

Trinity College

## Trinity College Digital Repository

---

Faculty Scholarship

---

10-2002

### Maimonides and the Rise and Fall of the Sabians: Explaining Mosaic Laws and the Limits of Scholarship

Jonathan Elukin

*Trinity College*, [Jonathan.Elukin@trincoll.edu](mailto:Jonathan.Elukin@trincoll.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.trincoll.edu/facpub>

 Part of the [History Commons](#)

---

Trinity College  
HARTFORD CONNECTICUT

# Maimonides and the Rise and Fall of the Sabians: Explaining Mosaic Laws and the Limits of Scholarship

*Jonathan Elukin*

---

The Koran mentions the *Sabi'un* three times (II 6-2, V 69, XXII 17). “Believers, Jews, Christians, and *Sabi'un*—whoever believes in Allah and the Last Day and does what is right—shall be rewarded by their Lord; they have nothing to fear or to regret.” This language is repeated in the second citation. The third appearance is slightly different: “As for true believers, the Jews, the *Sabi'un*, the Christians, the Magians, and the pagans, Allah will judge them on the Day of Resurrection. He bears witness to all things.”<sup>1</sup> Early Islamic commentators often disagreed on the identity of the *Sabi'un*, and the confusion continued throughout the medieval Islamic period.<sup>2</sup> The term *Sabi'un* was applied by some early Koranic commentators to the survivors of an ancient Jewish-Christian sect, the Elchasites in southern Iraq.<sup>3</sup> One minority group of ethnic Arab “pagans” with a hellenized elite in Harran, in Arabia, also took the Koranic name Sabian in the third/ninth century to claim the status of a “people of the book” and therefore avoid persecution. It is this group that some later Muslims identified as *Sabi'*.<sup>4</sup> The scholarly consensus now suggests that the

<sup>1</sup> *Encyclopedia of Islam*, new edition “SABI'.” François de Blois, “The ‘Sabians’ (*Sabi'un*) in pre-Islamic Arabia,” *Acta Orientalia*, 56 (1995), 39-61. I would like to thank the referees of the *JHI*; I am also grateful to colleagues at the Center for Advanced Judaic Studies at the University of Pennsylvania and at the History Department at Catholic University (where earlier versions of this paper were presented), and Dr. Jeffrey Kaimowitz, Curator of the Watkinson Library at Trinity College.

<sup>2</sup> Jane Dammen McAuliffe, “Exegetical Identification of the *Sabi'un*” *Muslim World*, 74 (1984), 95-106; C. Buck, “The Identity of the *Sabi'un*: An Historical Quest,” *Muslim World*, 74 (1984), 172-86.

<sup>3</sup> *Encyclopedia of Islam*, “SABI'.”

<sup>4</sup> *Encyclopedia of Islam*, “SABI'.” On Harranian paganism, see Tamara M. Green, *The City of the Moon God: Religious Traditions of Harran* (New York, 1992).

term Sabian refers to some kind of Gnostic identity that can encompass “the disciples of Judeo-Christian baptizing sects ... and, on the other, Harranian astrolators, the last representatives of decadent Greco-Roman paganism.”<sup>5</sup>

The mysterious Sabians would play a key role in attempts by early modern European scholars to understand the origins of the Mosaic legislation. It was through Maimonides, the great twelfth-century Jewish scholar, that the Sabians were transmitted to Christian scholars. By the seventeenth century, the Sabians of Maimonides’s *Guide for the Perplexed* had become a fixture in how scholars understood or at least debated the history of the origins of Mosaic law. Increasingly perceived as a diffuse paganism rather than a specific ethnic identity or subsumed by the more tangible reality of Egypt, Sabianism drifted to the margins of scholarship by the end of the Enlightenment. During the nineteenth century the Sabians became superfluous to scholarly efforts to understand the origins of Israelite monotheism. This study is an attempt to understand the growth of the enthusiasm for the Sabians by early modern scholars and then its precipitous decline. In a large degree it was the nature of the evidence itself regarding the Sabians that shaped and ultimately undermined the survival of the Sabians in European thinking. Still, both Christian and Jewish scholars well into the twentieth century lived with the ghosts of the Sabians as they sought to explain otherwise mysterious Mosaic commandments.

In the *Guide* Maimonides argued that the sacrificial system legislated by Moses was an example of God’s mercy. It would have been impossible for the Israelites to abandon suddenly the style of idolatrous worship learned in Egypt, and so Moses crafted the sacrificial system gradually to replace false gods with the true God. Maimonides still needed to explain the particular details and reasons for the sacrifices and the other ritual laws.<sup>6</sup> To that end he claimed to have read various texts, particularly the so-called *Nabataen Agriculture*, which purported to describe Abraham’s education among and flight from the Sabians as well as a summary of the practices of the Sabians.<sup>7</sup> (The Sabians had made one brief appearance before Maimonides’s discussion in the *Guide*; the tenth-century Karaite Jew, Qirqisani, declared in his *Kitab al anwar*, “the modern Christian philosophers assert that the laws of the Torah were given to the Children of Israel only because of God’s wrath; and that they [Israel] have chosen these laws for themselves only on account of their resemblance to the laws of the Sabians, which was due to the fact that they became accustomed to the

<sup>5</sup> *Encyclopedia of Islam*, “SABI’A.”

<sup>6</sup> Josef Stern, *Problems and Parables of Law: Maimonides and Nahmanides on Reasons for the Commandments (Ta’amei Ha-Mitzvot)* (Albany, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Maimonides, *Guide for the Perplexed*, tr. M. Friedländer (New York, 1956<sup>2</sup>), bk. 3, c. 29, 315. *Nabatean Agriculture* appeared in Arabic in 904 AD and was reputed to be an authentic translation from the Chaldean. See Shlomo Pines (tr. and ed.), *Guide for the Perplexed* (2 vols., Chicago, 1974), II, 518, note 25.

ways of the Egyptians during their sojourn with them, these ways being akin to the ways of the Sabians.”<sup>8</sup> By using the pagan practices of the Sabians as starting points, Maimonides argued that the new Mosaic laws had inverted the Sabian rituals: “I say that my knowledge of the belief, practice, and worship of the Sabeans has given me an insight into many of the divine precepts, and has led me to know their reason. You will confirm it when I shall give the reason of commandments which are seemingly purposeless.”<sup>9</sup> By imagining a fully functioning pagan culture among the Sabians, Maimonides asserted that

most of the “statutes” [*hukkim*], the reason of which is unknown to us, serve as a fence against idolatry.... If we knew all the particulars of the Sabeian worship, and were informed of all the details of those doctrines, we would clearly see the reason and wisdom of every detail in the sacrificial service, in the laws concerning things that are unclean, and in other laws, the object of which I am unable to state. I have no doubt that all these laws served to blot out wrong principles from man’s heart, and to exterminate the practices which are useless, and merely a waste of time in vain and purposeless things.<sup>10</sup>

In other words each of the Israelite ritual laws is specifically designed to counter a pagan habit or practice.<sup>11</sup>

But what of the Sabians themselves? Maimonides insists at one point that there were contemporary groups who represented descendants of the Sabians. “These survive in the remote corners of the earth, like the savage Turks in the extreme North and the Indians in the extreme South. These are remnants of the Sabeans, who once filled the earth.”<sup>12</sup> Even contemporary ethnic and religious groups living according to pagan customs were really Sabians: “But the practice of the Sabeans, even at present general in the East, among the few still left of the Magi....”<sup>13</sup> Oddly, Maimonides claims that the cult has died out:

<sup>8</sup> Stephen Benin, *The Footprints of God: Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought* (Albany, N.Y., 1993), 141, citing Qirqisani.

<sup>9</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 318. See the summary of Maimonides’s argument in a thirteenth-century Jewish text, Moshe Perlmann (ed.), *Ibn Kammūna’s Examination of the Three Faiths*. (Berkeley, Calif., 1971), 60.

<sup>10</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 380. See Isidore Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides (Mishneh Torah)* (New Haven, Conn., 1980), 431.

<sup>11</sup> See the discussion by Benin, *Footprints*, 58, and Amos Funkenstein, *Perceptions of Jewish History* (Berkeley, Calif., 1993), 137-47.

<sup>12</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 315.

<sup>13</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 368; See Alfred Ivry, “Maimonides and Neoplatonism: Challenge and Response,” *Neo-Platonism and Jewish Thought*, ed. Lenn E. Goodman (Albany, N.Y., 1992), 137-56, arguing that Maimonides imagined the Sabians to be philosophers in Aristotle’s tradition. See also Hava Tirosh-Samuels, “Maimonides’ View of Happiness: Philosophy, Myth and the Transcendence of History,” Elisheva Carlebach et al. (ed.), *Jewish History and Jewish Memory: Essays in Honor of Yosef Haim Yerushalmi* (Hanover, N.H., 1998), 189-213.

That I cannot explain some details of the above laws or show their use is owing to the fact that what we hear from others is not so clear as that which we see with our own eyes. Thus my knowledge of the Sabeian doctrines, which I derived from books, is not as complete as the knowledge of those who have witnessed the public practice of those idolatrous customs, especially as they have been out of practice and entirely extinct since two thousand years.<sup>14</sup>

Despite the confusion over the survival of the Sabians, Maimonides essentially shaped the later scholarly response to the Sabians. More than a separate people, the Sabians were adherents of a general pagan culture.

Sabians first entered the consciousness of Western Christian scholarship after Maimonides was translated and then assimilated by medieval philosophers such as William of Auvergne and Thomas Aquinas. These scholars rarely mentioned the Sabians explicitly but accepted Maimonides's larger notion of "accommodation" and the reaction to pagan practices as the motor force behind the Mosaic sacrifices.<sup>15</sup> Renaissance scholars began to look more closely at Maimonides's specific discussion of the Sabians under the influence of their common search for the classical past. Taking the Sabians seriously was part of the general attempt to see biblical narratives as part of a wider cultural setting in their own time.<sup>16</sup> The drive to contextualize the Israelites took advantage of the discoveries of the age of explorations, which allowed scholars to make comparisons between the Israelites and the native peoples of the Americas. At the same time the Hebrew language was being re-imagined as a "normal" language, making it easier to see the Israelites as part of a larger culture.<sup>17</sup> The Sabians offered further evidence to help scholars understand the world of the Bible.

One of the first post-medieval scholars to see the Sabians as part of the cultural world of the Bible was Jean Bodin, who linked the Chaldaeans and the Sabians in asserting that "this is indeed in agreement with what Rabbi Moses

<sup>14</sup> Maimonides, *Guide*, 380; and Jan Assmann, *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), 58: "It is precisely their complete insignificance which serves his purpose. He describes his Sabians as a once powerful community. The fact that the remnants of its memory survive only in some works of extremely specialized scholarship is the best proof of the truth of his explanation of the Law."

<sup>15</sup> See Benin, *Footprints*, 273, note 2; and Benin, "Jews and Christian History: Hugh of St. Victor, Anselm of Havelberg and William of Auvergne," *From Witness to Witchcraft: Jews and Judaism in Medieval Christian Thought*, ed. Jeremy Cohen (Wiesbaden, 1996), 203-21; Lesley Smith, "William of Auvergne and the Jews," Diana Wood (ed.), *Christianity and Judaism: Studies in Church History*, 29 (1992), 107-19.

<sup>16</sup> Debora Kuller Shuger, *Renaissance Bible: Scholarship, Sacrifice, and Subjectivity* (Berkeley, Calif., 1994), 44.

<sup>17</sup> Nicholas Hudson, *Writing and European Thought 1600-1830* (New York, 1994), 33.

relates from the ritual accounts of the Chaldaeans and Sabeans....”<sup>18</sup> Isaac Casaubon, the Protestant polymath, wrote to his great contemporary Justus Scaliger, asking his opinion of this mysterious name.<sup>19</sup> Scaliger was sure that the Sabians were Chaldeans: “De Zabiis, scito esse Chaldaeos....”<sup>20</sup> This assessment made sense given that Abraham was thought to have grown up in Ur of the Chaldees. The Chaldeans were an ancient people attested in Scripture (Habakkuk 1:6 or Daniel 2:2) and other classical sources. Moreover, it also was consistent with Maimonides’s presentation of Sabianism as a religious culture that extended throughout the Near East.

In sum, the biblical as well as the Hellenistic sources show that the term “Chaldeans” was transferred during the Hellenistic and Roman age from its narrow denotation as the name of a nation—and more specifically, of a very specific social/religious class in Babylon—to a more general class: all the persons who had studied or practiced the Chaldean sciences (namely, astrology, astronomy, divination, and so on).<sup>21</sup>

The identification of the Sabians with the Chaldeans continued throughout the seventeenth century. Hottinger in *Historia orientalis* (1651) associated the Sabians with Charan, which at least placed them in the Chaldean milieu.<sup>22</sup> In the *Thesaurus philologicus* (1649), Hottinger also affirmed that the most ancient religion was that of the Chaldeans to which the Sabians adhered before all others.<sup>23</sup> Claude Saumaise (1588-1653) in *De annis climactericis et antiqua astrologia diatribae* (1648) made the Chaldean connection as well.<sup>24</sup> The imposingly learned English scholar John Selden, who tried to see monotheism

<sup>18</sup> Jean Bodin, *Colloquium of the Seven about Secrets of the Sublime*, tr. Marion Leathers Daniels Kuntz (Princeton, N.J., 1975), bk. 2, 43.

<sup>19</sup> “Invenio apud Rambam [Maimonides] in praeclaro opere ...ultam mentionem cuisusdam populi, cuius alibi nomen non legi: Zabios vel Zabeos vocat ... Doce me, obsecro, quae haec gens fuerit,” cited in D. Chwolson, *Die Ssabier und die Ssabismus* (2 vols.; St. Petersburg, 1856), I, 26.

<sup>20</sup> Scaliger, *Epistolae* (1612), 341, cited in Chwolson, *Ssabier*, I, 26, note 2.

<sup>21</sup> Adolfo D. Roitman, “‘This People are Descendants of Chaldeans’ (Judith 5:6): Its Literary Form and Historical Setting,” *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 113 (1994), 256.

<sup>22</sup> *Historia orientalis; quae, ex variis orientalium monumentis collecta, agit ...* (Zurich, 1651), quoted in Chwolson, *Ssabier*, I, 29.

<sup>23</sup> Quoted in Chwolson, *Ssabier*, I, 28: “ejus antiquissima species est ... religio Nabathaea seu Chaldaea. Religioni huic addicti fuere Chaldaei, Persae, et prae ceteris Sabaei.”

<sup>24</sup> Quoted in Chwolson, *Ssabier*, I, 28: “Zabaei vel Zabii fuere populi Mesopotamiae, quos cum Chaldaeis cunctim nominat Maimonides in Moreh Nevochim ... Zabii illi sunt Maimonidae, quos et cum Chaldaeis conjungit eodem loco, Ut inde manifestum sit, eandem fuisse Zabaeorum et Chaldaeorum doctrinam de astris, quod Dii essent. Oportet omnino istos Zabios...partem fuisse Chaldaeorum vel sectam, ut plures fuere.”

against the background of a fully realized polytheistic world, also thought the Zabii were Chaldeans.<sup>25</sup> In 1662 Edward Stillingfleet, a defender of the reliability of textual evidence for biblical and gospel history, also identified the Sabians with the “Eastern Chaldaeans,” by which term he meant the Zoroastrians: “little is supposed to be yet further known of them than what Scaliger hath said, that they were the more Eastern Chaldaeans.”<sup>26</sup> Thomas Stanley, author of a massive work on “Chaldaick” philosophy, makes the connection between the Sabians and the Chaldeans more explicit: “And the later Eastern Writers (especially the Arabians) under the appellation of Chasdim or Chaldanin (Chaldaeans,) comprehended not only the Babylonians but the Nabathaeans, Charnaeans, and Sabaeans,... because the Doctrine of the Chaldaeans extended thither, and that the Religion of all these Nations was the same.”<sup>27</sup> Gale, whose *Court of the Gentiles*, tried to restate the traditional opinion that the Jews were the source of pagan wisdom, for example, held that the “Rites of the Zabii are the same with those of the Chaldaeans and Persians, who all agreed in this worship of the Sun, and of Fire, &c.”<sup>28</sup> Maimonides’s treatment of the Sabians as a religious culture identified with the Chaldeans allowed most seventeenth-century scholars to accept the Sabians as a real historical presence. It was a convenient and compelling way to set off the truth of revelation contained in the Mosaic revelation. The Israelites appeared unique against a background of Chaldean paganism.

Later in the seventeenth century, scholars built upon this connection with the Chaldeans and transformed Sabianism into a generalized paganism that was the common religion of the Near East. For example, D’Herbelot, in his massive *Bibliothèque Orientale*, concludes that the name Sabian does not refer to a nation but to a religion.<sup>29</sup> Indeed, he quotes one Muslim author that “the religion of the Sabians was not only the first and the most ancient, but also the

<sup>25</sup> Selden, *De diis Syriis syntagmata II ...* (1672), I, c.2, 282: “Aureas faciebant vetustissimi Orientalium Zabii, sive Chaldaei, ex quorum libris plurima retulit R. Moses Aegyptius....” See Graham Parry, *The Trophies of Time: English Antiquarians of the Seventeenth Century* (New York, 1995), 95-130.

<sup>26</sup> *Origines sacrae, or a Rational Account of the Grounds of Christian Faith, as to the Truth and Divine Authority of the Scriptures, and the Matters Therein Contained* (2 vols.; London, 1662; Oxford, 1836), I, 49-51.

<sup>27</sup> Thomas Stanley, *The History of the Chaldaick Philosophy* (London, 1662), 79.

<sup>28</sup> Theophilus Gale, *The Court of the Gentiles* (2 vols.; Oxford, 1669-71), II, 73; and see Gale, *Philosophia Generalis in Duae Partes Determinata* (London, 1676), 139-40. Thomas Hyde, *Historia Religionis Veterum Persarum ...* (1700; Oxford, 1760<sup>2</sup>), 122-38, inverts the sequence and sees in *Zabiism* a later degeneration of Zoroastrianism; see Clarisse Herrens Schmidt, “Once upon a Time, Zoroaster,” in Francis Schmidt (ed.), *The Inconceivable Polytheism: Studies in Religious Historiography* (New York, 1983), 209-39.

<sup>29</sup> Barthélemy d’Herbelot, *Bibliothèque Orientale, ou Dictionnaire universel, contenant généralement tout ce qui regarde la connoissance des peuples de L’Orient* (Paris, 1697), 725-26.

common and only religion of the world until the time of Abraham and from which all religions descend.”<sup>30</sup> Humphrey Prideaux reinforced these conclusions about the generalized nature of the Sabian religion in *The Old and New Testaments connected in the history of the Jews and neighboring nations*. When Abraham lived, “all the idolatry of the world was divided between two sects, that is, the worshippers of images, who were called the Sabians, and the worshippers of fire, who were called the Magians.”<sup>31</sup> The specific practices of the Sabians began

among the Chaldeans; which their knowledge in astronomy helped lead them to. And from this it was, that Abraham separated himself when he came out of Chaldea. From the Chaldeans it spread itself over all the East, where the professors of it had the name of Sabians. From them it passed into Egypt, and from thence to the Grecians, who propagated it to all the Western nations of the world.<sup>32</sup>

The extent of the Sabian religion in the ancient world was important for John Spencer’s attempt to understand the dynamic between the Egyptians and Israelites in the formation of the Mosaic laws. In the *De Legibus Hebraeorum* Spencer worked out connections between so-called Sabian rituals and the ritual laws of the Hebrew Bible in overwhelming detail and specificity.<sup>33</sup> Each Israelite practice, according to Spencer, came in response to an original Sabian practice. The key issue for Spencer was not the Sabians per se, but rather their relationship to the Egyptians. Spencer wished to demonstrate the dependence of the Jews on Egyptian culture, making Israelite culture more of a historically conditional phenomenon.<sup>34</sup> In *Dissertatio de Urim et Thummim* Spencer had argued that the Hebrew technology of prophecy was drawn from Egyptian practices. The Jews were certainly not, as many claimed, the most ancient people and the source of all wisdom and culture. It was the Egyptians who influenced the Jews. If he wanted to make use of Maimonides’s understanding of the conditional and contextual nature of the Israelite laws, Spencer would have to make the Sabians fit into the history of the Israelites’ exodus from Egypt.<sup>35</sup> In

<sup>30</sup> D’Herbelot, *Bibliothèque Orientale*, 726.

<sup>31</sup> Prideaux, *Connection*, I, 222-23.

<sup>32</sup> Prideaux, *Connection*, I, 224. See George Sale (1697?-1736), *An Universal History, from the Earliest Account of Time* (London, 1747), 378; Sale repeats this in *The Koran, commonly called the Alcoran of Mohammed/translated from the original Arabic, with explanatory notes taken from the most approved commentators, to which is prefixed a preliminary discourse by George Sale* (London, 1836), 16.

<sup>33</sup> John Spencer, *De legibus Hebraeorum ritualibus et earum rationibus* (Hagae-Comitum, 1686).

<sup>34</sup> *De Legibus*, 12.

<sup>35</sup> Assmann, *Moses*, 75.



other words, Spencer needed to transform the Egyptians into Sabians or at least make them interchangeable.

Spencer could look to Maimonides's own language as well as the conclusions of his predecessors sketched above to assert the link between Sabians and Egyptians. He portrayed the religion of the Sabians as a collection of ancient religious trends made up of beliefs from "Chaldaism, Judaism, Gnosticism and Platonism."<sup>36</sup> If Sabianism was so ancient and so diffuse, it surely could encompass the various practices known to Egypt. In fact Spencer makes the case that Sabianism spread among the Chaldeans and Egyptians and then the Arabs.<sup>37</sup> At the time of Moses the "Zabiorum superstition" was found in Chaldean and Egyptian forms.<sup>38</sup> By re-naming Egyptian religion as Sabianism, Spencer could bring to bear Maimonides's argument and authority to explain Israelite practice as a response to and an inversion of Egyptian pagan culture. John Edwards (1637-1716) cited Spencer's analysis that "the Mosaick Institutions were a remedy against *Zabiism*, i.e., they were given and enjoyn'd to the Jews to keep them from Idolatry, especially practis'd by the *Zabii*, that is, the Chaldeans and Arabians, yea and Egyptians, whose Idolatrous practices were most known in Moses's time."<sup>39</sup> In one sense he accepted Spencer's portrait of a widespread Sabianism found among Chaldeans and Egyptians, but his account ends with a ringing denunciation of Spencer. Why should God, Edwards asked, have tried to efface some pagan customs among the Jews and yet have allowed the Israelites to retain other pagan ceremonies? The criticism is perhaps less important than the force of Spencer's initial presentation.

Spencer's exploration of the Egyptian/Sabian roots of Israelite law and custom became the touchstone for all subsequent writers assessing the origin of Israelite monotheism. The reception of Spencer's work often had the ultimate effect of displacing the Sabians in the mental horizons of scholars. Scholars used Spencer as a way to emphasize the role of the Egyptians, at the unin-

<sup>36</sup> Spencer, *De Legibus*, 356: "Zabiorum religio constabat e' materiis variis & vix ulla cognatione cohaerentibus ... Quamvis autem Zabiorum superstitio e' quatuor istis elementis [Chaldaismo, Iudaismo, Gnosticismo, & Platonismo] constata fuerit."

<sup>37</sup> *De Legibus*, 354-55: "Sententia [si quid ipse judico] veritati propior, haec est: Zabiorum nomine, Chaldaeos in primis, Aegyptios etiam, Nabataeos, Charanaeos, Syros, alios Chaldaeorum dogmatis & ritibus addictos, censendos esse. In hanc sententiam concedo, quod Sabiismi fermentum se longe lateque diffunderet, eoque Gentes ad solem orientem sitae plurimum inficerentur, & quod e legibus, quae Zabiis adversae creduntur, aliae Chaldaeorum, aliae Aegyptiorum, aliae Nabataeorum. Moribus opponerentur."

<sup>38</sup> *De Legibus*, 266.

<sup>39</sup> John Edwards, [Polpoikilos sophis], *a compleat history or survey of all the dispensations and methods of religion, from the beginning of the world to the consummation of all things, as represented in the Old and New Testament shewing the several reasons and designs of those different administrations, and the wisdom and goodness of God in the government of His church, through all the ages of it: in which also, the opinion of Dr. Spencer concerning the Jewish rites and sacrifices is examin'd, and the certainty of the Christian religion demonstrated against the cavils of the Deists, & c.* (2 vols.; London, 1699), I, 250.

tended expense of the Sabians. For example, John Marsham thinks the *Zabii* are essentially “Egyptians.”<sup>40</sup> Thomas Burnet also echoed Spencer’s emphasis on the pre-eminence of the Egyptians.<sup>41</sup> Moreover, we can see how the Sabians became submerged into the Egyptians in the way the first generation of deists such as Herbert, Blount, and Toland used the *De Legibus* as a crucial weapon against revealed religion.<sup>42</sup> Drawing upon the *De Legibus*, Blount conceives of Moses as learned in Egyptian religion and philosophy. He further asserted that the “ancient Jews, and Modern Christians, have many rites and ceremonies common with the Gentiles.”<sup>43</sup> The distinctiveness of the Sabians becomes less important than the generally derivative or evolutionary nature of Judaism and Christianity. Other scholars who embraced Spencer also focused more on the Egyptians than on the Sabians. Warburton, engaged in his own polemic with the deists, took up Spencer’s preoccupation with the Egyptians and further displaced the Sabians as the central actors with the Israelites.<sup>44</sup> By emphasizing the connection with Egypt, which he believed was the inheritor of a corrupted form of the true Noachide religion, Newton also pushed the sense of the Sabians as an independent people to the margins of scholarly interests.<sup>45</sup>

Outright criticism of Spencer equally undermined the role of the Sabians. John Woodward rejected Spencer’s assertion of the antiquity and superiority of the Egyptians. It was Moses’s revulsion at the idolatry of the Egyptians that inspired the antagonism of the Israelite law to such practices.<sup>46</sup> An attack against the importance of the Egyptians was a blow against the role of the Sabians as well. Herman Wistius (1636-1708) rejected Spencer’s work—and the Sabians—out of hand.<sup>47</sup> Melchior Leydekker also offered a scathing critique of Spencer’s

<sup>40</sup> Marsham, *D. Johannes Marshami ... Canon chronicus aegyptiacus, ebraicus, graecus & diqvisiones ...* (Leipzig, 1676), 162.

<sup>41</sup> Thomas Burnet, *Archaeologiae Philosophicae; sive Doctrina Antiqua de Rerum Originibus* (2 vols.; London, 1692<sup>2</sup>). See John Gascoigne, “‘The Wisdom of Egyptians’ and Secularisation,” Stephen Gaukroger (ed.), *The Uses of Antiquity: The Scientific Revolution and the Classical Tradition* (Boston, 1991), 180. Burnet, *Archaeologiae Philosophicae*, argued that the Mosaic law was influenced not only by the Egyptians but also by another Gentile people, the Sabians (Gascoigne, “Secularisation,” 182).

<sup>42</sup> On Spencer and the deists, see J. A. I. Champion, *Pillars of Priestcraft Shaken: The Church of England and its Enemies, 1660-1730* (New York, 1992), 155-57. Francis Schmidt, “Polytheisms: Degeneration or Progress?” in Schmidt (ed.), *The Inconceivable Polytheism*, 9-61.

<sup>43</sup> Champion, *Pillars*, 146.

<sup>44</sup> Warburton, *The Divine Legation of Moses Demonstrated* (5 vols.; London, 1766<sup>5</sup>); see Gascoigne, “Secularisation,” 200-201.

<sup>45</sup> Gascoigne, “Secularisation,” 190.

<sup>46</sup> John Woodward, *Of the wisdom of the antient Egyptians, & c; a discourse concerning their arts, their sciences, and their learning, their laws, their government, and their religion, with occasional reflections upon the state of learning among the Jews, and some other nations* (London, 1777).

<sup>47</sup> Wistius, *Aegyptiaca et Dekaphylon, sive De Aegyptiacorum sacrorum cum Hebraicis collatione libri tres:...* (1717), bk. 3, c. 15, 294-98.

work in his *De republica Hebraeorum*. Pierre Jurieu was equally critical of Spencer and thus of the reality of the Sabians. The Israelites brought a kind of paganism with them out of Egypt but it was not God's intention to use these customs in shaping the Israelite laws. The paganism of the Israelites was the unfortunate inheritance of all the peoples of the region.<sup>48</sup> To assert, as Spencer did, that God used the forms of paganism in the Israelite law was offensive to Jurieu:

The third, which is not only erroneous but even scandalous is that of Spencer.... Nothing can be said more like a Pagan or a Magician than this, that God, who under such rigorous Pains, had so expressly forbidden the use of Images, and particularly those by which the Devil used to deliver his Oracles, should have so far authoriz'd these Images, as to introduce them into his Sanctuary, and to place them in the most sacred of all the Instruments belonging to his Service; such prodigies of a licentious Imagination are remarkable Instances of the boundless Confidence of some of our Modern Writers, among which Spencer and Marsham lead the Van; who are not ashamed to assert, that the Mosaick Service was for the greatest part settled in imitation of the Idolatrous Worship of the Pagans.<sup>49</sup>

In all of these cases, the emphasis on the Egyptians made the role of the Sabians increasingly irrelevant.

More general intellectual pressures took their toll on the certainty with which scholars assessed the Sabians. The seventeenth century saw the rise of a crisis in belief about the reliability of knowledge, particularly knowledge that was not mathematical or experiential à la Descartes.<sup>50</sup> Scholars such as Bayle, fought back by asserting that historical evidence could—after searching criticism—be proved reliable and authentic.<sup>51</sup> Theologians, too, had to be willing to fight their battles on rational terrain.<sup>52</sup> The Sabians, already weakened by comparison to the Egyptians, were further undermined when this general skepticism was focussed on the rather fragile evidence supplied by Maimonides. In his great *Dictionary* Louis Moreri, for example, was remarkably reticent about

<sup>48</sup> Jurieu, *Religio veterum: or, A general history of religious worship, both true and false, observ'd in the church for 4000 years/translated from the French of the celebrated Monsieur Jurieu* (2 vols.; London, 1721<sup>2</sup>).

<sup>49</sup> Jurieu, I, 409.

<sup>50</sup> Brendan Dooley, *The History of Skepticism: Experience and Doubt in Early Modern Culture* (Baltimore, 1999), 114-46.

<sup>51</sup> Anthony Grafton, *The Footnote: A Curious History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), 206-7.

<sup>52</sup> Barbara J. Shapiro, *A Culture of Fact, England, 1550-1720* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2000), 170.

the nature of Sabian religion.<sup>53</sup> Bayle, in his classic riposte to Moreri, does not even mention the Sabians.

A specific and no doubt influential source for this early skepticism of Maimonides's understanding of the Sabians appeared in a passing comment by Richard Simon, the great bible scholar. In his *Histoire Critique du Vieux Testament*, Simon admitted that Maimonides was probably the best source for information on the Sabian sect, but he was reticent about drawing any important conclusions because "to tell the truth, we have very little knowledge of this ancient sect."<sup>54</sup> Furthermore, while it might be possible to explain a good portion of the books of Moses on the basis of Sabian practices, Simon concluded that his discussion would not be the place to pursue those connections.<sup>55</sup>

This uncertainty about the Sabians began to find its way into more general works of scholarship. The most that the great Catholic scholar A. Calmet felt safe in saying was that Sabian was not the name of a particular people but a religion known in the Orient, with its origin among the Chaldeans, which spread among the Egyptians, Nabateans, and others; and it was afforded some protection by Mohammed in the Koran.<sup>56</sup> But Calmet could not shake off all doubts about the Sabians. The evidence was based neither on facts or ancient historians, or any authentic monument; he felt obliged to warn the reader that all of this discussion is only "une hyperbole" which could not be guaranteed as the truth.<sup>57</sup> In Picart's massive *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde* (1728) there is a "Dissertation sur Les Sabeens" in which the original Sabians are portrayed as worshiping different manifestations of one God. At the same time the treatise admits that scholars have begun to doubt the received knowledge about the Sabians, including that from Maimonides.<sup>58</sup>

The resistance of more radical Enlightenment figures to acknowledge the reality of the Sabians seems to be the outgrowth of these early doubts. The Sabians attracted the attention of Voltaire but he was reluctant to commit himself on the question of the identity and historical context of these pagans.<sup>59</sup> Voltaire did not need the Sabians for his own understanding of the relationship of the Israelites to pagan culture. Voltaire must have been aware of at least some part of the scholarly tradition on the Sabians as they appear in an introductory list in the entry on idolatry in his *Philosophical Dictionary*. He did not

<sup>53</sup> Moreri, *Le grand dictionnaire historique* (10 vols.; Paris, 1759), s.v. "Zabeens."

<sup>54</sup> Simon, *Histoire Critique du Vieux Testament. Nouvelle édition* (Rotterdam, 1685), 545.

<sup>55</sup> Simon, *Histoire Critique*, 50.

<sup>56</sup> Augustin Calmet, *Dictionnaire historique, archéologique, philologique, chronologique, géographique et littéral de la Bible* (4 vols.; Paris, 1845-46<sup>4</sup>).

<sup>57</sup> Calmet, *Dictionnaire de la Bible*, "Zabiens."

<sup>58</sup> Bernard Picart, *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde...* (9 vols.; Amsterdam, 1728-43), VIII, 11.

<sup>59</sup> Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, tr. Peter Gay (2 vols.; New York, 1962).

discuss them further in the entry.<sup>60</sup> Given Voltaire's generalized picture of ancient paganism as the crutch of the superstitious masses in all ancient societies, he had no real need to find one source of paganism. It was endemic in all societies. It certainly made sense that the Israelites would have borrowed some practices from the Egyptians: "Isn't it highly probable that the small nation imitated a practice of the great nation, and that the Jews borrowed several customs from their masters?"<sup>61</sup> As for tracing the historical path of paganism, the past is too obscure: "While nobody knows when men began to make idols for themselves, we do know that they date from the remotest antiquity. Terah, Abraham's father, made them at Ur, in Chaldea. Rachel stole and carried off the idols of Laban, her father-in-law. We cannot go back farther than that."<sup>62</sup> The pagan-like laws of the Jews were internally generated. The entry in Diderot's encyclopedia was equally ambivalent about how to identify the Sabians or their religion. It states only that "some" believe that Sabianism was the most ancient religion of the world. He also reports, without agreeing or dissenting, that Maimonides thought the Sabian religion was widespread at the time of Moses.<sup>63</sup> In the article on Arabs, there is a more forceful critique of "Zabianism" as a collection of the most extravagant elements of idolatry, superstition, and heresy. This mongrel nature suggests, the article concludes, that ancient idolatry of the Near East could not have been considered "Sabianism."<sup>64</sup> Indeed, Sabianism was a "mélange" of various ideas borrowed from Persians, Greeks, and Egyptians; it did not approach a systematic theology.<sup>65</sup>

Scholarly awareness of the Sabians was resilient, and even in the latter part of the eighteenth century major scholars could still insert them into the mosaic of Near Eastern history. Gibbon, was not deterred by the uncertainty of the evidence: "The religion of the Sabians and Magians, of the Jews and Christians, were disseminated from the Persian Gulf to the Red Sea. In a remote period of antiquity, Sabianism was diffused over Asia by the science of the Chaldeans and the arms of the Assyrians."<sup>66</sup> In Dupuis's discussion of the religions of the world, for example, the Hebrews are not the repository of an original spiritual religion, but of one which grew up in "Sabianism and in the religion of the worshippers of fire and of Nature." This religion was that "of all the

<sup>60</sup> Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, I, 316 ("Idol, Idolatory, Idolatry"): "Whether the Persians, the Sabeans [sic], the Egyptians, the Tartars, the Turks, Were Idolators, and of What Antiquity is the Origin of the Images Called Idols."

<sup>61</sup> Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, I, 204.

<sup>62</sup> Voltaire, *Philosophical Dictionary*, I, 320.

<sup>63</sup> Diderot, *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des métiers* (35 vols.; Neuchâtel, 1765; Stuttgart, 1967<sup>2</sup>), s.v. "Sabaisme."

<sup>64</sup> Diderot, *Encyclopédie*, "Arabes."

<sup>65</sup> Diderot, *Encyclopédie*, "Sarracén."

<sup>66</sup> Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (8 vols.; Boston, 1855), VI, 214-15.

people.” It is “incontestably the most ancient and thus Sabianism was the most universal religion.”<sup>67</sup>

The rest of the nineteenth century took its toll on the Sabians. The higher criticism that flourished in Germany—and eventually made its way to England—eroded the sense of a divinely inspired text. Under these intellectual conditions, it was hard to defend as divinely inspired a set of laws that seemed to have been designed to counter paganism. While scholars lost interest in the Sabians per se, various factors combined to increase (transform?) scholarly interest in the actual historical context of Israelite monotheism. Instead of turning to the Sabians, scholars found other ways to explain the Mosaic laws in the context of ancient societies. For example, Mayers’s *History of the Jews* saw the Mosaic laws as practical laws designed to preserve the social identity and health of the Israelites:

The law of Moses then had nothing new or extraordinary in this point; the design of it was, to keep the people within reasonable bounds, distinct from other nations, by placing impediments in the way of their forming social intercourse with them; and the abstinence from particular sorts of meat, contributed also to the preservation both of their health and morals.<sup>68</sup>

In a more tangible way, the explosion of knowledge and interest about Sanskrit and the Aryans, as well as the deciphering of Assyrian texts that paralleled biblical accounts, suggested that the Israelites must have been part of a flourishing polytheistic culture of the Near East. In many ways this approach was a continuation of the attempt by earlier scholars to seek connections between Israelite customs and the habits of the Indians of the New World.

However, the Sabians did not disappear from the scholarly discourse completely, although they appeared in material outside the circle of higher biblical critics. They are invoked as the original idolaters, worshipping the stars and spreading their beliefs among the peoples of the ancient world. In his (1816) *A rational of the ritual of the Hebrew worship: in which the wise designs and usefulness of that ritual are explained, and vindicated from objections*, Lowman commented that “Hence the Sabians (who seem to have held some of the most ancient principles of idolatry) used angels and planets as mediators, whom they thought to be seven viceroys, or lower kings, inhabiting those bodies of light, as so many palaces or temples....”<sup>69</sup> J. A. Dulaure in his *Des cultes qui ont*

<sup>67</sup> Dupuis, *Origine de tous les cultes: ou, Religion universelle* (10 vols.; Paris, 1835-36), I, 10-11.

<sup>68</sup> M. Mayers, *History of the Jews: From Their Origin to Their Ultimate Dispersion* (London, 1824), 102, note.

<sup>69</sup> Moses Lowman, *A rational of the ritual of the Hebrew worship: in which the wise designs and usefulness of that ritual are explained, and vindicated from objections* (London, 1816).

*precedé et amené l'Idolâtrie ou l'adoration des figures humaines* (1805) finds a widespread Sabian worship of the stars among the Egyptians, Chaldeans, Phoenicians, Persians, and Greeks. It is still present in India and China.<sup>70</sup> The Sabians make a passing appearance in the *Sabaeen Researches* by John Landseer in his 1823 discussion of seals and signets in the ancient Near East. Discussing one type of seal, he asserts that “they are the kind of signets which were in use among the Sabaeen nations of remote antiquity....”<sup>71</sup> According to Landseer, when the Jews returned to the use of amulets, it was their neighbors in Canaan who had “infected them with the superstitious practices of the Sabaeans; or in other words, had revived those of their Chaldaean ancestors.”<sup>72</sup> Lubbock in *Origin of Civilization* used the Sabians in the general sense of idolatrous worship of the stars: “Who can wonder at the worship of the sun, moon, and stars, which has been regarded as a special form of religion, and is known as Sabaeism?”<sup>73</sup> Drummond asserted in his *Origines* that “thus in Egypt, and throughout Asia, where Tsabaism generally prevailed, the Sun, with the exception of one nation, was adored by mankind, while the existence of the God of nature was either misunderstood or forgotten.”<sup>74</sup> Indeed, he continued, “it seems that most of the erroneous doctrines of the Pagans may be traced to those of the Tsabaists. Idolatry clearly owes its origin to the symbols, by which the leaders of the hosts of heaven were represented. The Tsabaists appear to have been the inventors of graphic symbols and of hieroglyphical writing.”<sup>75</sup> Townley’s *Reasons of the Laws of Moses* (1827) offers an extended discussion of the Sabians with the goal of affirming Maimonides’s interpretation of the Mosaic laws.<sup>76</sup> Pagan culture was still real for Townley, and the Sabians offered a way of articulating or categorizing the customs against which the Israelites rebelled. He returned to Gale’s *Court of the Gentiles* to assert that “Zabaism, so termed from the Zabii, a sect of Chaldean philosophers, was the first and more natural piece of idolatry, which consisted in a religious worship given unto the sun, moon, and stars.”<sup>77</sup>

Once the Sabians had been reduced to a kind of non-descript or catch-all kind of paganism, however, they were less of a challenge to anthropologists interested in making connections between biblical evidence and contemporary primitive cultures. Milman’s *History of the Jews* (1863) is an interesting tran-

<sup>70</sup> Dulaure, *Cultes*, 24-25.

<sup>71</sup> John Landseer, *Sabaeen Researches* (London, 1823), 18.

<sup>72</sup> Landseer, *Researches*, 32-33.

<sup>73</sup> Lubbock, *Origin of Civilisation* (1870), 284.

<sup>74</sup> Drummond, *Origines; or Remarks on the origin of several empires, states and cities* (4 vols.; London, 1824-29), II, 84.

<sup>75</sup> Drummond, *Origines*, II, 164.

<sup>76</sup> James Townley, *Reasons of the Laws of Moses: From the “More Nevochim” of Maimonides* (London, 1827).

<sup>77</sup> Townley, *Reasons*, 41.

sitional text in this shift from seeing the Jews against a background of paganism to contextualizing them among primitive pastoral tribesmen. Milman still describes the general pagan religion as having some kind of Sabian identity:

The religion of the natives, in whose territory the Israelites were about to settle, appears to have been a depravation of the purer Tsabaism, or worship of the host of heaven—of that vast and multiform nature worship which prevailed throughout the Asiatic nations.<sup>78</sup>

Nevertheless, Milman saw the early Israelites as part of the larger Near Eastern cultural world where there were more important commonalities than differences over religion: “Abraham is the Sheik or Emir of a pastoral tribe, migrating from place to place.... He is in no respect superior to his age or country, excepting in the sublime purity of his religion.”<sup>79</sup> Indeed, Milman proposes that the geography and climate facilitated the early form of star worship:

In the spacial and level plains of Chaldea, where the nights are delightfully cool and serene, a pastoral people would naturally be led to contemplate the heavenly bodies with peculiar attention. To this country the first rudiments of astronomy are generally ascribed, and here the earliest form of idolatry, the worship of the host of heaven, planet worship, began to spread.<sup>80</sup>

It was only with the work of “biblical” anthropologists at the turn of the century that Sabianism became superfluous. W. Robertson Smith’s seminal book on the religion of the Semites shifted the emphasis away from imagining a paganism distinct from Israelite monotheism to contextualizing the Israelites against a background of primitive cultures that allowed for a naturally evolving religious tradition:

You observe that in this argument I take it for granted that, when we go back to the most ancient religious conceptions and usages of the Hebrews, we shall find them to be a common property of a group of kindred peoples, and not the exclusive possession of the tribes of Israel.<sup>81</sup>

James Frazer’s *Folk-lore in the Old Testament* moved even further away from Maimonides’s understanding of pre-Mosaic paganism and its influence on Is-

<sup>78</sup> Henry Hart Milman, *History of the Jews* (2 vols.; New York, 1909), I, 137.

<sup>79</sup> Milman, I, 48.

<sup>80</sup> Milman, I, 32.

<sup>81</sup> W. Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites. The religion of the Semites: the Fundamental Institutions* (Edinburgh, 1889), 3.



raelite monotheism.<sup>82</sup> He looks to the contextual experience of primitive tribes and their superstitions to explain Israelite practices:

So far as this explanation assumes a superstition to lie at the root of the prohibition, it may well be correct, and accordingly it may be worthwhile to inquire whether analogous prohibitions, with the reasons for them, can be discovered among rude pastoral tribes in modern times, for on the face of it the rule is likely to be observed rather by people who depend on their flocks and herds than by such as subsist on the produce of their fields and gardens.<sup>83</sup>

The secrets of Israelite ritual can be unlocked not by looking at the pagan context but rather at the broad category of primitive tribes to see how they negotiate their relationships with the natural world.<sup>84</sup> The important facet of Israelite religion was not how different it was from paganism, but how similar it was to other so-called primitive cultures of the Near East.

More recently, Mary Douglas engaged in the same kind of reasoning about the ancient Israelites. For her, the most important issue was the larger pattern of responses to wholeness and holiness that she was trying to see in the dietary laws.<sup>85</sup> In order to construct this interpretative model, she had first to show how the Israelite experience could be applied to other primitive groups just as Robertson and others had done. For example, in seeking out the original reasons that Israelites avoided certain kinds of meat, she argues that such distaste originated in the reaction common among pastoral people to reject certain kinds of game.<sup>86</sup> Paganism is once again displaced as the operative factor in the genesis of the Mosaic laws. The Israelites are set within a context of primitive peoples who function according to universal laws of holiness. The Sabians, even as a diffuse idolatrous culture, are irrelevant to the evolution of the ritual and sacrificial laws of the Israelites.<sup>87</sup>

Despite the growing indifference of biblical scholars and anthropologists, the Sabians did survive. The view of an Israelite culture antithetical to pagan-

<sup>82</sup> Frazer, *Folk-lore in the Old Testament: Studies in Comparative Religion, Legend and Law* (3 vols.; London, 1918), III, 117.

<sup>83</sup> Frazer, *Folk-lore*, III, 117-18.

<sup>84</sup> Frazer, *Folk-lore*, III, 154.

<sup>85</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo* (London, 1970).

<sup>86</sup> Douglas, 69-72.

<sup>87</sup> They remain a convenient shorthand to denote ancient star worship: "As for the problem of the nature of the first superstition, the three categories listed in the *Wisdom of Solomon* were no doubt still present in people's minds. Was it Sabeism, Euhemerism or Egyptianism?" (Schmidt, "Polytheisms," 20).

ism found partisans in certain corners of nineteenth-century culture. Lionel Gossman has studied in detail how that feeling manifested itself in the work of Heine and others. As Heine wrote:

Already in their earliest beginnings—as we observe in the Pentateuch—they manifest a predilection for the abstract, and their whole religion is nothing but an act of dialectics, by means of which matter and spirit are sundered, and the absolute is acknowledged only in the unique form of the Spirit. What a terribly isolated role they were forced to play among the nations of antiquity, which, devoting themselves to the most exuberant worship of nature, understood spirit rather as material phenomena, as image and symbol! What a striking antithesis they represented to multicolored Egypt, teeming with hieroglyphics; to Phoenicia, the great pleasure-temple of Astarte, or even to that beautiful sinner, lovely fragrant Babylonia, and finally, to Greece, burgeoning home of art.<sup>88</sup>

This kind of tradition, which was something of a conservative counterpoint to biblical criticism, did have continuing attractions for some scholars, most notably Jewish ones. The Sabians struck these people as the manifestation of that fundamental difference between monotheistic Israelites and polytheistic pagans.

The great Jewish historian of the nineteenth century, Heinrich Graetz, while not explicitly endorsing Maimonides's opinion about the role of the Sabians, nevertheless treated it as deserving of a certain respect. In his programmatic essay the "Structure of Jewish History," Graetz insisted on the importance of Maimonides's understanding of the Sabians:

On the basis of these principles and also the assumption that the historical task of Judaism had been to oppose directly Sabianism ... with its corrupt, highly unethical views and practices which was already flourishing at the time of Judaism's birth, Maimonides was able to find for most of Judaism's commandments a reasonable and purposeful foundation and to make them available to reason.... When an unusual commandment or detail does not readily yield to any of his assumptions then Maimonides has a handy remedy—its intent was most likely anti-Sabian.

Graetz cuts short this encomium reluctantly: "This is not the place to examine the strength and weaknesses of the Maimonidean system. Our only purpose is

<sup>88</sup> Lionel Gossman, "Philhellenism and Antisemitism: Mathew Arnold and his German Models," *Comparative Literature*, 46 (1994), 15, quoting Heine, *Ludwig Borne: A Memorial*.

to draw attention to the great influence which it had on Jewish history.”<sup>89</sup> The impulse to preserve a sense of a pagan culture against which the Israelites reacted is found in other Jewish scholars, even if they do not name the Sabians. The great Jewish bible scholar Yehezkel Kaufmann devoted a great deal of attention to imagining a kind of overarching pagan culture.

We designate as pagan all the religions of mankind from the beginnings of recorded history to the present, excepting Israelite religion and its derivatives, Christianity and Islam. This distinction assumes that, on the one hand, there is something unique about Israelite religion that sets it off from all the rest, and on the other, that there is an essential common aspect to all other religions which gives them their pagan character.<sup>90</sup>

Even Salo Baron, perhaps the most prominent of twentieth-century historians of Jewish history, acknowledged the sweeping nature of Maimonides’s use of the Sabians: “It is especially the Sabeian cult which prevailed in the environment of both the patriarch and the lawgiver and against which both of them took a firm stand. In fact, Maimonides thinks that this opposition of the founders of Judaism to the Sabeian ritual explains many obscure points in Jewish law.” Baron concludes, however, with a caveat: “In pursuing this hypothesis, Maimonides occasionally realizes that he can submit no evidence from the sources.”<sup>91</sup>

The changing fortunes of the Sabians were perhaps a barometer of more aggressive attitudes on the part of Christians towards Jewish history and identity. Consider, for example, the way in which nineteenth-century Christian scholars such as Ernest Renan created the myth of the Aryans. They transformed Christianity into an Aryan as opposed to a Semitic religion in order to excise any Jewish influence. In much the same way, the erosion of the perceived reality of the Sabians may have helped to undermine the revolutionary character of Israelite monotheism.<sup>92</sup> The larger story of the rise and fall of the Sabians is more assuredly a product of the evidence available to scholars at particularly crucial moments in European intellectual history. Under the increasing indifference, criticism, and shifting priorities of scholars, the Sabians faded back

<sup>89</sup> Graetz, *Structure of Jewish History and Other Essays*, trans. Ismar Schorsch (New York, 1975), 117.

<sup>90</sup> Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel*, trans. Moshe Greenberg (Chicago, 1969), 21.

<sup>91</sup> Baron, *A Social and Religious History of the Jews* (18 vols.; New York, 1965), II, 117, n. 21.

<sup>92</sup> See Maurice Olender, *Languages of Paradise* (Cambridge, 1992), 78-79. Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *The Savage in Judaism: An Anthropology of Israelite Religion and Ancient Judaism* (Bloomington, Ind., 1990), 15.

into the mists from which Maimonides had conjured them. The scholarly tradition of the Sabians, beginning with Maimonides and then continued in Spencer, contained the seeds of its own demise. It allowed the Sabians to be submerged in the history of Chaldeans and Egyptians and eventually to evaporate as a vague paganism of the ancient world. That history may not have very much to teach us about the Israelites, but it is a useful caution about creating our own Sabians.

Trinity College, Hartford.