THE THREE JEWISH CHILDREN AT BERLIN:
COTTON MATHER’S OBSESSION

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Yea, who knowes what Use the Lord may make of such an Essay?
Cotton Mather, The Faith of the Fathers

In February 1704, Samuel Sewall, minister of the Second Church of Boston and an avid eschatologist, recorded in his diary Cotton Mather’s “unsuccessful attempt to convert to Christianity a Boston Jewish merchant, one of the Frazon brothers – evidently by some jugglery with holy texts.” According to Sewall: “The forgery was so plainly detected that Mr. C.M. confess it, after which Mr. Frasier [Frazon] would never be persuaded to hear any more of Xianity.”

The historian Lee M. Friedman remarks: “The ambition to be the means of converting a Jew to Christianity was so near an obsession on the part of Cotton Mather that it is easily possible to understand how he overstepped the bounds of propriety when one realizes his Puritan viewpoint.” From Mather’s millennial point of view, “to be the means of converting a Jew was not merely a matter of personal glory, but another step accelerating the establishment on earth of the Kingdom of God.”

Born on February 12, 1663, Cotton Mather was the first of nine children of Increase Mather and Maria, daughter of the great John Cotton. It seems that “young Cotton had begun to pray as soon as he could speak. His father began to suspect that this gifted child was one of the happy few (a tiny fraction of the elected saints) who are

given a saving faith and a virtuous character in their very infancy.” By the time Cotton was twelve, “his proficiency in Latin was so good that while listening to the Sabbath sermon, which was delivered in English, he could take notes on it in Latin.” He also “read Greek capably.” By the age of fourteen, he could write in Hebrew. At fifteen the prodigy and visible saint graduated from Harvard College, “having consumed enormous numbers of books in most of the arts and sciences known to seventeenth-century scholars.” Some of those books were out of date; his Harvard thesis of 1678 pleads a lost cause: “An Puncta Hebraica sunt Originis Divinae. Affirmat Respondens Cottonus Matherus.” At eighteen he “preached so effectively in Grandfather Cotton’s First Church in Boston that some auditors declared themselves hardly able to forbear crying out aloud during the sermon.”

He died on February 13, 1728, a day after his sixty-fifth birthday. “In every church [we read in Perry Miller’s The New England Mind] there were discourses on Cotton Mather, three of which were printed.” Benjamin Colman described him as “the first Minister in the Town, the first in Age, Gifts and in Grace.’ From the beginning of the country to this very day, no leader of these churches amassed so great a treasure of learning ‘and made so much use of it, to a variety of pious Intentions, as this our Rev. Brother and Father, Dr. Cotton Mather.”

The focus of this essay is Mather’s conversionism – his pious intention, or obsession, to convert Jews.

Christ’s return to earth was imminent, Mather believed; the true Church, true Israel, must prepare itself for the bridegroom, the thief who comes in the night, and Mather intended to expedite his coming. Unregenerate children among the Puritan elect must be saved; otherwise, like Papists, Turks, and other heretics, they would perish in the “tremendous Conflagration, which is to precede the New Heavens and the New Earth.” As for the “infidel” Jews, at Christ’s

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8 Cotton Mather, letter to Gordon Saltonstall, August 3, 1724, Diary, II, p. 804. First published in 1911–1912 in 2 Volumes by the Massachusetts Historical Society,