



PROJECT MUSE®

---

Isaac La Peyrère (1596-1676): His Life, Work, and Influence  
(review)

Lenn Evan Goodman

Journal of the History of Philosophy, Volume 29, Number 1, January 1991,  
pp. 131-135 (Review)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/hph.1991.0024>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/226330/summary>

in justifying the rationality of Cartesian science, this is a possibility which he would do well to try to foreclose.

LYNN S. JOY

*University of Notre Dame*

Richard H. Popkin, *Isaac La Peyrère (1596–1676): His Life, Work, and Influence*. Leiden: Brill, 1987. Pp. x + 241. \$56.25.

Readers of the *Journal of the History of Philosophy* have long known the broad scope and distinctive style of Richard Popkin, combining narrative élan with a sleuth's tenacity and keen nose for significant detail. It was Popkin, for example, who brought to light the racist theses of Hume and Kant (in *The High Road to Pyrrhonism*). In recent years he has turned from the history of philosophical scepticism to that of the millenarian movements which played a remarkable role in his beloved seventeenth century, delving, for instance, into the significance of Isaac Newton's long engagement with the study of history as evidence of God's providential governance of the world,<sup>1</sup> and, in a forthcoming essay,<sup>2</sup> showing how early readers of Spinoza's *Ethica* found kabbalistic themes in his response to Cartesian dualism. Here he traces the life and thought of Isaac La Peyrère, and the fate of the idea he made famous: the thesis that Adam was not the ancestor of all humanity.

Isaac was born in Bordeaux to a wealthy Calvinist couple, quite possibly of Marrano origin. Suspected of heretical notions while still a young attorney and practically a newlywed, he was cleared after the intervention of some sixty pastors called on by his family to attest to his good character and sound doctrine. By 1640 the family influence and his own good report brought him to Paris as secretary to the Prince de Condé, whose coterie included Mersenne, Gassendi, La Mothe le Vayer, Pascal, Grotius, and probably Thomas Hobbes. Stimulated by his conversations with the Prince and this illustrious circle, he wrote a book, dedicated to Richelieu, who "carefully" saw that it was banned. Mersenne showed the manuscript around, and Grotius refuted the unpublished claim that the inhabitants of America were not of the seed of Adam, by arguing that Northmen had found their way to America and populated the land. He referred to La Peyrère's thesis obliquely as what "one in France lately dreamed" and called it "a great danger imminent to religion."

Setting aside his "prae-Adamite" preoccupation for the time, La Peyrère diligently extracted an equally controversial claim from his manuscript and published *Du Rapel des Juifs* anonymously in 1643, the year of Richelieu's death. The book argues kabbalis-

<sup>1</sup> See "Newton's Biblical Theology and His Theological Physics," in P. B. Scheurer and G. Debrock, eds., *Newton's Scientific and Philosophical Legacy* (Boston: Kluwer, 1988), 81–97; Isaac Newton, *The Chronology of Ancient Kingdoms Amended* (London, 1728) and *Observations upon the Prophecies of Daniel and the Apocalypse of St. John* (London, 1733).

<sup>2</sup> "Spinoza, Neoplatonic Kabbalist?" in L. E. Goodman, ed., *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, (SUNY Press, forthcoming).

tically that God's "recall" of the Jews will take place in France and will be followed by their return to Palestine, led by the King of France, who will rule the world from a rebuilt Jerusalem, ushering in the Messianic Age. No antichrist is mentioned, and no attempt is made to calculate the date of the epochal events. But a rabbi in Constantinople reportedly had said that a future king of France had been born in 1588. That was the year of birth of the Prince de Condé's father. Small wonder that La Peyrère showed no interest in the messianic claims of Sabbatai Sevi.<sup>3</sup>

La Peyrère's heretical theses were ingeniously strung together. The Hebrew Bible tells the story not of humanity at large, but only of the Jews. Thus Adam was the ancestor of the Jews, and the rest of humanity had their own descent. The once-chosen people had fallen from grace (thus their historic sufferings), but would be restored. The awaited conversion of the Jews would be accomplished not in apocalyptic wars but by the abandonment of their persecution and the theological reformation of Christianity, so that Jews could see the congruence of its true content with Judaism.

Traveling to Sweden as a supernumerary of a French delegation, La Peyrère met Ole Worm in Stockholm, who became his fast friend and welcome listener, giving him the details about Iceland and Greenland that would enable him to answer Grotius and would make him an authority whose work on those locales would be reprinted until the mid-nineteenth century. The crucial fact for La Peyrère was that the Vikings encountered Eskimos in their voyages west: If the Americans descended from the Northmen, whence came the Eskimos?

Returning to France via Holland, La Peyrère met Claude Saumaise, from whom he learned enough about ancient pagan chronologies to motivate him to rewrite his prae-Adamite thesis completely, working feverishly while serving the young Prince de Condé after the death of his stalwart old patron, hiding out with the young prince in Belgium, and continuing to write in the respites of his delicate diplomatic work in Spain (where Protestants, let alone Judaizers, were still very much subject to the Inquisition, and a diplomatic Protestant was at best to be accommodated as a rare and potentially dangerous curiosity) and in England, where he nearly died of some illness. The diplomatic efforts might almost have borne fruit in a marriage between the prince and Princess Christina of Sweden, the fairy-tale princess who had been imprisoned during the Thirty Years' War, rescued by her faithful general after the death of her father, Gustavus Adolphus, and placed on the throne. La Peyrère went to Antwerp to arrange the etiquette of her meeting with the prince, found her taking instruction in Catholicism, offering sponsorship to Menasseh ben Israel to publish his *Hope of Israel* (which entertains the hypothesis that the Indians of America might have some connection with the lost tribes of Israel and thus that their discovery might herald the ingathering of Israel promised in the Messianic Age), and offering high rewards to anyone who could produce a copy of *De tribus impostoribus* for her. Popkin only half jokingly suggests the rewards might actually have stimulated the composition of the work. Christina and Menasseh were fascinated by La Peyrère's ideas. Menasseh stoutly rejected prae-

<sup>3</sup> For whom, see Gershom Scholem, *Sabbatai Sevi: The Mystical Messiah*, tr. R. J. Zwi Werblowsky (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1973).

Adamism, but liked the philo-semitic messianism; the newly Catholic princess urged La Peyrère to publish his work in Holland and probably underwrote the expenses.

In 1655 five editions of *Prae-Adamitae* appeared, three by Elsevier. Condemned on all sides, the book put a noose around its author's neck, and when the Bishop denounced it in Namur, where La Peyrère was living, thirty armed men hauled him off to prison. He stood by his guns until it was clear that even his prince could not protect him, and then, much like Sabbatai Sevi, made his escape from the trap he had drawn about himself by the expedient of conversion. Appealing to the pope, who had laughed out loud on reading the book, La Peyrère wrote an intricate recantation, in which he held that Calvinism had misled him into believing that reason was adequate to the understanding of Scripture. He might have held by his error indefinitely, had he not seen the need for authority in faith and come to Rome to take the pope as his guide. To the end of his days La Peyrère maintained that no convincing argument had ever been brought against prae-Adamism by its many refuters; only papal authority showed its untenability. He had to resist some provocations, lest he seem to protest too much, but in the end he held that what really mattered was the heuristic power of the thesis and the historic reconciliation he saw as its outcome, between Jews and Gentiles, the restoration of the Jews, as he had called it, in which humanity would be united in a world of peace, and in which, now, La Peyrère found an appropriately grand role for the pope.

Declining the offer of a benefice from that great settler of human doubts, La Peyrère retired, a widower, evidently, as a lay member of the Oratorian Seminary at Paris, where he ended his days still following up leads: the Sabaeans mentioned by Maimonides had traditions that Adam had a father; others reported that he had died of gout, an inherited disease. The Oratorian Richard Simon, who wrote La Peyrère's life soon after he died, said that all his last days were devoted to studying Scripture to strengthen his vision of the end of days. And the claim in a way was true, for La Peyrère's vision of redemption was of a piece with his vision of human history.

To the great philosophers of his age, to have a philosophy was to have a world view, not in our etiolated sense, but a cosmology, a geodesy, a view of time and space, in the grand sense that Plato's *Timaeus* paradigmatically proposes, and a view of history, in the equally universal sense that the Hebrew Bible proposes. Thus the great book that Descartes never published in full was *On the World*, following the rays of light from the heavens to the eye of man and their contact, in the inner eye, with the light of reason, capable of recognizing the supernal source from which alone any light could spring. The great book Pascal never published was to have been a philosopher's reconciliation with history, learning the meaning of Christian faith by contrasting it dialectically with its Jewish counterpart and alternative. And the great book Spinoza never finished was to derive a science of politics, at the intersection of the metaphysical and moral achievement of the *Ethica* with the critical-historical achievement of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, which had completed the work of Socrates by bringing not only theology but sacred history and sacred law down out of the heavens and into the streets and market-places, the fora and agoras of daily life.

All philosophers and most public men and women in the seventeenth century knew that metaphysical propositions had theological counterparts and political implications

and could not be isolated from the findings of natural science—or discoveries of travelers and explorers. Popkin gives our students a vivid sense of the linkages that made an Enlightenment or Renaissance philosopher, of necessity, a global thinker, when he opens his textbook anthology *The Philosophy of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries* with passages from Amerigo Vespucci. For Columbus only found America; Vespucci is deservedly its eponym, since he founded the *idea* of America, as a new world of rich and exotic material potential and unfathomable cultural challenge—whose inhabitants, as Menasseh ben Israel and Isaac La Peyrère clearly saw, directly challenged conventional thinking about history, demanding in the end a new science of anthropology at the nexus between nature and culture.

The prae-Adamite idea naturally antedated La Peyrère, and long outlived him. More than a century before his time defenders and attackers of the rights of Indians in the New World had staked out the prae-Adamite thesis as a battleground,<sup>4</sup> and long after the doctrinal obloquy against La Peyrère had ceased some of his readers were putting his theory to a use diametrically opposed to the irenic intentions of its author, and, for that matter, to those of its originator, attacking the very humanity of aboriginal populations. Popkin tells that story in detail, down to the nineteenth and even twentieth centuries. But he only obliquely alludes to our findings that the racist version—or rather perversion—of the prae-Adamite theory still survives in theories of “polygenic” anthropology, which trace the human races to genetically discrete stocks, some of which are held to be more or less human, closer to or further from nature, more or less amenable to culture, than others, and whose differences are sometimes claimed to go deeper than the differences of diverse animal species.<sup>5</sup>

This is not the place to expand on that theme, but its occurrence here is sufficient evidence of the continued relevance to philosophy of knowledge of the world. For philosophers have not really grappled with the human condition if they have no inkling of the unities underlying human diversity. And that in turn brings us to the lasting moral of the story so engagingly told by Popkin here, a moral perhaps best stated by Maimonides when he argued that moral excellence is a prerequisite of real achievement in philosophy, globally understood. The key to Maimonides’s argument is the recognition that without a certain chastity of mind all ideas will be perverted. Without such chastity, the simple tale of Adam, which Maimonides saw as an allegory of the human condition, and which we all know expresses the universal kinship of all races, in whatever sense is most relevant morally, will be twisted and turned inside out to provide an apologetic for exploitation, brutalization, and worse. La Peyrère, by a

<sup>4</sup> Among the defenders: Alonso de la Vera Cruz, who taught at the University of Mexico in the mid-sixteenth century. See his *Defense of the Indians: Their Rights and Defense of the Indians: Their Privileges*, ed. and tr., Ernest J. Burrus (St. Louis, and Tucson: Jesuit Historical Institute, 1968 and 1976 respectively).

<sup>5</sup> See M. J. Goodman and L. E. Goodman, “‘Particularly amongst the Sunburnt Nations . . .’: The Persistence of Sexual Stereotypes of Race in Bio-Science,” *International Journal of Group Tensions* 19 (1989): 221–43; 365–83. Popkin saw an early version of this material but played the helpful role of a Mersenne, rather than the churlish role of a Grotius. He alludes to its findings on p. 2 of the work reviewed here.

curious twist of reasoning, saw prae-Adamism not merely as a critical or scientific solution to the difficulties of Biblical history but as the key to history's denouement: Only if humanity at large could understand that Israel had once been chosen, would be recalled and ultimately united with an intellectually reformed Christendom, could the age of peace begin on earth. A second twist could make a weapon of racism out of what La Peyrère called his Copernican hypothesis, his simple shift of perspective that changed nothing but seemed in his eyes to make sense of everything.

L. E. GOODMAN

*University of Hawaii at Manoa*

Edwin Curley. *Behind the Geometrical Method: A Reading of Spinoza's "Ethics."* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988. Pp. xxi + 175. Cloth, \$25.00. Paper, \$9.95.

Lucia Lermond. *The Form of Man: Human Essence in Spinoza's "Ethic."* Brill's Studies in Intellectual History, Vol. 11. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1988. Pp. 86. \$24.00.

*Behind the Geometrical Method* is a revised version of E. M. Curley's Jerusalem Spinoza Lectures, originally given at Hebrew University in May, 1984. Like the original lectures, the book is aimed at a dual audience: Spinoza scholars and persons with less knowledge of, but interest in, Spinoza. Although Curley is apologetic regarding his efforts to make Spinoza intelligible to the latter, he has achieved success in this respect without sacrificing interest to scholars. The title alludes to his strategy, which is to show how Spinoza might have arrived at his system through critical reflection on the work of his important predecessors, Hobbes and Descartes, an origin which is largely concealed by the geometric mode of presentation. The first two chapters deal with metaphysical topics, chiefly Spinoza's substance monism, his theory of human nature, and the relation of mind and body. The third chapter focuses on the psychology and ethical doctrine.

In Chapter 1 Curley attempts to show that Spinoza has "a powerful argument, from principles Descartes would have had difficulty rejecting, to the most uncartesian conclusion that there is only one substance, God" (30). The argument he refers to is that given by Spinoza in the demonstration of E 1. 14, which cites def. 6 and props. 5 and 11 of *Ethics* 1. On Curley's view the most problematic of these premises for Descartes would have been E 1. 5: "In nature there cannot be two substances of the same nature or attribute." Descartes must have rejected this, since he held there could be a plurality of thinking substances. Curley, however, cites solid textual evidence and makes a strong argument that Descartes was in fact committed to the identification of substance and attribute and other principles which underlie the demonstration of E 1. 5. Thus Spinoza correctly saw that on Descartes's premises numerically different substances must have different attributes.

In Chapter 2 Curley defends an interpretation of Spinoza's view of the mind-body relation first put forward by Stuart Hampshire, and again attempts to show how Spinoza could have come to that view of the mind and body through reflection on the