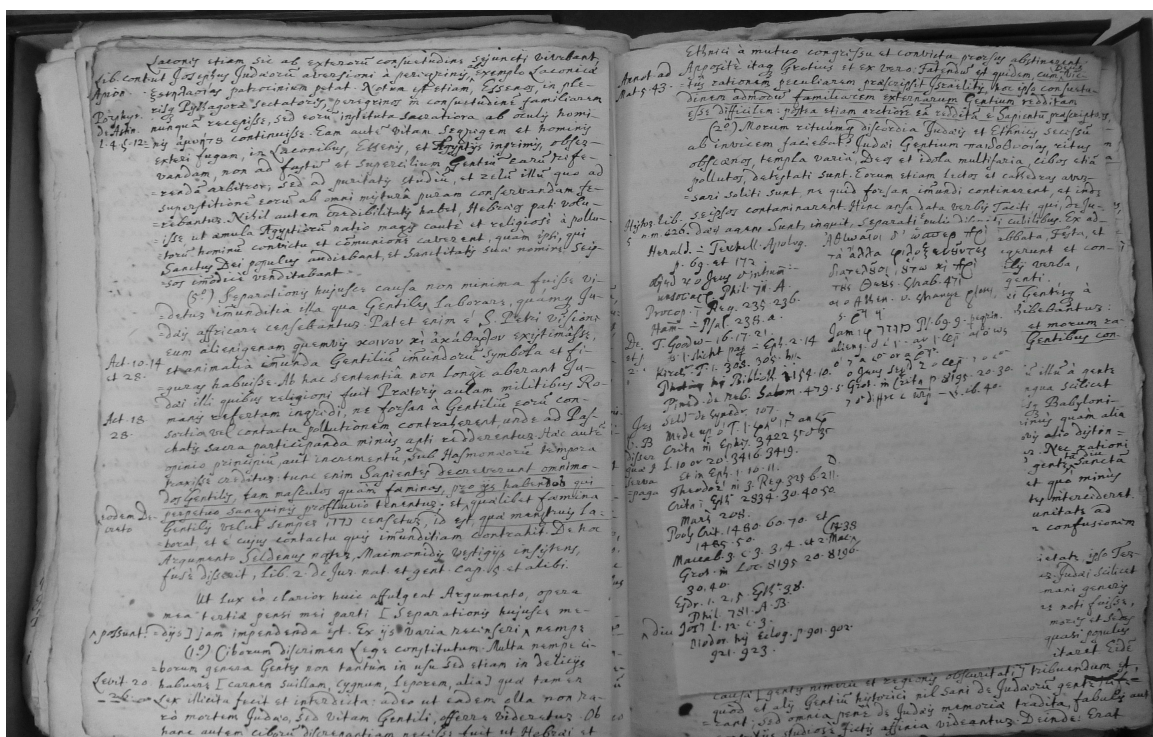
'Some new sources and contexts for the *De legibus Hebraeorum* (1685) of John Spencer, father of 'enlightened' sacred history' (forthcoming)

'The experimentalist as humanist: Robert Boyle on the history of philosophy' (under review)

'John Locke', in *The Oxford Guide to the Historical Reception of Augustine*, ed. Karla Pollmann (forthcoming, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

'Matthew Tindal's *Rights of the Christian Church* (1706) and the Church-State Relationship', *Historical Journal* 54 (2011), pp.717-740. [[Cambridge Journals](#)]

'Reconsidering John Sergeant's Attacks on Locke's *Essay*', *Intellectual History Review* 20 (2010), pp.457-77. [[Informaworld](#)]



Spencer's autograph version of a new chapter for *De legibus* (CUL Adv.a.44.12). Note the loose sheet, clearly derived from a commonplace book. The significance of such working methods for interpretation of the work is discussed at pp.2-3 of the paper.

## SEMINAR INTRODUCTION

From Toland to Diderot, Giannone to Rousseau, some of the major figures of the European 'high enlightenment' were convinced that they had the answer to the problem of the history of the ancient Hebrews. The people of the Old Testament were primitive, brutish and nomadic, their place in history massively overplayed by previous generations. Most important, all agreed, was the fact that Hebrew religion was derived from pagan cults, especially those of the Egyptians. But this narrative was not born in the eighteenth century: it was the fruit of the scholarly labours of two Restoration Englishmen, John Marsham and John Spencer. This paper is a reconsideration of the latter's vast masterpiece, *De legibus Hebraeorum* (1685). The last twenty years have seen a rekindling of interest in Spencer and in early modern sacred history more generally. Spencer has been presented as a radically innovative figure, the father of the idea that sacred traditions had intermingled with the profane. This has been explained in two ways: either by presenting Spencer as a brilliant scholarly innovator who single-handedly invented the discipline of the history of religion, or by claiming that Spencer was a closet heretic, specifically a Socinian, and that his approach stemmed from a desire to minimise the theological importance of the Mosaic Law. Both interpretations thus share in the belief that Spencer's work was the manifestation of enlightened rationalism. Through examining Spencer's working methods, sources, intellectual networks and extra-scholarly intentions, it emerges that these conclusions require serious modification. For the Egypt-Hebrew connection he had important precedents in late-Renaissance discussions. For the principle that sacred traditions were commonly incorporated into the sacred he drew on several long-forgotten sources, of which the majority were – very interestingly – Catholic. And for his polemical ambitions, we need to look not to the world of clandestine heterodox rationalism, but to the ecclesiological and theological debates of Restoration England. Spencer's importance to eighteenth-century thinkers means that this reconsideration opens an avenue for re-analysing the nature of 'early enlightenment' sacred history: this is done in the conclusion (pp.32-35) of the paper, and will be done at length in the seminar, where I shall consider the important recent interpretation by J.G.A. Pocock, amongst others. It will be suggested that the categories of 'conservative' and 'radical' enlightenment are inappropriate for charting the developments within early modern historiography of religion.

### Select Bibliography

#### *On Spencer*

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Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge [MA], 1997), pp.55-79.

Martin Mulsow, 'Orientalistik im Kontext der sozinianischen und deistischen Debatten um 1700. Spencer, Crell, Locke und Newton', in *Scientia Poetica* 2 (1998), pp.27-57

Fausto Parente, 'Spencer, Maimonides, and the History of Religion', in *History of Scholarship*, eds, C.R. Ligota & J.-L. Quantin (Oxford, 2006), pp.277-304

#### *On sacred history and enlightenment*

J.G.A. Pocock, *Barbarism and Religion: Volume 5, Religion: The First Triumph* (Cambridge, 2011)

Adam Sutcliffe, *Judaism and Enlightenment* (Cambridge, 2003)

J.A.I. Champion, *The Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken: The Church of England and its enemies 1660-1730* (Cambridge, 1992)

#### *On 17<sup>th</sup> century sacred history and Christian Hebraism*

Anthony Grafton and Joanna Weinberg, *"I have always loved the Holy Tongue": Isaac Casaubon, the Jews, and a Forgotten Chapter in Renaissance Scholarship* (Cambridge [MA], 2011)

Aaron L. Katchen, *Christian Hebraists and Dutch Rabbis: Seventeenth Century Apologetics and the Study of Maimonides' Mishneh Torah* (Cambridge [MA], 1984)

Jonathan Sheehan, 'Sacred and Profane: Idolatry, Antiquarianism and the Polemics of Distinction in the Seventeenth Century', *Past & Present* 192 (2006), pp.35-66