Moritz Steinschneider’s tremendous and often unsurpassed achievements in the study of Hebrew books earned him the title “father of Hebrew bibliography.” He is often seen as a scholar par excellence who studied, with a certain degree of pedantry, every piece of Jewish literature he came across, irrespective of its historical or cultural value. But was the comprehensive bibliographical mapping of Jewish literature Steinschneider’s ultimate goal? Although much of his work does indeed leave us with the impression of Steinschneider as a painstaking scholar striving for the objective documentation of the remains of Jewish literature and nothing more, in the present paper I try to argue the case that this interpretation does not do justice to Steinschneider’s real ambitions. Already in his first important publication—the essay “Jüdische Literatur” for Ersch and Gruber’s Allgemeine Encyklopädie der Wissenschaften und Künste—Steinschneider gives much more than just a bibliographical sketch of Jewish literature. It is an ambitious draft for a comprehensive history of Jewish literature based upon clearly formulated historiographical concepts. In a later work—the lectures known as “Allgemeine Einleitung in die jüdische Literatur des Mittelalters”—Steinschneider makes it clear that bibliographical research, or the collection of dry facts, cannot be a goal in and of itself. Rather, the aim of all historical research should be “cultural history” (Kulturgeschichte), of which the history of literature is an inseparable part.

This is an indication that Steinschneider’s own scientific goals were reaching beyond bibliographical documentation, and that they had deeper theoretical foundations than later generations were willing to concede. It is the purpose of the present paper to shed some light on

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2 AE, p. XV/312: “Kulturgeschichte ist das eigentliche Ziel der Weltgeschichte, weil das Ziel aller Geistesthätigkeit.”
Steinschneider, not the father of Hebrew bibliography, but the historian of Jewish literature, who developed a concept of the history of Jewish literature as part of a general *Kulturgeschichte*—a concept that served him as a guideline for his relentless activities as a bibliographer but that goes well beyond the collection of dry facts.

Steinschneider’s conceptual framework for the study of the history of Jewish literature can be seen in many of his books and articles, but the above-mentioned essay, “Jüdische Literatur,” along with the lectures published under the title “Allgemeine Einleitung,” are the most important sources for the reconstruction of his ideas about what a history of Jewish literature should look like. These works are therefore the main focus of the following discussions. But before I proceed to them, I begin with a short discussion of Leopold Zunz’s (1794–1886) contribution to the discipline of the history of Jewish literature, which will serve as a foil for a proper appraisal of Steinschneider’s achievements in this field.  

1. *Steinschneider’s Predecessor: Leopold Zunz’s Concept of the History of Jewish Literature*

Steinschneider’s essay “Jüdische Literatur” marks an enormous step forward in the study of Jewish literature, but it was made possible by the scholarly activities of earlier representatives of the early *Wissenschaft des Judentums*. Among these, Leopold Zunz’s epoch-making “Etwas über die rabbinische Literatur,” published in 1818, is of prime importance. Zunz’s article is generally interpreted as an impressive manifesto for the nascent *Wissenschaft des Judentums*, but it should also, and no less

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3 The recently published book by Johannes Sabel, *Die Geburt der Literatur aus dem Geist der Aggada* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2010), pp. 35–167, contains a detailed analysis of the interpretation of the Aggadah in nineteenth-century *Wissenschaft des Judentums* and in Jewish literature. Unfortunately, this book came to my attention only when this article was largely completed. The focus of the book and that of the present article are slightly different, but some of the conclusions regarding Zunz’s and Steinschneider’s interpretation of the Aggadah are complimentary.