TRUTH TO (HIS) NATURE: JUDAISM IN THE ART OF SIMEON SOLOMON

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Abstract:

Simeon Solomon was a Pre-Raphaelite artist who navigated the modernity of Victorian England to create works revolving around explicitly Jewish themes; often creating overtly Jewish images, highly unusual among the generally explicitly Christian movement. This article will deal with how Solomon constructed and dealt with his own identity as a Gay, Jewish man in the modern, and heavily Christian environment of mid-nineteenth century Victorian London. Using contemporary approaches to historicism, observation, and spirituality, his works deal with the complexities of his identity as Jewish and homosexual in a manner where neither was shameful, but rather, sources of inspiration.

Simeon Solomon was born in London to a middle class Ashkenazi Jewish family in 1840. Two of his older siblings, Abraham and Rebecca, were artists while his father worked as an embosser and had some training in design. Simeon was close to Rebecca; it is likely she introduced him to drawing and encouraged him in pursuing art.[1] Simeon was admitted to the Royal Academy when he was fourteen and was quickly drawn to the Pre-Raphaelites. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood only lasted from1848-53 and had lost cohesion by the time Solomon was admitted to the Royal Academy in 1854. However, PRB art and ideas stuck around, meaning Solomon was exposed to their ideas and art through the PRB publication *The Germ* as well as displays of paintings and drawings by the movement during his time at the academy.[2] Solomon had begun working in Pre-Raphaelite circles by the time he turned eighteen and became greatly admired by his colleges for his imagination and innovation.[3] The Pre-Raphaelite ideas about art as fundamentally spiritual, that nature should be studied carefully, and honouring artistic tradition aside from what was deemed rote, were part of religious discourse in modern Britain. Victorian was shaped by the dismantling of the confessional state, with which came instability of religion's place in society and an increased emphasis on Christian values as morality.[4] Although created with conveying Christian morality in mind, the Pre-Raphaelites' method of truth to nature, to show the mystical and the holy while maintaining a firm grounding in physical reality provided a

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[1] Gabriel P. Weisburg."Jewish Naturalist Painters: Understanding and Competing in the Mainstream". *The Emergence of Jewish Artists in the Nineteenth-Century*. Ed. Susan Goodman Turmarkin. (London, Merrel, 2001.) 148.

[2] Seymour Gail Marie. *The Life and Work of Simeon Solomon*. University Microfilms International, 1991.26.

[3] Ibid. 1

[4] For the purposes of this paper I will be using religion and spirituality as defined by Sally M. Promey in her 2003 paper "The Return of Religion in the Scholarship of American Art": "religion as the broader of the two terms, incorporating spirituality as one of its many dimensions. Religion, in this sense, intersects life and art at multiple and various points and allows for the possibility of complex, even competing and contradictory, sorts of commitments and engagements within a single artist, artefact, or beholder."

framework for Solomon to explore his own religion, and spirituality. Rather than abandoning the Jewish world, Solomon used his Jewishness as a source of inspiration, and as a way to connect with the vanishing past of pre-emancipation Judaism.[5] British understandings of religion along with specific pre-Raphaelite interests are a vital part of Solomon's works.

Solomon was the only non-Christian in the Pre-Raphaelites; as a result his work is informed by the complex convergence of Victorian evangelical piety, a Pre-Raphaelite interest in close observation, and Jewish tradition, to create a modern representation of Judaism. Simeon Solomon was a Jewish homosexual working in a community of deeply spiritual Protestants at a time of intense religious revival in England. The rise of evangelicalism, religious revival and the study of science as a way of understanding the world are widely recognised as being crucial parts of modern Victorian life. A Jewish person working as an artist with a community of gentiles was an incredibly recent development at the time Solomon began his career. The first Jewish man to be admitted to the Royal Academy, Solomon Alexander Hart was only admitted in 1840, the year Simeon Solomon was born. Documents pertaining to Solomon as part of the Pre-Raphaelites are fragmented, but from what survives it is clear that Solomon was an important part of the community, professionally, and socially.[6] The study of Solomon, his work and his relationships with the Pre-Raphaelites has typically had a heavy biographical focus. This approach to Solomon, and many other Pre-Raphaelites is due to the fact that the group made a massive effort to document their lives, theories, and achievements. Many of the histories

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[5] Gail M. Seymour. "The Old Testament Paintings and Drawings." in *Love Revealed: Simeon Solomon and the Pre-Raphaelites*. Ed. Colin Cruise. (London: Merrell. 2005.) 19.

[6] Frank C. Sharp."A friendship I held dear: Simeon Solomon and the Royal Academy Circle". in *Love Revealed: Simeon Solomon and the Pre-Raphaelites*. Ed. Colin Cruise. (London: Merrell. 2005.) 25.

of the group were written by its members around the turn of the century, after Solomon was tried and condemned for sodomy in 1873. As an attempt to distance themselves from the scandal, the Pre-Raphaelites cut all ties with him, denied that he had been an important member of the movement, and wrote him out of their histories.[7] While Solomon's life and his relationships with the Pre-Raphaelites are worthy areas of study, and did have significant impact on his work, there has not been a great deal of attention paid to how Solomon's work fit into modern English discourse around religion. Solomon's work involved interaction between the many components of his identity as well as his engagement with contemporary English concerns around religion, spirituality, and objectivity, shaped by the methodology and interests of the Pre-Raphaelites. I hope to navigate these elements of Victorian culture to reach a deeper understanding of how identity and religion interact in Solomon's work, as well as how the Victorian interest in observation shaped Solomon's work.

The Pre-Raphaelite devotion to the idea of truth to nature meant first-hand study as often as possible was a vital part of Pre-Raphaelite artistic practice. The biblical subjects Solomon dealt with were geographically rooted in modern day Israel, Iran, Syria and Egypt- all far from Britain. This meant Solomon's access to objects for first-hand study came largely from the colonial actions of the British Museum. Another source of information was travel to biblical sites. Among other artists working with biblical illustration, William Holman Hunt travelled to Egypt and the Palestine and made a great deal of scientific illustrations of the geography, local plant life, architecture, textiles, animals, ruins, in other

[7] Seymour. *The Life and Work of Simeon Solomon.* 204

words, anything related to the bible.[8] These drawings, as well as sketchbooks published by other travellers, were shared in pre-Raphaelite circles, allowing those who could not travel to Biblical sites to fill their art with accurate material. These artistic pilgrimages had an almost archaeological slant, and did in many cases overlap with archaeological discoveries.

In 1847 a section of the ruins of the ancient Assyrian city, Nineveh, were excavated by British diplomat Austen Henry Layard. A massive public display of these looted objects was to be found at the British museum from 1852 on. This colonial activity gave Solomon, and the other Pre-Raphaelites, unprecedented access to a historical source contemporary to the Kingdom of Judah.[9] Close study of the Nineveh room can be seen in the details and aesthetics Solomon included in many of his works. A large section of the Hebrew bible could now be represented in an informed historical manner. This concept of historicism and accuracy was of great importance to the Pre-Raphaelites. This early historicism was part of a larger growing concern within English society of how to represent the past. This collection of artefacts allowed Solomon to approach subjects from Jewish history, and holy texts using Pre-Raphaelite truth to nature.

Even in images drawn from sections of Jewish texts set in places where the rich reliefs brought from Nineveh have no place, Solomon used information gathered from details in reliefs to enrich the images with historicity. When Solomon tackled the story of Moses in his 1860 piece, *The Mother of Moses* (fig.1), he chose to show a scene inside the home of Jochaved, Moses' enslaved mother. Solomon treated the subject with historicism

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[8] T.S.R. Boase. "Biblical Illustration in Nineteenth-Century Europe." *Journal of the Warbrug and Courtauld Institutes.* Vol.29 (1966): 359-360.

[9] The Kingdom of Judah's timeline is an area of archeological debate. It lasted from about the 9th century BCE until the late 7th century BCE when it was conquered into the neo-Babylonian Empire. Judah was certainly part of the Assyrian Empire as a vassal state from the time it was conquered.

and emotionalism rather than a strictly academic take on the subject.[10] Solomon shows the family as humbly dressed, and living in a simple hut rather than richly attired as generally shown in Christian artistic convention.

Solomon took details from the Nineveh reliefs as well as sketchbooks passed through Pre-Raphaelite circles to add a historical dimension to, and to flesh out the details of, this painting. The model Solomon hired was Fanny Eaton, a working class black woman who went on to model for many of the Pre-Raphaelites. The fact Solomon used a model who was obviously not white, a visible other as a model for biblical figures in a time where idealized beauty as white was a given is fascinating. Solomon's Jochaved and Miriam are (to a Victorian eye) visibly Jewish, tightly curled dark hair and all, presenting a clear other to a Victorian audience.[11] The Victorian interest in phrenology, studying the face to understand the ethnic background and character of a person, comes into play here. For a Victorian audience with this interest in phrenology, there would be no doubt these women were Egyptian Jews. Some of this certainly came out of the interest in truth to nature and historical accuracy Solomon shows in other aspects of his biblical works, but by making this choice to show these figures as Jews, Solomon consciously points out that this painting is not about Christianity. Solomon does not make Jochaved and Miriam stereotypes, but rather they are shown as Jewish and dignified at once. This scene is rather lovely; it is a tender, human moment and at the same time it is overtly, unashamedly Jewish.

The Mother of Moses shows a moment from the life of Moses through a modern approach. Rather than depicting a moment directly from biblical text, Solomon chose an

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[10] Colin Cruise. 'Pre-Raphaelitism and Early Success' in *Love Revealed: Simeon Solomon and the PreRaphaelites*. Ed. Colin Cruise. (London: Merrell. 2005.) 85.

[11] Susan Turmarkin Goodman. "Reshaping Jewish identity in Art." in *The Emergence of Jewish Artists in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Ed. Susan Goodman Turmarkin. (London, Merrel, 2001) 88.

intimate moment between the baby Moses and his mother and sister, Jochaved and Miriam. This moment can be inferred from the text, but is not explicit. In this sense, a similar image is Ford Everett Millais' *Christ in the House of his Parents*. Both images show interest in the pre-Raphaelite ideal of truth to nature, through careful study of reality in every detail, historicising, and a non-supernaturalist approach. Solomon took the modern interest in historical biblical figures, portrayed as people rather than divine, and applied it to his own religion. In this context, Jewish belief was quite compatible with Victorian concerns around objectivity. Judaism historically has a different understanding of biblical figures than Christianity, and has traditionally seen Moses, Abraham, Jeremiah, as people, good Jews with a special relationship with God. The Jewish view of figures considered by Christians to be like Christ was as historic figures, not as the divine.

Close, critical analysis of biblical texts was a relatively new way of reading, closely tied to the growing modern interest in scientific objectivity. At the time, biblical criticism was developing in protestant communities as a form of personal devotion. Interestingly, approaching biblical texts critically has been a part of Jewish tradition for thousands of years with some of the earliest evidence for this form of reading preserved in the Talmud. Critical reading is closely related to another important part of pre-Raphaelite work, the idea of objective, scientific observation. Close readings and close observational looking were coming from this interest in objective analysis. That objectivity can and should be applied to everything, even religious texts, is an incredibly modern way of thinking, as is the intense study of nature seen in Pre-Raphaelite work. This careful historical observation can be seen in the details of *The Mother of Moses.* The birds in the background, the textiles, the basket Miriam holds all have research and this observational looking informing them.

Harps show up in many of Solomon's religious works, including three discussed in this paper, *The Mother of Moses* (fig.1), *A Young Musician Employed in the Temple Service at the Feast of Tabernacles* (fig.2) and *Queen Esther Hearing the News of the Intended Massacre of the Jews* (fig.3). This brings the ideas of art, religion and music together. By including harps Solomon bought music into his paintings, a comparison that would later become increasingly important in the Aesthetic movement, which many Pre-Raphaelites including Solomon would join.[12] Music, visual art, and religion each have the capability to cause an emotional response and a transformative experience in an audience, and they are often used together in religious rituals to create a deep emotional response in participants. Showing these harps, even if not being played, invites the viewer to imagine the music the instrument could produce, the quality of the notes, how the music might sound. The viewer may recall the music played at a religious service and how the harp may sound in comparison, the strings vibrating as they are plucked, the movement of the hand playing the instrument, and how the wooden frame might feel to hold. The sensual experience created by the harps lets the audience contemplate the biblical material Solomon shows with emotional resonance as well as intellectual interest. The inclusion of the harp transforms looking into a sensory experience, where viewers can connect to the world of the image through their own experiences. The audience, who may or may not be Jewish, can engage with Solomon's works at a personal, embodied level.[13] The sensual experience of looking these historical images of ancient Jewish life allowed British Jews to relate to their distant past and sacred texts in a personal, visceral way. Music becomes part of a spiritual

[12] Cruise. "Pre-Raphaelitism and Early Success". 88.

[13] For a detailed exploration of embodied visual theory, Olga Belova's "The Event of Seeing: A Phenomenological Perspective on Visual Sense-Making," *Culture and Organization* 12, 2 (June 2006), 93–107 is a useful resource.

experience, a personal transformation to religious feeling. By bringing music into visual art, Solomon picked up on the contemporary interest in art as able to give a transformative experience akin to religious feeling, and used it to connect the ancient Judaism to his present.

The design of these harps comes from the Nineveh reliefs. One of Solomon's works showing a harp being played, *A Young Musician Employed in the Temple Service at the Feast of Tabernacles,* is greatly informed by Assyrian art. This choice makes a good deal of logical sense. The Assyrian empire existed around the Kingdom of Judah, which paid tribute to the Assyrian Empire as a vassal state. Cultural exchange and trade certainly existed to some extent between Judah and Assyria. The hairstyle and clothing of the musician are of the same type as those in Assyrian reliefs. The style of the harp and how it is held, and the relief decorations on the wall, all have clear sources in Nineveh. All these details are rendered in Solomon's naturalistic style with attention to the textures and surfaces of material reality, rather than in an imitation of Assyrian stylization.

The harpist in this picture does not come from specific reference point in the Hebrew bible, but is an event Solomon inferred from biblical and religious knowledge. His emphasis is on historic and spiritual truth with a meticulously historical construction. The title places this picture in the Temple in Jerusalem during one of the days of Sukkot, a festival celebrating the harvest, and commemorating the years the Jews spent wandering the desert after the Exodus. The branches along the wall bring to mind the practice of layering foliage as the roof of the Sukkot booth, as well as the importance of willow and myrtle branches as part of the four species used during Sukkot services and prayer. This rich iconography of Jewish ritual would only have been legible to Jews or Christians who had studied Jewish custom.

The alternate title, *Hosannah!* became the popular title through the print version of this work, part of an illustrated bible by the Dalziel brothers, and references Sukkot as well, in a more roundabout way.[14] Hosannah comes from the Hebrew *hoshana*, which is typically translated as 'save me', but this translation leaves out the element of joy the Jewish use contains. Hosannah as an Anglicization of *hoshana* comes through the book of Luke, where Christian understanding of hosanna is an exclamation of the glory of god through the divine Christ. Christians and Jews reading the title *Hosannah!* came away with completely different interpretations. Solomon and other Jews understood *Hoshana* in this context as part of the *hoshanot,* prayers said throughout Sukkot, or *Hoshana Rabbot*, the most important day of Sukkot. *Hosannah!* and the painting it is based on come from a place of historical examining of Judaism. Solomon connected music and spirituality with Judaism's specific traditions, and careful historical research create an overtly Jewish picture. Modern approaches to the bible as a historical document rather than a literal truth allowed Solomon to depict a Jewish subject in a modern way without conceding to Christian visual convention.

Queen Esther Hearing the News of the Intended Massacre of the Jews (fig.3) shows a moment from the story of Queen Esther, the wife of Ahasuerus, one of the Kings of Persia.[15] In the story Ahasuerus, not knowing his beloved wife is Jewish, orders the execution of all Jews in the Empire. After Esther hears this, she prays and fasts realizes she needs to tell her husband that she is Jewish. When Esther reveals she is Jewish, she also

[14] Cruise, Colin. "Pre-Raphaelitism and Early Success". 89.

[15] The actual location of this story is unclear and remains contested in biblical criticism. Esther has been proposed to have been a Queen of Babylon and a few other kingdoms in Mesopotamia as well as a Queen of Persia with no full consensus for any one place. However, the location has been generally talked about and understood as Persia.

convinces Ahasuerus to let the Jews live, and thus saves her people. The wall decorations bear a striking similarity to those from the Nineveh. The harp, as has already been mentioned, and Esther, her companions' hair and clothing are also informed by the Nineveh reliefs. Esther is shown as beautiful, but she is also shown as historical and Jewish.[16] Solomon used Fanny Eaton as a model again for all the women in this scene. The similarity in appearance can also be compared to the repetition and use of types layered on top of each other found in Assyrian art, including many works in the Nineveh room. Representations of this story in Western art were typically deeply orientalist, focusing on opulent clothing, food, and jewels, also choosing a scene of feasting where decadence and exoticism can be latched onto. Solomon had not chosen a scene of feasting, leisure, or violence, but one of overwhelming grief. That is not to say there is no orientalism in this work; there is an intense focus on the richness of the setting, elaborately decorated textiles, furniture, and architecture are fairly typical subjects of orientalism in British art. There is the eclecticism typical of British orientalism in the combination of Egyptian column bases, Assyrian reliefs, and the presence of a peacock all wrapped up in a place identified as Persia. This shows a conflation of unique geographically and temporally disparate cultures into an "Eastern" aesthetic, that is to say an overall visual effect that read as Other. There is an interest in historical accuracy here, however; it happens in an Orientalist way.

Rather than attempting to find a Persian source, Solomon used a selection of sources ranging from Assyrian to Egyptian to create this image. While Solomon did use objects from historical periods relevant to Jewish history, his selection of objects from a variety of distinct cultures to represent another shows a conception of these cultures as an

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[16] Cruise, Colin. 'Pre-Raphaelitism and Early Success.' *Love Revealed: Simeon Solomon and the PreRaphaelites.* 97

interchangeable 'East'. Solomon's picture of Esther is in an imagined East, albeit one informed by careful study of historic artefacts, not in an historical Persia. Edward Said's theory of how this imagined East, what he calls the Orient, was managed and produced by European culture is still an incredibly relevant work of scholarship.[17] As objective and observational as those travelling around Palestine, Iran, and Egypt, gathering information and filling sketchbooks intended to be, the people gathering and interpreting the cultures contained within the middle east were Orientalist. These travellers and their audience engaged with the sites, culture, and people of the middle and near east as something foreign and exotic. The sources Solomon examined were gathered with the understanding that they formed part of the Orient, the foreignness and exoticism of which was a product of western culture.[18] Solomon himself was raised in England; his interpretation of Nineveh and other sources was that of a European constructing the East populated by a visible other, underlined by Fanny Eaton modelling. However, Fanny Eaton's presence does mark this painting as different from many English paintings of the Orient where the standard approach was to paint an idealized white woman in Oriental costume. Solomon conceptualized his Judaism as a tradition and culture coming from this exoticized construction. However, Solomon was conscious of his own status as Other in Victorian Britain as a Jew.[19] The interaction between the Jewish Other and the Oriental Other in his work is deeply connected to nineteenth century Jewish identity.

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[17] Said, Edward. Orientalism. 3

[18] ibid.

[19] Anti-Semitism was certainly prevalent in Britain, as well as the wider world throughout Solomon's life. However, the exact nature of anti-Semitism did develop throughout his lifetime from primarily of generally religious nature of prejudice, to generally racial. The racial "science" that developed in the 1860s and 1870s, separated Jews from gentiles on a fundamental biological level. The idea that Jewish people were fundamentally different from Christians was not a new idea, but it did gain an increasing amount of "scientific" backing throughout the nineteenth century.

To be Jewish and an artist in the modern era brought a host of problems with it. To be a modern artist, and to be a pre-Raphaelite meant the interior world of emotion and thought must be expressed outwardly.[20] Jews lived in a world where their emancipation was only given with the expectation that their Jewishness remained hidden, and that externally they were gentiles. The emancipated Jew was required to conceal their inner life, but to be an artist the interior needed to be expressed.[21] This created a paradox for Jewish artists; how could the interior be expressed when it was unacceptable to gentiles? For many Jews, taking part in modern life as part of a nation required adopting the culture of that nation, and to an extent denying their Jewishness.[22] The intellectual modernization movement *Haskalah* encouraged Jewish participation as citizens of nations and the joining of modern life. *Haskalah* is also known as the Jewish enlightenment. However, the use of the term enlightenment to describe *Haskalah* is misleading; it implies the supremacy of rationalism and anti-clericalism. Rather, *Haskalah* encouraged Jews to take part in modern life, and to apply modern attitudes about religion to Judaism.[23] *Haskalah* and its effects were most distinct in Eastern and Central Europe, but Solomon's work forms part of this discourse around modernizing Judaic life and religious practice.

When Solomon worked with Jewish subjects, he chose historical subjects, typically biblical subjects. Solomon, like all Jewish artists, had to choose how much to embrace his Jewish identity.[24] Historical subjects allowed Solomon to engage with Judaism without

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[20] Mirzoeff, Nicholas. "Inside/Out: Jewishness Imagines Emancipation". in *The Emergence of Jewish Artists in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Ed. Susan Goodman Turmarkin. (London, Merrel, 2001) 42.
[21] Ibid
[22] Turmarkin Goodman. 16
[23] Olga Litvak. *Haskalah: The Romantic Movement in Judaism*. 25-27
[24] Larry Silver. "Between Tradition and Acculturation: Jewish Painters in Nineteenth Century Europe". in *The Emergence of Jewish Artists in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Ed. Susan Goodman Turmarkin. (London, Merrel, 2001) 123.

subordinating it or sacrificing his Pre-Raphaelite leanings by delving into Jewish genre painting. These subjects allowed Jewish artists to link their present with the past before acculturation, and Judaism could remain a primary subject.[25] Pre-Raphaelite ideas and methods were suited to this communication between past and present. The Pre-Raphaelites' close observation of nature and historical study combined with idealized beauty to create an emotionally resonant spirituality.[26] The British interest in personal spirituality allowed Solomon to bridge the gap between the traditional past and the modern present of Judaism.

In many ways Esther embodies the tension and contradictions of being a Jew in modern British society. Nineteenth century British Jews were not at risk of being massacred by the state because of their Judaism, but they were at risk of being ostracized if their Judaism became uncomfortable to gentiles.[27] The position of Jews as citizens may have been legal, but their position was uncertain. Jews had been persecuted in England many times in the past, and anti-Semitism was growing and changing in the nineteenth century. Esther reveals her internal, Jewish self, and saves the Jews of Persia. She is heroic for externalizing her Judaism. Solomon chose to show the moment Esther hears the Jews are to be massacred, and as a result, the drawing becomes about Judaism, about persecution, about prayer as well as about the historical. The moment is somewhat ambiguous, Esther may be wringing her hands or she may be praying. Based on Pre-Raphaelite visual cues, where closed eyes and solitude are connected to a moment of complete absorption in religious feeling, it is quite likely she is praying. Esther is separated from the other women in the

[25] Turmarkin Goodman. 16.
[26] ibid. 17.
[27] Paula E. Hyman. "Acculturation of Jews in Nineteenth-Century Europe". in *The Emergence of Jewish Artists in Nineteenth-Century Europe*. Ed. Susan Goodman Turmarkin. (London, Merrel, 2001) 35.

drawing and she pays no attention to them, focusing instead on prayer.[28] This is a desperate moment, but Victorian viewers would know the end of the story, that Esther is able to save her people.

Carrying the Scrolls of the Law (fig.4), where a beautiful young man carries the Torah is one of Solomon's works most obviously informed by his homosexuality as well as his Judaism.[29] There is a clear interest in religious ritual here with careful details on the dressings of the Torah and the clothing of the rabbi; this speaks to Solomon's experience with the materials of Jewish ritual. The materials are emphasised heavily, and as such point to the unchanging yet transitory nature of religious ritual and the invisible spiritual of the moment.[30] However, there is also an undercurrent of sensuality and desire in how this man is depicted. Here is a male figure formed with the same idealized beauty normally reserved for female figures, with the caveats of this figure being obviously Jewish and male. This man's expression is incredibly emotionally charged, as is his body language as he embraces and leans into the Torah. This is a transcendent moment of deep religious feeling and intense awareness of the significance of the physical object of the Torah. The moment Solomon shows is outside of narrative certainty, the moment in a service and the moment in time are uncertain. This sort of inferred nonspecific moment is something Solomon has explored before in *Hosanna!* but the non-specificity is taken further in this work; it is this intense religious feeling that comes along with material ritual that is important, not historicity. Sexuality and religion intersect in complicated ways, questioning how to be

[28] Cruise, Colin. "Pre-Raphaelitism and Early Success". 97
[29] Weisburg,148
[30] Cruise, Colin, "Pressing all religions into his service" Love Revealed: Simeon Solomon and the PreRaphaelites. 61

Jewish in a new way.[31] The intersection of Judaism and homosexuality in *Carrying the Scrolls of the Law* opens a window to examine how these aspects interact in all of Solomon's Jewish subjects.

The sensuality found throughout Solomon's work is clearly articulated in *Carrying the Scrolls of the Law*. Textures are rendered carefully with careful observations and deep sense-knowledge of the materials in in the picture. The physical object of the Torah weighs heavily in the iconography of the image and in the arms of the young man. The Torah dressing is detailed with knowledge from years of seeing the scrolls carried through congregations at services. The young man's hands on the heavy brocade wrapped around the Torah emphasise the idea of touch. This invites the viewer to think about the other textures in the picture, such as the young man's clothing, and the silver caps against his face. In many ways the audience is invited to explore the idea of touching this man, to imagine the texture of his skin as well as the textiles he is draped in. There is a strong undercurrent of desire in this picture, an idea that becomes complicated with the equally strong sense of intense religious feeling.

The emphasis on texture and sensuality also suggest a moment of crystal clear awareness of the materiality of the world that comes with strong spiritual feeling. In the moment of this picture, the ritual is all that exists, and holiness is all that exists; not in the abstract but in material reality. The young man is fully attentive to this moment of devotion coming from the ritual of carrying the Torah. The Torah is heavy with significance; the physicality of the Torah as an object and the reverence of its carrier convey the importance of the words held within it. The half-closed eyes of the young man are looking only at the

[31] Mirzoeff. 44

Torah. *Carrying the Scrolls of the Law* is informed by a long tradition of showing moments of intense religious feeling through sexual ecstasy. Bernini's *The Ecstasy of St. Theresa* is one of the most well known examples of this visual cue. Although this conflation of sexuality and religious ecstasy is from the Christian visual tradition, Solomon would have become familiar with it in his Academy schooling. Like the ideas of the Pre-Raphaelites, Solomon has taken a formula devised for Christianity and changed it to work with his Judaism and homosexuality. Solomon's combination of intense religious feeling and desire in *Carrying the Scrolls of Law* contains an exploration of emotion and desire in homosexual love in relation to holiness. Through this combining of sensuality, desire and transformative religious feeling, Judaism was validated as worthy and holy, and queer desire became blessed. Religion did not need to shame homosexuality. Solomon's Judaism and homosexuality can exist at once: religion can support desire as good, even holy.

Solomon's existence as a homosexual and a Jew made him an other to British society on two levels; however with the legal emancipation of Jews in 1858 granting his Judaism legal protection, this was vastly more publically acceptable than homosexuality. Jews were full legal British citizens with worship and existence legally protected; while homosexuality would by law remain a serious criminal activity for another century. This does not mean Judaism was fully accepted in British society: it was generally assumed by the Protestant majority that Jewish people would abandon their religion eventually to integrate into Britain.[32] Victorian identity was closely tied to the idea that Britain was Christian and was great and successful as an empire because it was Christian.[33] Morality and respectability were also closely tied to Christianity, and in particular to Protestantism;

[32] Hyman. 32.
[33] Hugh McLeod. "Protestantism and British National Identity 1814-1945". *Nation and Religion:*

Victorians of all classes viewed Christianity as the ultimate source of respectable behaviour and morality.[34] Both aspects of Solomon's identity fell outside the strong Christian morality of Victorian identity. Jewish people throughout Western Europe struggled with how to go about joining modern society, how Jewish to outwardly act, as well as how to deal with the need to interact with gentiles. In many cases this manifested in artists as avoiding Jewish subjects altogether, or by painting Jewish subjects in a deeply academic manner.[35] This did not happen with Simeon Solomon- his art is unabashedly Jewish, and modern. Solomon as a Jew and a gay man embraced the contradiction of living as a Jewish artist and created overtly Jewish work. The hidden identity that was most reprehensible to Victorians was homosexuality; Solomon's exterior was Jewish and modern at once, while his interior was homosexual. Like his Judaism, homosexuality does not appear in all Solomon's work, but when it does it became part of the interplay of interior and exterior versions of the self.

Esther has already been discussed as a figure representative of the Jewish struggle of having a hidden inner identity that must be reconciled with the external identity. This can be read as the dilemma faced by emancipated Jews, where revealing the secret of their Judaism becomes a source of strength. Esther's story can also be read as a coming out fantasy, where the secret hidden in the interior is being gay, through which Solomon could imagine revealing his identity and being accepted.[36] Through engaging with sources from the Hebrew bible about sanctioned, and holy same-sex relationships as well as stories about struggling with identity Solomon was able to ease, if not resolve, his inner tensions about

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Perspectives of Europe and Asia. (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2002.) 52-53

[34] Hugh McLeod. "New Perspectives on Victorian Working-Class Religion: The Oral Evidence," *Oral History*, 14, no. 1 (1986): 45.

[35] Turmarkin Goodman. 16.

[36] Seymour, Gail M. "Simeon Solomon and the Biblical Construction of Marginal Identity in Victorian England" *Journal of Homosexuality.* Volume 33.)1997): 116

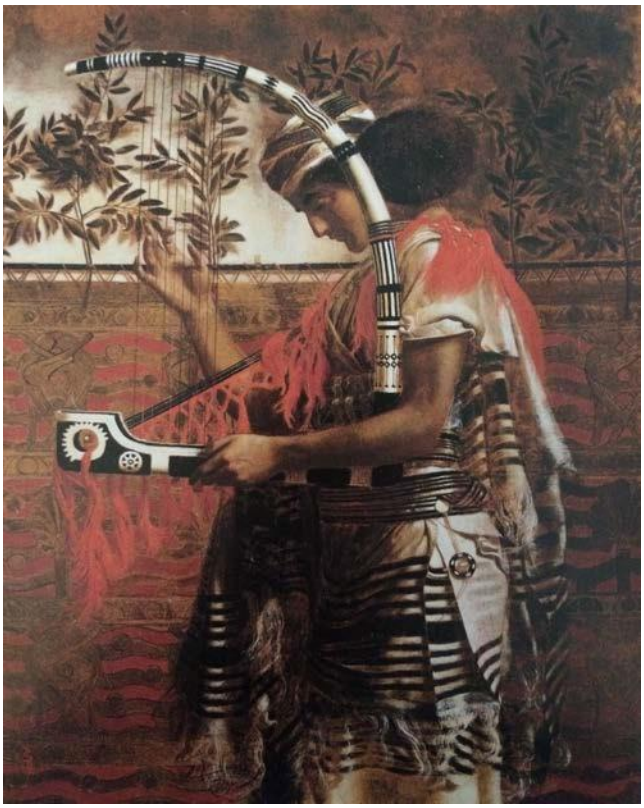
his religion and his sexuality.[37] Solomon's approach to Judaism as personal and his modern approach to close reading allowed him to look outside English Christian morality's denouncement of homosexuality as sin. Through this personal relationship with Judaism, Solomon was able to find an understanding of his Jewishness and his homosexuality where neither was shameful.

Through the convergence of pre-Raphaelite methods, Judaism, homosexuality, and desire, Solomon created explicitly Jewish art in a thoroughly modern way. Solomon's Judaism and his homosexuality were interdependent to some degree and should not be separated from Victorian religious discourse. Jewish identity was in flux after emancipation, access to the gentile world brought new opportunities to Solomon and other English Jews, but also new challenges. There was no easy way to reconcile modern British life with all the deep traditions Judaism developed over the centuries. Solomon chose to retain his Judaism and use Jewish in his art, adapting methods developed for and by the Christian PreRaphaelites for his own use. Solomon used the historical and observational interests of the Pre-Raphaelites to enrich Jewish content, connecting modernity to Jewish traditions through sensuality and historicity. The intersection of his identities led Solomon to contemplate three important aspects of his identity, his commitment to Pre-Raphaelite modernism, his Jewishness and his homosexuality. Ultimately, Solomon created art where despite being intensely informed by Victorian culture neither Judaism, nor homosexuality, was shameful. Solomon's work was a complex questioning and navigation of how to exist freely between the tradition and modernity of Victorian London.

[37] ibid

Appendix

(Fig.1) Simeon Solomon. *The Mother of Moses.* 1860. oil on canvas. 59.7x48.3cm. Delaware Art Museum.



(fig.2) Simeon Solomon, *Young Musician Hired to Play at the Feast of Tabernacles.* 1861. oil on canvas 59.7x45.7cm. Private Collection.

(fig.3) Simeon Solomon, *Queen Esther Hearing the News of the Intended Massacre of the Jews.* 1860. ink on paper. 28.6x33.6cm. Private Collection.

(fig.4) Simeon Solomon, *Carrying the Scrolls of the Law*. 1867. Watercolour and Gouache. 35.7x25.5cm. The Whitworth Art Gallery, The University of Manchester.

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