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Review:

Disraeli: The Novel Politician, David Cesarani

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REVIEWS

Disraeli: The Novel Politician, David Cesarani (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016), ISBN 9-780-30013-751-4, pp. viii + 292, £16.99.

Now overshadowed by the Holborn Viaduct and enveloped by the City of London's approach roads, it is easy to miss the parish church of St. Andrew's, an Anglo-Saxon foundation and a medieval building splendidly remodelled by Sir Christopher Wren after the Great Fire of London. Its one-time rector was Henry Sacheverell, infamous for stirring up angry mobs against the infidel and Dissenting enemies of the Church of England. And it was here, in this sturdy bastion of English Christianity, that Benjamin Disraeli was baptized on 11 July 1817 at the age of thirteen. It looks like an aberration in a Jewish life. For although he never subsequently referred to it, Disraeli had been circumcised eight days after his birth by the *mohel* of the Bevis Marks synagogue and brought up as a Jew. His baptism never prevented admirers and critics from referring to him as a Jew – for Otto von Bismarck, who met him at the 1879 Congress of Berlin, he was “der alte Jude”, the old Jew, but also a human being. It is the great virtue of David Cesarani's new biography of Disraeli, which begins with, and insists on, the importance of that baptism, that it sits uneasily in the Yale series of *Jewish Lives* for which it was commissioned. There have been numerous lives of Disraeli before, beginning with Monypenny and Buckle's multi-volume tombstone and including Robert Blake's Balzacian account of how Disraeli climbed what he called the “greasy pole”. Cesarani's crisply written, trenchant book is a justified addition to them, because it focuses relentlessly on Disraeli's complex and, in his eyes, tragic relationship with Judaism.

Disraeli's baptism has always scuppered naive attempts to represent him as a Jewish politician. As Jonathan Parry established in an influential study much cited by Cesarani, there is little in Disraeli's political record as a youngish gadfly, then as opposition leader, opportunistic architect of the Second Reform Act (1867) and, twice, as Prime Minister (1868, 1874–80), that conflicts with the idea that his baptism was sincere. He shared the priorities of the churchgoing Tory country gentlemen who

distrusted their talented leader. He believed in agriculture, in a strong but cautious foreign policy and in the Church of England as a bulwark against threats to English Christianity: Roman Catholicism and scepticism. The perception that Disraeli's actions in buying the Suez Canal or in anointing Queen Victoria as Empress of India reflect an "Oriental" Jewish bent owe more to the antisemitic slurs of his adversaries than to reality. If Disraeli's politics were, then, hardly Jewish, could he nonetheless be seen as a Jew in politics? It is no accident that much of the scholarly attention lavished on Disraeli in recent years has focused on his youth, when he refined his persona through experiments with dress and exotic travel, a process recorded in the sardonic, picaresque, uneven novels he published in those years. Literary scholars have collaborated with historians in identifying Disraeli's self-fashioning as key to a Jewish identity no less real for being manufactured. Precisely because he was cold-shouldered as a Jewish interloper, they argue, Disraeli converted his racial and religious otherness into glamorous exoticism.

Cesarani is at his most acute in dealing with these early years and the claims founded upon them. Before his untimely death last year, he was known as a prosecutorial biographer of Adolf Eichmann, and he brings the same sceptical attention to this very different subject's ego documents. On an early trip to Germany, Disraeli's letters home recorded the "vol-au-vent of pigeon" he ate in Frankfurt and the *Don Giovanni* he saw in Mannheim, but passed over the Jewish communities of those cities in silence. Nor was his visit to the Holy Land in 1831 a pilgrimage to his Jewish roots. It was a week-long stop on an Oriental tour which paled in comparison to the five months he spent in Egypt. His recorded impressions of Jerusalem ran to only seven hundred words; he did not see the Temple Mount; and while he mingled with the "Vicar General of the Pope", he met no Jews there. If Disraeli's travels do not produce much evidence of Jewish sympathies, then nor, for Cesarani, does the fiction. It is true that the early novels were full of alienated young men struggling to find their place in society, but Cesarani reads that alienation as a Byronic pose rather than as an expression of anxiety about assimilation. The most graphic portrait of a Jew in these novels is not a heroic sage, but the grasping moneylender Levison, who imprisons the hero of *Henrietta Temple* in his spunging house. Nor was Levison a literary device, for Disraeli evinced a distaste for meeting Jews in private life – only excepting the Rothschilds, whose princely wealth fascinated him. Cesarani's intriguing suggestion is that the novels do not add up to a "compensatory myth" of Judaism, because

Disraeli did not need one. He did face antisemitic taunts in his early career, but they were not an effective barrier to political success – certainly less so than the colossal debts he had incurred. During the 1837 General Election, crowds addressed by Disraeli in Maidstone waved bacon on poles, but he still won his seat. Once in Parliament, he was hardly a champion for Judaism. He was initially silent over the heroic struggles by practising Jews to take their seats and while he was instrumental in ensuring the passage of a Jewish Disabilities Bill in 1858, for Cesarani his motive was as much to make up to Lionel de Rothschild as to champion a principle.

Why then do we, or should we, speak of Disraeli as Bismarck's "old Jew"? Cesarani bumps the crucial period for Disraeli's self-fashioning as a Jew from his early years to the apogee of his career. It was then that his novels and speeches abounded in commentary on Judaism. Fatefully, though, they presented Judaism in racial terms. Because the Hebrew religion had been superseded by the coming of the Messiah, Jews mattered henceforth mainly as bit-players in a racialized cosmogony. His novel *Lothair* (1870), for instance, preached that "God works by races" and accepted a binary, enduring distinction between Aryans and Semites. Disraeli did not want a race war, of course, but to make England a stable seat of racial harmony: like Matthew Arnold, his ideal civilization blended the contrasting virtues of different races. But this racial talk still had malign consequences. It ratcheted the antisemitism of his opponents to a manic pitch by encouraging them to argue that he was, as a "Hebrew", racially programmed to follow "a Hebrew policy" rather than English, Christian objectives. This was particularly so during the Eastern Crisis (1875–78), when his critics alleged he was not doing enough to protect Christian lives in the disintegrating Ottoman Empire. The last chapters of Cesarani's book shed light on the ugly antisemitism of England's leading Liberal intellectuals. Gladstone raved privately against what he called Disraeli's "race antipathy": "Though he has been baptised, his Jew feelings are the most radical and the most real . . . portion of his profoundly falsified nature" (p. 194). It was not only this "tempest of anti-Jewish vitriol" that makes Disraeli's life a Jewish one. Disraeli himself had charged the lightning. Worse, his "racial rhodomontade" did not die with him, but was co-opted by the murderous, biological antisemitism of the twentieth century. In a speech of 1941, Hitler cited the "British Jew, Lord Disraeli" as proof that the "racial problem was the key to world history".

It is a tribute to Cesarani's forensic skill that his exploration of Disraeli's Jewish identity constantly turns into an indictment. He might have done

more to honour his caution that “Disraeli could not have foreseen the vector of racial thinking” after his death, and to have steered clear of Hannah Arendt’s implausible claim that Disraeli “almost single-handedly invented the lexicon of modern anti-Semitism”. Neither Disraeli nor Gladstone were Julius Streicher in a frock-coat. Lucubrations on race and religion in nineteenth-century Britain owed more to the categories of Christian theology – which was certainly deep-dyed with anti-Judaism – than to biological thinking. Moreover, the fact that much of what Disraeli said about Judaism in his novels was silly does not prevent it from being heartfelt: the developing analysis of books such as *Alroy* or *Tancred* reveals a vein of reflection on monotheism and its traditions as sophisticated as it was conjectural. The notion of Disraeli as the agent of a “Hebrew mystery” may have been concocted between him and his political enemies. But he remains mysterious enough. In 1851, he told an aide that he wished to restore the “H. Race to their country” as their “Messiah – the real saviour of prophecy!” Some years later, that aide mused that, as no actions had followed from the comment, it was probably a “mystification . . . but which purpose could the mystification, if it were one, serve?” Disraeli’s ability to generate such questions means that we can expect plenty more biographies of him in the years to come.

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