Bayle's relationship with Judaism appears at first sight to be—unsurprisingly—paradoxical. He is widely acknowledged as the most sophisticated and passionate Early Enlightenment advocate of toleration, arguing, in his *Commentaire philosophique* (1686) that all religious sects should be tolerated, and specifically including Judaism among these. Yet he was also the most sophisticated Early Enlightenment Bible critic, focusing his attention with devastating relentlessness on the moral shortcomings of the Jewish heroes of the Old Testament. His witty but pointed *Dictionnaire* articles on biblical characters stand at the head of what developed into a barbed eighteenth-century tradition of irreligious polemic advanced through the ridiculing of Judaism. His article on King David, in particular, which so outraged the Walloon Consistory of Rotterdam, was used as a source by both Voltaire and d'Holbach, feeding into their far more unambiguously anti-Judaic writings. How can we make sense of these two contrasting aspects of Bayle’s politics and scholarship with regard to Judaism, and how can we reconcile them?

Scholarly opinion on Bayle and Judaism is divided. Richard Popkin perceived an affinity with Judaism in Bayle’s writings, and speculated whether, in his inner heart, he might have been “a Judaizing Christian, or a genuine Judaean Christian, or even a secret Jew.” Miriam Yardeni, in contrast, judged that Bayle was in essence “anti-Jewish”, because he regarded Judaism as inherently morally deficient. Yardeni finds Bayle guilty, despite himself being free of antisemitism, of opening up the road

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down which Voltaire and d’Holbach later travelled without hesitation.\textsuperscript{5} Lorenzo Bianchi, in a more measured essay on the subject, has argued that Bayle’s critiques of Judaism, because they are historical rather than racial, are not “radically anti-Jewish”, and are in any case outweighed in significance by his commitment to universal toleration.\textsuperscript{6}

It is, however, ultimately fruitless to try to categorize Bayle as either a friend or an enemy of Jews. Despite the presence of significant communities of both Ashkenazic and Sephardic Jews in late seventeenth-century Rotterdam, there is no evidence that they made any particular direct impression on him. Jews and Judaism interested Bayle not for concrete but for abstract reasons: they occupied a key position in his philosophical firmament. Fascinated throughout his life by what he regarded as the inescapable incommensurability of faith and reason, Bayle was ineluctably also fascinated by Jews, for they—and they alone—lived outside this antinomy. (Or, more precisely, as the recipients of God’s directly revealed Word, they were divinely commanded to live outside this antinomy.) An examination of Bayle’s thinking and argumentation in relation to Jews thus leads us to the core of his philosophy. The Jews also represent a unique and revealing limit case in the political applicability of his thought.

How interested was Bayle in Judaism? Richard Popkin rightly observed that, given the unique and unprecedented opportunities for interaction between Christians and Jews in the Dutch Republic in this period, it is notable that Bayle evinced no particular interest in discussion with living Jews: there is no trace in his writings, for example, of the “friendly conversation” between the Remonstrant theologian Phillip van Limborch and the Sephardic doctor Orobio de Castro, an account of which was published by van Limborch in 1687 in nearby Gouda.\textsuperscript{7} However, Bayle was extremely interested in Jewish history (he was a close friend of Jacques Basnage, who was hard at work on his \textit{Histoire des Juifs} during Bayle’s final years), and in works of Hebraist scholarship. All of the Dutch francophone literary journals of the late seventeenth century gave

