

THE TALE OF AUSTRALIA'S FIRST "RABBI" JOSEPH MARCUS 1767-1828

by

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At the Sydney Jail, in the last week of September 1806, the Rev. William Cowper first encountered Joseph Marcus, a former convict, who voluntarily served as Australia's first unofficial rabbi in the years before the establishment of a synagogue. The strange story of this meeting is to be found in the proceedings of the London Society for Promoting Christianity among the Jews.¹ Through Cowper's fervent desire to bring "salvation to the Jews", we learn of the identity and spiritual adventures of Sydney's "only acknowledged Levite" whose Hebrew and Jewish knowledge enabled him to conduct funerals and religious services and to deal with the spiritual needs of the first Jews in Australia.

Joseph Marcus was born on 24th March, 1767 at Mannheim.² At the age of seven, two years after the death of his father, he was sent to study at a Yeshiva in Poland, where he remained for seven years. He then returned to Germany and continued his religious education at Metz and later in Jerusalem where he lived for almost two years.³

In 1791 Marcus was sentenced to death at the Lent Assizes in the County of Staffordshire for breaking and entering the house of Michael Dainty of Leck and stealing 15 spoons, 2 salt holders, a mustard pot, 4 salt spoons, 2 pairs of sugar tongs, one wine strainer, a cup and 2 linen shirts, valued at £9.5.0.⁴ Like thousands of other Jews in the late 18th century, Marcus had migrated to England where he had become a pedlar. In the course of his wanderings Marcus later remembered having been introduced by a country vicar to Dr Blayney, Professor of Hebrew at Christ Church, Oxford, and Marcus spent some time there, where his rabbinic knowledge aroused some curiosity.⁵ When arrested, Marcus had obviously been trying to augment his meagre stock by breaking and entering an unguarded house, perhaps hoping to take his goods back to London and sell them to some friendly receiver of stolen property in the metropolis.

In February 1792 Marcus arrived in New South Wales on the convict transport ship "William Pitt", having had his death sentence commuted to transportation for seven years.⁶ In 1795 Marcus left Sydney for Norfolk Island where he remained to serve his sentence and only succeeded in returning to the mainland in 1805.⁷ Marcus served as a Constable at the Sydney jail in 1806,⁸ and as a servant to the Sydney emancipist merchant, Simeon Lord, during 1807 and 1808, during which time he narrowly escaped conviction after being caught "entering his master's house through a window at night, with a suspicious design".⁹

On 29th August, 1805 in Sydney, the 30 year old Jewish convict, Elias Davis, was found guilty of burglary and sentenced to death.¹⁰ Eight days later Davis died on the gallows and, as the Sydney Gazette reported, "being of the Mosaic persuasion was, at his own desire, attended by a friend of the same religion".¹¹ There is little doubt that this friend was Joseph Marcus. As the Rev. Cowper later wrote about Marcus, "Our first interview happened in one of the cells of the jail, where he came to visit a Jew under sentence (of death). We then had some conversation concerning the forgiveness of sin, the Messiah and particular passages in the Prophets relating to his coming and the manner of his appearance, the atonement, etc. Marcus was then in health and strength and seemed to be a well behaved and intelligent man."¹²

In 1809 Marcus and his de facto wife, Dorcas Jane Broughton, rented a farm at George's River on the Parramatta Road, about 20 miles from Sydney.¹³ His rural experiment was not a success. In September 1809 their farm was attacked by a band of 15 aborigines who stole 2 muskets and some property, and Dorcas Jane was injured by a spear.¹⁴ Desperate for money, Marcus sold his government-supplied subsidised seed wheat to a baker and on 10th July, 1810 was sentenced to 3 months' hard labour for his "turpitude".¹⁵ In January 1811 Marcus asked Governor Macquarie for a grant of land. It was refused with Macquarie's comment: "Not to have any grants, not being a good character".¹⁶ In the next year Marcus decided to bow to the demands of society and married his de facto wife at St. John's, Parramatta.¹⁷ The farm brought more miseries and debts and in December 1813 the Provost-Marshal arranged for the sale of 4 acres of wheat, 4 acres of corn and some potatoes.¹⁸ Marcus moved to Sydney, having been stricken with a "very severe paralysis".¹⁹ His financial plight is reflected in the sale of his cottage in 52 Kent Street, Sydney, to the meteorically successful Jewish emancipist, Solomon Levey. The contract is signed with a mark, as Marcus was so ill that he was unable to write.²⁰

In pain and penniless, Marcus vainly sought consolation. In 1820 his wife was charged "with cruel treatment of her husband, a palsied and infirm old man and with being a common nuisance in the streets of Sydney" and was sent for six months hard labour to the females' work prison at Parramatta.²¹

Marcus briefly turned to Sydney's new Roman Catholic chaplains to see whether they could help him. He then "most earnestly entreated the Rev. Cowper to visit him," assuring him that his time would not be spent "in vain", for he greatly desired to understand the truth, and to save his soul.²²

Cowper's first letter to the Society, written from Sydney on 26th February, 1820, describes Marcus as Australia's "only acknowledged Levite" and as "an intelligent, peaceable and well-disposed man" who

had spent much time studying the Scriptures in Hebrew.²³ Cowper reported that "about thirty" Sydney Jews had recently agreed "to meet together once or twice each week to have their own prayers and the Scriptures read to them". Marcus had begun to attend Cowper's Church "as his bodily infirmities permit him" and the colonial chaplain asked the London Society to send him half-a-dozen copies of the New Testament in Hebrew.

This reference to the agreement of a group of Jews in Sydney to meet together for prayers in February 1820 is the earliest recorded reference to Jewish worship in Australia. In 1845 George Moss, the Secretary of the Sydney Synagogue, wrote in the first short history of the Sydney Jewish community that prayers had been held "for the first time, morning and evening, during the seven days of mourning" at the time of the death of Joel Joseph.²⁴ Joseph died in Sydney in October 1820 and it is interesting to note that Moss remembered that at their time of need the Jews of Sydney turned to the Rev. Dr Cowper who allotted "the right-hand corner of the Christian Burial Ground to the Hebrews as a place of internment for their dead". As Cowper himself wrote in that first letter to the Society in London, "All the Jews are most respectful in their conduct towards me and I feel it my duty to serve them, in the fear and cause of God, as 'beloved for the fathers' sake'. Gratitude, indeed, constrains; for we know that 'Salvation is of the Jews' ".²⁵

Once the Hebrew New Testaments arrived, the Rev. Cowper wrote once more to London. He had found his prospective convert's Hebrew and Biblical knowledge "very superior". Marcus "repeatedly assured me all his prejudices against Jesus Christ and the Gospel were entirely removed, by the convincing explanations afforded him. Many were his difficulties in both English and Hebrew Scriptures, but by patient investigation and appropriate comparisons, these were gradually overcome. His cabalistical and talmudical expositions he used to be very fond of introducing . . . It is impossible to describe the expression, the satisfaction and the joy which he seemed to experience . . . when he saw the New Testament in the language of his nation. He read it with great delight and much benefit".²⁶ Indeed by November 1821, Marcus "although labouring under great tribulation from bodily infirmity" wrote to London thanking the Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews "for providing him with a Hebrew New Testament having had no previous opportunity to read any Christian book".²⁷

Progress then became more difficult. In July 1822 the Archdeacon wrote home to tell the Society that "Marcus perseveres in reading and meditating upon the New Testament, printed in the Hebrew language".²⁸ His health had improved. "His mind appears to be more vigorous and his desires more ardent; his understanding is good and his affections are strong". In August Cowper added, "The more he reads



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and knows the New Testament, the better he likes it . . . He intended to come to church yesterday, but was disappointed in the man who was to assist him. He wishes much to have the Old Testament in Hebrew, in type such as that of the New Testament".²⁹ By February 1823 Cowper described "his regret on account of the indifference and inattention to which the Jews in this place had returned, after having made some professions of religion by weekly meetings for prayer, etc."³⁰ Joseph Marcus, it was claimed, continued to be imbued with pro-Christian feelings although "his bodily indisposition does not allow him to attend our public worship; nor has he been able, of late, to minister to his brethren according to the flesh". From which we learn that Marcus had

obviously done some "pastoral" work within the little Jewish community. Indeed Cowper described how the Jews had asked Marcus to officiate at a funeral service "of a learned Jew who died in Sydney, but Marcus declined because the deceased had not manifested any fear of God. Thus he dares to be singular and to show himself on the Lord's side".

Not surprisingly, the Rev. Cowper found that the Jewish community did not respond to his missionary endeavours. Though Marcus spoke of "the happiness which he has found in searching and comparing the Psalms, the Prophets, and the New Testament" . . . "he cannot bring his carnal brethren to think as he now thinks, nor to use the means generally necessary to acquire a right knowledge of the sacred oracles". Only "one intelligent young man" in the Jewish community seemed willing to listen. He had come free to the colony and readily donated 2 spanish dollars – a very small sum – for some tracts supplied to him by the chaplain.³¹ This "intelligent young man" could only have been Barnet Levey, the father of the Australian theatre, who arrived in Sydney in 1821. Cowper also mentions that, on the suggestion of Marcus, a parcel of tracts and two or three Hebrew New Testaments were sent to Van Diemen's Land that "they may become a blessing to some of the Children of Israel in that dependency". And from this it is reasonable to infer that in the early years of the 1820s, there was contact between the Jews scattered in the two lonely Australian convict colonies of New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land.³²

As Dr Cowper's relationship with Marcus deepened, the earnest cleric began to have difficulty distinguishing fact from fiction. In 1824 Cowper wrote that before the father of Marcus had died he had given his five year old son a parchment scroll "charging him never to open it till he should be 13 years of age. The scroll, when opened, was found to be the New Testament in the Arabic language, written in the Hebrew characters."³³ This extraordinary story had, of course, already been contradicted by Marcus himself when he first wrote to the Society in 1821 thanking them for "first introducing" him to the New Testament. Marcus claimed to have known seventeen languages in the year of his arrival in New South Wales. Dr Cowper observed, "probably he was not grammatically acquainted with more than three or four of them".

Joseph Marcus died on 26th November 1828 and was buried in the Jewish section of the Devonshire Street Cemetery.³⁴ He died a Jew, despite Cowper's final letter to the London Society claiming that "the aged Rabbi Marcus is growing in grace, and in the knowledge of his Saviour. Although he is infirm in body, he is vigorous in mind . . . If I happen to be more than two or three days without visiting him, and reading three or four chapters with him, he calls me to account for my apparent inattention".³⁵

Was Marcus a Christian? Did he really believe that the Rev. Dr Cowper had the key to his salvation? Or, did he enjoy the mental

stimulation of being able to argue about passages in his beloved Hebrew Bible with a cultured adversary? Perhaps he was simply grateful for company during his long and painful illness. Obviously his fellow Jews did not believe Marcus had denied his faith, for they buried him with the words of the Hebrew prayer book written upon his grave.

At Botany Bay, in the shadow of the oil refineries, whose savage fumes continue to destroy the old inscriptions etched on the gravestones of our first pioneers, lies the memorial to Joseph Marcus.^{35a} Carved in Hebrew letters are the last four lines of the familiar Synagogue hymn, *Adon Olam* (the Lord of All). Appropriately, these lines form the longest Hebrew inscription to be found on the old stones that had originally been erected in the Jewish section of the Devonshire Street Cemetery. The gravestone of Joseph Marcus seems to have been a dignified one. Perhaps it was erected by general subscription among the early emancipist Jewish community as a tribute to their "acknowledged" minister.

Marcus died a little over two months after a fellow emancipist, Abraham Polack, had made the first official attempt to establish a synagogue in Sydney.³⁶ By 1828 the first significant numbers of free Jewish settlers were arriving in Australia and the birth of an organized Jewish community was very near.

Ed. — Nearly all speakers at the discussion following the reading hereof, expressed doubts as to whether Marcus would have had any genuine personal interest in the message of the New Testament brought by Cowper. Perhaps Marcus misled the good cleric who in turn must have raised undue hopes in London.

Notes

¹ The Jewish Expositor and Friend of Israel being the Proceedings of the London Society for Promoting Christianity Among the Jews, London 1816-1826.

Jewish Records. Chiefly for the Use of Collectors and Small Subscribers to the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews, London 1818-1827.

² Proceedings, 1824 p. 334. The 1828 Census of N.S.W. states that Marcus was 70 years old, thus making the year of his birth 1758.

³ Jewish Records No. 21. 1825. Letter from R.W. Cowper, Sydney, May 1824.

⁴ Crown Minute Book Lent Assizes 2/25.

⁵ Op cit.

⁶ William Pitt. Indent (A04/4004) p. 272.

⁷ Sydney Gazette. 14th July, 1805. Also Norfolk Island Victualling Book 1795 (ML).

⁸ Proceedings of the Bench of Magistrates ML 1/301, 5th Nov. 1808. Also ML 1149, 22nd Sept. 1806. 7/33.

- ⁹ Op cit. 5th April 1807.
- ¹⁰ Ibid. 31st Aug. 1806.
- ¹¹ Ibid. 7th Sept. 1806.
- ¹² Proceedings 1822 p. 288. Letter from Rev. W. Cowper. 17th Nov. 1821.
- ¹³ Op cit. 10th July 1810.
- ¹⁴ Ibid. 27th Sept. 1809; Sydney Gazette, 24th Sept. 1809.
- ¹⁵ Ibid. 10th July 1810.
- ¹⁶ N.S.W. C.S. Letters Rec'd. AO 4/1822 Memos 1810 L-Y. C.S. Memo 2. Dated 15th Jan. 1811 misplaced in 1810 Register No. 204.
- ¹⁷ Married 3rd Nov. 1811 (Mutch Index ML).
- ¹⁸ S.G. 27th Dec. 1813.
- ¹⁹ Proceedings 1822 p. 288.
- ²⁰ Piper Papers V.1. 387 (ML A254) 16th Jan. 1819.
- ²¹ S.G. 16th Sept. 1820.
- ²² Proceedings p. 288. Letter from Rev. W. Cowper 17th Nov. 1821.
- ²³ Jewish Records 1821. No. 7. p. 10.
- ²⁴ Report of the Committee of the York St. (Sydney) Synagogue 1845, p. 7.
- ²⁵ Op cit.
- ²⁶ Proceedings 1822 p. 288. Letter dated Sydney 17th Nov. 1821.
- ²⁷ Ibid. Letter from Marcus dated 12th Nov. 1821.
- ²⁸ Ibid. 1823 p. 68. Letter from W. Cowper dated 15th July 1822.
- ²⁹ Ibid. Dated 19th August 1822.
- ³⁰ Ibid. 1824 p. 332. Letter from W. Cowper, dated 11th Feb. 1823.
- ³¹ Ibid.
- ³² Marcus may have visited Van Diemen's Land in his earlier days. The Sydney Gazette contains a number of notices concerning his departure from the Colony. (S.G. 23rd March 1806, 29th March 1807).
- ³³ Jewish Records No. 21. 1825, p. 4.
- ³⁴ It is recorded in the plan of the Devonshire St. Jewish Cemetery that a Rachel Marcus was buried there. No date or further information is provided. Was this a daughter of Joseph Marcus?
- ³⁵ Op cit.
- ^{35a} All the old memorials at Botany are now being removed and some may be placed in a Pioneers' Memorial Section. It is hoped to save and restore the headstone of Marcus amongst some others.
- ³⁶ J.S. Levi and G.F.J. Bergman. *Australian Genesis* 1974 p. 220.

Note. Ed. The authors of *Australian Genesis* at p. 74, remark that "it is not likely that fellow-Jews regarded him very benevolently". If so, Marcus may finally have grown in the estimation of his co-religionists.

See the biography of William Cowper by N.S. Pollard in *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Vol. 1, pp. 254-6. The writer mentions Cowper's extreme Evangelical attitude and he is listed as connected with many Evangelical societies. There is no mention of the Society for Propagating Christianity among the Jews.