

Bacon, Jewishness, and the Pastoral

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INTRODUCTION

New Atlantis is a novel about a flawless land. It is a story of discovery and enlightenment. In it, Francis Bacon creates his ideal scientific pastoral utopia. The story begins at sea. A ship from Europe is lost in the Pacific Ocean and happens upon a mystical island, called Bensalem. The inhabitants of this island are uneasy about welcoming in strangers, for after initially denying the European explorers entry onto their land, the natives quarantine the sailors in the “House of Strangers.” But, since these newcomers are Christians, too, the people of Bensalem allow them to stay. Throughout their visit, the sailors are introduced to the culture of this island. They learn of the ways of its people and learn about “Salomon’s House,” a scientific research college, of sorts, that only admits the best individuals. The newcomers see the island through various perspectives, one of them being through the eyes of Joabin, the Jew, or the “other” of Bensalem. *New Atlantis* is a story about identity and cultural disparity.

Bacon’s magical creation is, in a way, his representation and understanding of England. Claire Jowitt says that *New Atlantis* is a commentary and criticism on colonialism and the political culture of England. Jowitt cites Bacon’s investigation of Jewishness as a primary way in which he considers the reality of England. “Early modern culture represented Jewishness in contradictory ways. Bacon’s intervention in this discourse can be seen as similarly ambivalent” (Price 130). Bacon *uses* Jewishness

to examine the ideal society, the pastoral, and difference. There are two ways in which he considers these ideas, first through an investigation of the character Joabin and second through perpetual references, comparisons, and criticisms of ancient traditions.

Using both primary and secondary texts, I first conduct an investigation and close reading of *New Atlantis*. I then move to consider a Near-Eastern interpretation of the pastoral and consider both the connection and discord between Jewishness and the pastoral. **I seek to explicate the position and existence of the “Jew” and the “other” in Francis Bacon’s *New Atlantis* and to begin to examine the greater relationship between Jewishness and the pastoral.**

BACON

Bacon interacts both with an actual “Jew” and with greater Jewish tradition and text. His presentation and understanding of Jewishness is contradictory, to say the least. Bacon begins his story by setting Judaism in opposition with the culture. On the island of Bensalem, which sounds all too much like Jerusalem, Christianity is normal and dominant. One could say that the foreign sailors were only welcomed to this pastoral place because they were Christians. “Are ye Christians?,” the citizens of Bensalem asked the European explorers (Bacon 459). Bensalem is a place for Christians. Bacon says that Christians are pious and human. In *New Atlantis*, Christianity is the right way of life and anything different is frowned upon.

However, only a few pages later, Bacon makes positive references to parts of Jewish culture. For instance, the citizens of Bensalem recognize the importance of rest and live their lives according to “Jewish” numbers -- the entire text is peppered with connections to Judaism. When the European’s enter the Strangers’ House, the Bensalemite leader offers the sailors **six** helpers and tells them to **rest**. “But let it not trouble you...but rather left to your rest and ease. You shall want nothing, and there are six of our people appointed to attend to you...” (Bacon 461). The number six refers not only to the great importance of numbers in Judaism, but to the six days of the week and the six days of creation, after which Shabbat, the Jewish day of **rest**, is observed. More importantly, though, is the House of Salomon. It is tied directly to the Hebrew creation story and to the history of a Jewish king. In fact, this research institution is even called, by some, the “College of the Six Days Works,” for it is dedicated to “...finding out [the] true nature of all things...” (Bacon 471). This recognition and observance of Jewish

tradition is paired with a hatred of the same extent, for in the same paragraph, it is said that some believe the name of this sacred college to be corrupted in its original form, which references the great King of Israel. This is only one example of Bacon's contradictory representation of Jewish tradition. The text is full of connections to Biblical texts, ranging from the nature of miracles, to the practice of prayer. In addition, Bacon also references mystical, and perhaps pastoral, Jewish texts, by discussion mythical **dreams** and magical **light**. These ideas represent Bacon's interpretation and confusion of Jewish text and tradition.

The majority of Bacon's text, however, focuses on the behavior of the "Jew" as an other. The sailors and, ultimately, the reader, experience this island through the eyes of someone different. Bacon examines the way the Jew lives his life, *mostly* in opposition to the Christian norm (remember that Bacon's notion of Jewishness is contradictory). Even the first mention of a Jew makes him "different" and "other." "He was a Jew, and circumcised: for they have some few stirps of Jews yet remaining among them, whom they leave to their own religion" (Bacon 475). Bacon has already positioned the Jew as less than and forever different from the Christian. Even though Joabin, the Jew described by Bacon, has mostly assimilated, he will always physically an other, if not mentally and spiritually different, too. Bacon, while setting the Jew apart from the dominant culture also includes the Jew, saying that Joabin and Jews like him have accepted *some* of the country's beliefs. "For whereas they hate the name of Christ, and have a secret inbred rancour against the people amongst whom they live: these (contrariwise) give unto our Saviour many high attributes, and love the nation of

Bensalem extremely” (Bacon 476). Bacon identifies Joabin as just different enough. Joabin is not a good Christian, but he is acceptable.

Bacon continues his investigation of the “Jew” with a conversation about marriage. Here, Bacon goes more in depth into the actual life of Joabin. In Bensalem, marriage becomes more of a form of control for those who are out of control. Bensalem is the “virgin of the world,” according to Joabin. “You shall understand that there is not under the heavens so chaste a nation as this of Bensalem: nor so free from all pollution or foulness” (Bacon 476). It is a place where marriage is only necessary for the bad citizens, for the bad Christians (or Jews). Bacon’s dual representation of Jewishness is present in this discussion, too. Joabin has unlimited praise not only for Bensalem, but for all of its traditions, even though marriage is a control that is used against people like him. “They have also many wise and excellent laws touching marriage” (Bacon 478). Joabin, though still a Jew, is normalized, Christianized, and has assimilated himself, for even *he* is impressed by the ways of Bensalem. Here, too, Joabin is referred to as “the good Jew.” In other words, he is not a normally evil Jew, but he is tolerable. Again, this is only one example of an interaction between a “good” citizen and a “bad” citizen - or between a Christian and a Jew. Throughout the story, the Jew is portrayed both positively and negatively, for while he is sent around as a messenger, he is also viewed as a wise man.

Bacon uses Jewishness to maintain class, difference, and distance while the normative Christian mainstream *pretends* to accept and embrace the Jew. Throughout the entire text, the Jew is segregated and alienated but is *still* offered a seat at the table, so to speak. Bacon’s text presents the Jew as a threat and describes ways for

Christians to ensure that the Jew is forever separate and distinct. In her essay, "Colonialism, Jewishness and politics," Claire Jowitt further identifies and investigates Bacon's contradictory depiction of Jews, saying that they are just as complex.

"In addition, there was a strong tradition of anti-Semitic depictions of Jews in circulation that imagined them as treasonous, sexually monstrous, foul smelling, and guilty of the ritual murder of Christians...Jews were only seen positively because they were imminently expected to convert." (Price 144)

Jowitt says that Bacon's Jewishness emerges from these various characterizations. She considers how Joabin is accepted in Bensalem, but also notices how he is distrusted. "Superficially Joabin is described in positive ways: he is depicted as 'a wise man, and learned, and of great policy, and excellently seen in the laws and customs of that nation' (Bacon 476)" (Price 144). She even asserts that Bacon's "good" representation of Jews advocates for better treatment of Jews in England. However, Jowitt also explains Bacon's name choice of "Joabin" for the Jew. "Joab was the untrustworthy nephew of king David who treasonably tried to prevent Solomon from becoming king after David had named him as his successor" (Price 144). While Bacon *tries* to accept Jewishness, the dormant anti-Semitism of his text reveals his *true* perception of Jews, that they are, in fact, deceitful.

Jowitt also discusses the controls placed upon Joabin, the Jew and the other. She establishes that even though Joabin is Christianized and a part of the Bensalemite society, he is still different. Jowitt cites Joabin's circumcision as a form of social control that maintains distance and difference.

"Joabin is circumcised; in other words, his sexual desires have been curbed by trimming his foreskin because, as the gloss to Genesis 17.11 in the Geneva Bible outlines, the 'privy part is circumcised to show that all that is begotten of man is corrupt and must be mortified'." (Price 149)

Circumcision is not only a way in which Joabin is different, but it makes him less than the Christians. Jowitt says that circumcision is an inhibition to Jewish sexual experience and asserts that it functions in the same way as marriage does in *New Atlantis*, as a control or punishment for the inferior members of society. "Joabin's circumcision thus acts as an impediment to sexual desire...in the same way that marriage is intended to control the lower social orders" (Price 149). Bacon's representations of circumcision and marriage show his support for social control of the lower classes. In addition, one could say that Bacon's notion of circumcision is not only a perversion of a sacred Jewish practice, but puts the "Jews Body" in direct opposition with the natural, the normal, and with, perhaps, the pastoral.

Is Joabin in opposition to Bacon's "pastoral"? Has the "Jew," historically, been in opposition to **the** "pastoral"?

No, I think.

THE (JEWISH) PASTORAL?

In his essay, "Pastoral Origins and the Ancient Near East," David Halperin offers a Biblical understanding of the pastoral. He investigates the development of the pastoral in the Near East, making no "real" ties to Jewishness, but cites texts that are Jewish. Halperin begins by examining spiritual expression in these texts. "Far from being a late and peripheral development, pastoral is beginning to be considered one of the oldest and most characteristic forms of man's spiritual expression" (Halperin 86). He says that the Torah story of Cain and Abel describes the dilemma between divinity and shepherd vs. farmer life. Both in the story of Cain and Abel and in the story of Moses, the "pastoral nomad," as Halperin calls him, is a primary character. Halperin also examines the agricultural life the Ancient Israelite's lived. He says that they resisted the onset of civilization and the urban life. "elijah, as he is described in the two books of Kings in the Old Testament, maintained precisely such a wavering relation to the settled communities..." (Halperin 99). Early Jews had an aversion to the settled and established urban community. These Ancient Jews maintained a physical relationship to the land. The holidays created by ancient Hebrews and observed by modern Jews are based on agriculture and how the land functions.

Halperin says that there is something divine and Godly about the pasture and the empty landscape. He notes that most of the time, in Jewish text, God speaks to an individual who is **not** in a city.

"By neglecting the city entirely and lighting upon David in the isolation of the pasture, the working of God's grace accentuates the contrast between man's outward appearance and his inner state. To be sure, there is also a suggestion

that removal from society carries with it a comparative innocence or moral rectitude and that the kingship, which has been a corrupt urban institution...” (Halperin 97)

Moses’ first interaction with God is entirely pastoral; he hears the voice of God when he leaves the city and is alone in nature with his sheep. Halperin even says that the shepherd acts as a kind of middle-man between God and the people. “Thanks to his liminal position and increased exposure to divinity, the ancient herdsman could perform the function of a mediator between the human community and the mysterious powers beyond it” (Halperin 97). The herdsman was a leader of religious life, for he possessed a higher connection to the land.

To Halperin, the Israelite’s were architects of the pastoral life. Through the engagement with God in the pasture and a dislike of the urban environment, Ancient Hebrews wrote and experienced the bucolic. Until recently, the Jewish people have always been “nomads,” in a sense. Even in Francis Bacon’s time, Jews were not settles. In fact, the 1500’s might represent the high of the Jewish pastoral, for it is when the Zohar was written and when mystical, erotic, and “natural” Judaism became popular. Texts written during this period explicitly depict a sexual relationship between the people, the land, and “God.”

*How could we **not** be pastoral?*

Today, some position the Jew in opposition to the pastoral, as Bacon did in parts of his text.

Does the Jew only become anti-pastoral when he **assimilates** and settles with an **other**?

I have begun to examine Jewishness and the pastoral. This is only a first step, however. I set out to investigate the notions of otherness, difference, and Jewishness in Bacon's *New Atlantis* as a way to explore the dilemma and question of the Jewish pastoral. The greater question of the heart of both my consideration of Bacon's Jew and Jewish pastoral roots is:

What *is* the **Jew's Body**?

Works Cited

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