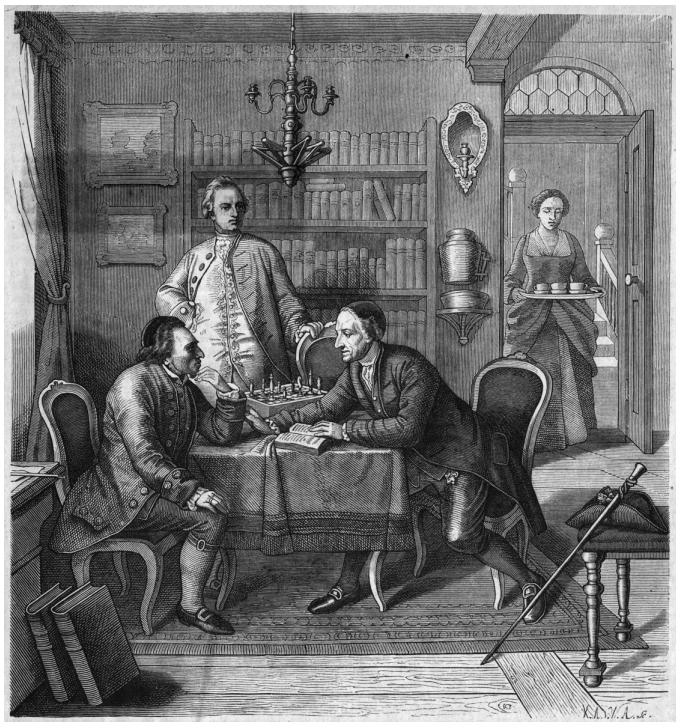


Gotthold Ephraim Lessing and Johann Caspar Lavater at Moses Mendelssohn's Home in 1763 (1856)

Abstract

Based on a 19th-century painting, this engraving depicts an imaginary meeting between the philosopher and political publicist Moses Mendelssohn (seated on the left, 1729-1786), the renowned playwright and philosopher Gotthold Ephraim Lessing (standing, 1729-1781), and the Swiss theologian Johann Caspar Lavater (seated on the right, 1741-1801). This scene is a conflation of various historical facts and events. Mendelssohn, an eloquent advocate of Jewish claims to religious and civil rights, was indeed a close friend of Lessing, who modeled his dramatic poem *Nathan the Wise* (1779) after him. And in April 1763, Lavater did in fact travel from Zurich to Berlin to pay Mendelssohn a visit. Lessing, however, was not present at the meeting. The fictional scene takes place in the library of Mendelssohn's home, where traditional elements of the Jewish faith – e.g. the *Judenstern* Sabbath lamp above the table – mix easily with symbols of bourgeois learning, culture, and civility. In this respect, the setting reflects Mendelssohn's role as a pioneer of Jewish engagement in non-Jewish intellectual life in Germany. The focal point of the image is Mendelssohn's conversation with Lavater, who is portrayed as somewhat of an interloper. Lavater, who combined the late Enlightenment's scientific interest in human psychology with a Protestant religious zeal that led him to challenge the Jewish philosopher to disprove Christianity or convert to it, seems to be urging an open book, presumably the New Testament, on his conversation partner. Mendelssohn appears focused and steadfast, if not somewhat irritated, while Lessing observes the scene with a serious expression. Wood engraving after a painting by Moritz Oppenheim (1800-1882), 1856.

Source



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