

Orthodoxy

Then and Now

BECOMING ORTHODOX: THE STORY OF A DENOMINATIONAL LABEL

Jeffrey C. Blutinger

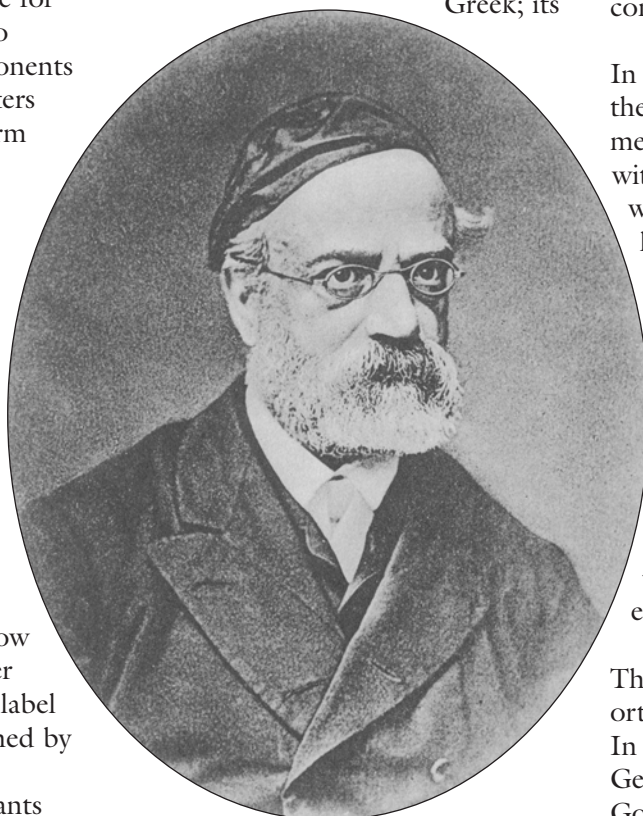
In the middle of the nineteenth century, a strange debate broke out over who was to blame for the use of the label *orthodox* to describe the traditionalist opponents of Reform. Liberal Jewish writers would generally qualify the term with words such as “*die sogenannte*,” or “*die heisige Orthodoxen*”—i.e. the “so-called orthodox”—as a condescending way of calling into question the idea that their opponents were actually “right-believing.” At the same time, leading opponents of the reformers, such as S. R. Hirsch, noted that the traditionalists resented the use of the term *orthodox*, and rightly so. So how did this come to pass? How did a term that refers to proper belief come to be applied as a label for a denomination distinguished by practice? How did a concept developed by German Protestants come to be used as a way of differentiating German Jews?

As with most of the rhetoric used by German Jews, the term *orthodox* originated with German Christians. The word entered German from the Greek; its

German-root equivalent, *rechtgläubig* (true or correct belief), was used by German Protestants to refer to those who held to the canonical works and doctrines. Those who departed from conformity with the teachings of the church were called *heterodox*, whose German-root equivalent was “*irrgläubig*” (erroneous belief or heresy). By the seventeenth century, the label “Lutheran orthodoxy” had come to mean a dogmatic biblicism.

In the eighteenth century, however, these terms underwent a shift in meaning. Enlightenment thinkers, with their new ideas and new writings, were quickly labeled *heterodox*, while those opposed to them remained *orthodox*. Although Enlightenment thinkers accepted these labels, they shifted the valence of the words: *heterodox* took on a positive connotation, while *orthodox* took on a negative one. It was in this new sense that these words entered into the vocabulary of Jewish enlightenment figures in Germany.

The first Jew to use the term *orthodox* was Moses Mendelssohn. In 1755, he wrote a letter to the German Enlightenment writer, Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, asking if a Dr. Baumgarten—who was “a strong metaphysicist” yet had



Portrait of Samson Raphael Hirsch. Reprinted from S. A. Hirsch, *A Book of Essays* (London: Macmillan & Co., Limited, 1905).

“greatly praised” Lessing—“was really orthodox, or does he just pretend so.” Baumgarten’s enthusiasm for Lessing, and therefore by implication for the Enlightenment, was difficult to square with his apparent orthodoxy.

When Mendelssohn published *Jerusalem* in 1783, he told Herz Homberg that the book’s “character is of such a sort which neither orthodox nor heterodox people of either nation expect.” Thus, what he was saying was that Jews and non-Jews, both those opposed to the Enlightenment and those who supported it, would be surprised by his book. The following year, Mendelssohn expanded on this theme when he wrote that his “ideas of Judaism cannot, in actuality, satisfy either the orthodox or the heterodox.” Again, the key element here is that the terms orthodoxy and heterodoxy refer to one’s intellectual world, not the world of practice.

Jewish opponents of Mendelssohn and the Enlightenment were referred to by both Jewish and non-Jewish Enlightenment thinkers as orthodox. In 1784, for example, Karl Gotthelf Lessing wrote to Mendelssohn concerning community opposition to *Jerusalem*, which he described as consisting of “a few orthodox Jewish elders” who were “pushing the matter.” Following Mendelssohn’s death, there were frequent references to “orthodox Jews” in his obituaries, including a description of Mendelssohn’s opponents as “orthodox Talmudists,” and a note that his translation of the Psalms “found no reception among the orthodox.” In each case, the term was used to refer to Jews who

opposed Enlightenment thought, not a separate denomination.

One of the most striking uses of this meaning of the word orthodox is in Solomon Maimon’s autobiography. Published in 1792, it describes the

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ignorance of Polish Jews, yet it is only in his account of his life in Germany that Maimon used the term orthodox. The word appears in two separate incidents. The first was when Maimon, attempting to enter Berlin, was stopped at the gate. He spoke of his intention to study medicine, and during the conversation showed the Jewish representative his copy of Maimonides’s *Guide for the Perplexed*. The representative, whom Maimon described as “a zealot in his orthodoxy,” rushed to inform the town elders of Maimon’s “heretical mode of thinking.” These leaders suspected that Maimon intended to devote himself “to the sciences in general” and that “the orthodox Jews looked upon [this] as something dangerous to religion and good morals,” and so he was turned away. The second incident occurred when Maimon’s wife, along with her son, arrived in Germany seeking a divorce. Maimon took the opportunity to try to enlighten his son, but Maimon’s wife went to “consult some orthodox Jews,” who advised her to proceed with her divorce and to shield her son from Maimon’s influence.

In both these cases, the word orthodox is only used in a *German* context. The only orthodox Jews that Maimon describes are in Germany, and in each case, what makes them orthodox is their opposition to Enlightenment thought. That Maimon did not view orthodoxy as a denominational label can be seen from the striking fact that Maimon only uses the term in a *German* context, never a Polish one. This eighteenth-century German-Jewish use of orthodoxy

paralleled the contemporaneous usage of “*mitnagdim*” in Poland. Both terms derived their meaning from their opposition to another group, whether to the Enlightenment in Germany or to the Hasidic movement in eastern Europe. As there was no Hasidic movement in Germany, there were no *mitnagdim* there to oppose it; in the same way, since there was no Enlightenment in Poland (in Maimon’s opinion), there were no and *could be no* orthodox Jews there to oppose it. Only in Germany, the center of the Enlightenment, could there be found orthodox Jewish opponents.

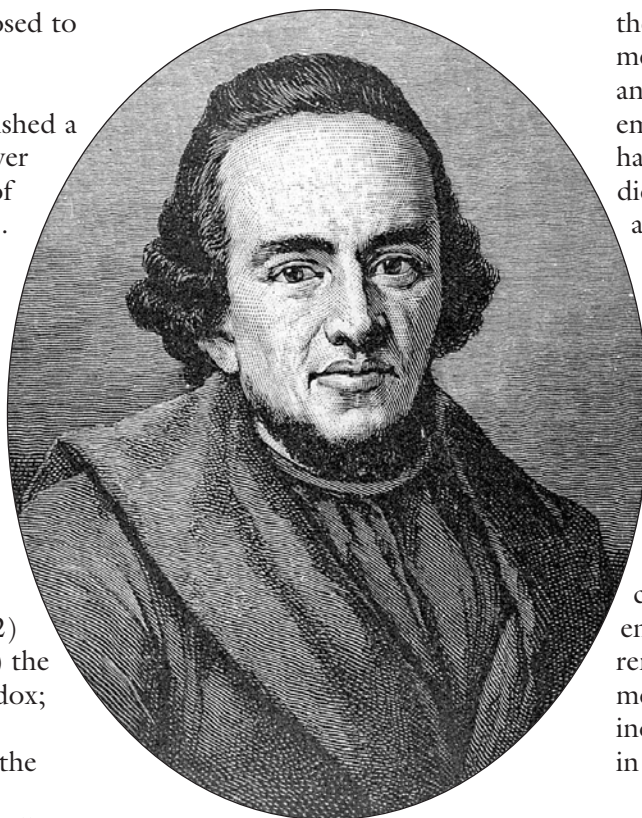
As the nature of Jewish debate changed in the nineteenth century, the meaning of the terms similarly began to shift. In the early 1800s, some Jewish Enlightenment figures began to advocate changes in religious practices. The term “heterodox” was expanded at this time to cover these developments, while its opposite, “orthodox,” was similarly modified to emphasize the opposition to these changes. It is at this point that orthodox began to lose its primary meaning of one opposed to the ideas of the Enlightenment and take on its

modern meaning of one opposed to change in religious practice.

A remarkable document published a few years ago by Michael Meyer nicely captures this moment of terminological transformation. This previously unpublished manuscript was written in the 1810s and was sent to the Prussian minister of religion, apparently as part of an effort to influence the government's Jewish policy. The author divided the German-Jewish community into four groups—two orthodox and two heterodox: (1) the educated orthodox; (2) the uneducated orthodox; (3) the educated, enlightened heterodox; and (4) the uneducated, enlightened heterodox. Both the author's distinctions between orthodox and heterodox, as well as the differences among them, point to significant shifts in the terms' meanings.

The first term, educated orthodox, would have been oxymoronic a generation earlier, while the second term, uneducated orthodox, would have been seen as redundant. Here, however, the author treated the former (by whom he meant Talmud specialists) rather sympathetically, reserving his scorn for the latter, who had "marred the religion with an unfounded outward devoutness and pseudo-piety."

In contrast to these two groups of orthodox Jews were the heterodox Jews. The educated, enlightened heterodox were the smallest of these



Portrait of Moses Mendelssohn.
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four groups and were those who, through the study of good writings and real contemplation, had become truly enlightened. Here again, the term would not have been intelligible to an eighteenth-century

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reader. These are people, he wrote, who tried to imitate the truly enlightened, but only read modern works in order to lead themselves to impiety.

What is striking about this text is

the way it contains both the older meanings of the terms heterodox and orthodox, as well as the emerging new ones. So on the one hand, the author continued the dichotomy between enlightenment and orthodoxy, yet on the other hand, orthodox Jews are characterized not so much by their opposition to enlightenment thought but by their traditional forms of religious practice. So, too, what is distinctive about heterodox Jews is not so much their enlightenment, but their lax religious practice. Finally, the category of uneducated, enlightened heterodox was only rendered possible by expanding the meaning of the word heterodox to include those who did not engage in traditional religious practices.

By the 1830s, the older meanings of heterodox and orthodox had all but disappeared; heterodox now referred to those who advocated religious reform, while orthodox referred to those who opposed it. Leopold Zunz, for example, in his 1832 survey of the history of the synagogue service, only used the

term orthodox after describing the establishment of the Seesen, Berlin, and Hamburg Temples. "These early reform temples," Zunz wrote, "were opposed by the so-called orthodox portion of the community." Here, the term orthodox has entirely lost its original meaning of opposition to the Enlightenment, and only denoted opposition to changes in religious practice. As a result, there was now a clear disconnect between

the meaning of the term, “right belief,” and the group to which it was applied, distinguished by a claim of right practice, which is why it was possible for Zunz to call them “so-called orthodox.”

By the 1840s, this terminology had acquired its current connotations. Jewish reformers attacked traditionalists for ascribing to themselves the claim of “right believing,” while traditionalists rebutted the aspersions. In fact, however, traditionalists also adopted this label for themselves so that the newspaper *Der Treu Zions-Wächter* described itself as “the organ for the defense of the interests of orthodox Jewry,” and even Hirsch himself

used the term on occasion.

In this way, a term first used by German Lutherans to refer to those who held firm to church dogmas came to be used by German Jews as a label for those who opposed changes to traditional Jewish practice. When Jewish Enlightenment thinkers first adopted the term from the German Enlightenment, they had no problem applying it to Jews who opposed Enlightenment thought. But as the nature of the debate among German Jews changed from one about new ideas to one about new practices, the word continued to be used, even though neither side felt comfortable with it. Both

reformers and the orthodox were aware that the word referred to proper belief, but they had become trapped by nearly a century of prior use and were unable to break free.

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