

A hypothetical peace:  
natural philosophy as  
the solution to the  
jewish-christian ...



It was 1627 when Sir Francis Bacon published his utopic treatise *New Atlantis* and Europe was polluted by religious tension, much of which revolving around the recent surge of science but some having existed since long before. Of course, one could enumerate these conflicts, citing the Protestant Reformation as many of their catalyst, but guided by *New Atlantis* one should focus on the ever-fraught Jewish-Christian dynamic insofar as it informs Bacon's construction of his utopia *Bensalem*. Before beginning, it should be made clear that the Jewish-Christian conflict much predates Bacon's writing and plants its roots most saliently in the Jewish decide, ascribing to which many a Christian has blamed Jesus' crucifixion on the Jewish people and cited the bible as evidence. (King James Bible, Matt., 27: 24-25). This, combined with myriad other complications, imbued anti-Semitism throughout the European continent, translating it into various crusades and pogroms that resulted in the massacre of countless Jews.

Now given this brief history of the Jewish-Christian tension, one can contrast it to *New Atlantis*, wherein Bacon provides his reader with a utopia in which Jews and Christians tolerate each other. But, it is not as though *Bensalem* resembles Europe in all aspects aside from religious harmony; indeed, *Bensalem* is a stark departure from European, for if it weren't, its Jews and Christians wouldn't coexist. As a chief difference, *Bensalem* is very much a scientific society, dedicating itself to the pursuit of natural philosophy, here described as knowledge and understanding of God's creations. (Bacon, 20). Devotion to natural philosophy, as it exists in *Bensalem*, can be understood as the transcendent solution to Europe's incessant Jewish-Christian conflict; such is to say, through his utopia, Bacon hopes to argue that science, and

the objective mindset it employs, promotes toleration and peace. To this end, Bacon weaves Jewish tradition throughout the otherwise Christian Bensalem and ultimately personifies such fusion in the story's only Jewish character, Joabin, in whom he at once dramatizes and rectifies the Jewish-Christian conflict.

Before unpacking Bensalem's implications and Bacon's intentions, it stands to reason that one need understand both the utopia's history and institutions. For an explanation of the former, one can look to Joabin, who recalls Bensalem's original Jewish ancestry: "being desirous by tradition among the Jews there to have it believed that the people thereof were of the generations of Abraham...and that Moses by a secret cabala ordained the laws of Bensalem which they now use..." (26). Yet, Bensalem has since moved past its Jewish roots, having Christianized itself after Jesus' crucifixion and the subsequent revelation of the ark by the apostle Bartholomew. (13). Meant to deliver "salvation and peace," this ark contained books of both the Old and New Testaments—the former pertaining solely to Judaism but both to Christianity—and so saved Bensalem from "infidelity," obviating the flood that would wash over the rest of the old world. (13). In spite of this Christianization, Bensalem still retains "some few stirps of Jews" (25), like Joabin, who are free to practice their religion. Indeed, the utopia will never truly be rid of its Jewish roots: its name translates from the Hebrew to mean "peaceful son," and perhaps Bacon chose this to remind the now-Christian state of its heritage. In any case, the Jews that remain, Bacon points out, are "of a far different disposition" (25) from the European Jews, who "hate the name of Christ, and have a secret inbred rancor against the people among

whom they live” (26). By contrast, the “ good Jew” of Bensalem would acknowledge “ Christ was born a Virgin; and that he was more than a man,” and such beliefs jive with the Christian remainder of the population, nullifying any would-be conflict between the two groups.

Now, one could argue that in Bacon’s Bensalem it is not science that quells religious tension but this more flexible breed of Judaism that is inherently less at odds with Christianity and thereby less controversial. But, it is crucial to remember that Bensalem exists only in the hypothetical and that the Jewish-Christian conflict did indeed exist and inform Bacon’s writings.

Irrespective of the differences between real, contemporary European Jews and Bacon’s, there is no Jewish-Christian conflict in Bensalem, and the reasons thereof have yet to be understood. As mentioned, Bensalem is a scientific society, bolstered at its core by the institution of “ Solomon’s House,” whose implications are at once complex and vital to understanding New Atlantis’s deeper allegories. Sonically, “ Solomon’s House” reminds of two figures: the first, Solomona, was Bensalem’s first King (18), and the second, the biblical Solomon, was son of David and King of Israel. According to the Bible, God gave King Solomon “ wisdom and understanding exceeding much, and largeness of heart” (1 Kings, 4: 29), a description that undeniably guides Bacon’s construction of King Solomona, who has a similar “ large heart” (18). More, the biblical Solomon’s crowning achievement was his construction of “ a house of the Lord at Jerusalem” (2 Chron., 3: 1); this first Jewish temple, or “ Solomon’s Temple,” was the contemporary mecca for Jewish worship, housing the Ark of the Covenant and drawing as its crowd “ all the men of Israel” (1 Kings, 8: 2). Just as the Bible remembers King

Solomon for his temple, so too do the Bensalemites remember King Solomona for his own, similarly named “Solomon’s House,” and deemed the “noblest foundation...that was ever upon the earth, and the lantern of [Bensalem]” (Bacon, 20). Indeed, the sonic similarity between the two respective institutions is by no means accidental, for Bensalem’s “Solomon’s House” can be taken to “denominate the King of the Hebrews” whom King Solomona “finds himself to symbolize” and from whose works he seems to have been influenced. (20). As it turns out, King Solomon actually advanced the natural philosophy, leaving remnants of his studies not with the Europeans but with the Bensalemites: “for we have some parts of his works which with you are lost; namely, that natural history which he wrote of all plants.... and of all things that have life and motion” (20). Then, being acutely and undeniably aware of the connection between the natural science and King Solomon, these Bensalemites sometimes refer to “Solomon’s House” by another name, “The College of Six Day’s Works,” a nomenclature that admits their “excellent King had learned from the Hebrews that God created the world and all that therein is within six days” (20). As should come of no surprise, this second name also nods to the Bible, in which God is said to have created the world in six days, with the seventh being deemed the Sabbath (Ex., 20: 11). No doubt privy to this infamous six-day timeframe and its centrality to the Jewish tradition, Bacon employs the number throughout the work, mentioning “six of the clock” and “six [travellers]” (6-7). Although subtle, Bacon’s repetition of the number six speaks more greatly to the infusion of the Jewish tradition in an otherwise Christian narrative, which can be more specifically and fruitfully observed in Joabin.

Joabin's role in both Bensalem and New Atlantis is an absolutely crucial one, for he is at once a figurative parable and a literal example of Bensalem's religious tolerations. For evidence of the former, one should start by understanding the derivations of his name, which comes from the biblical Joab. As the Bible tells it, Joab was King David's nephew—and so Solomon's cousin—and the murderous commander of his uncle's army. Time and time again, Joab murdered King David's political enemies (2 Sam., 3: 27), eventually disobeying the King's orders (2 Sam., 18: 5), and killing his third son, Absalom (2 Sam., 18: 14). As punishment, Joab was demoted from his position of commander and replaced by Amasa, whom he then proceeded to deviously kill, pretending to kiss him as a sign of peace but instead stabbing his stomach. (2 Sam., 20: 9). Aware of Joab's proclivity for blood shed, King David dissociated himself from his nephew and upon his deathbed advised Solomon, his successor, to have him executed (1 Kings 2: 9), an order soon thereafter carried out. (1 Kings., 2: 29). And so, the Bible remembers Joab as a villain, not just of Kings David and Solomon, but also of the greater Hebrew people against whom he acted in vain. As a point of departure, Bacon's Joabin is no villain; in fact, he is a friend of a state and a participant in "Solomon's Temple."

As proven above, there is undeniable connection between King Solomon and his temple and King Solomona and his; and so, by deriving his character's name in that of Solomon's enemy, Bacon allows himself opportunity to rectify the biblical conflict. In New Atlantis, Bacon refers somewhat ambiguously to Joabin as a "merchant" (26), though of what in particular it remains unclear, and uses him as a mouthpiece to convey the most

narrative's most intimate details of Bensalem's sociological customs (26-29). Alone, these moments don't yield much consequence, but soon after their occurrence, Joabin is "commanded away in haste" by the father of Solomon's house who then "commanded [him] to tell you that he will admit your company to his presence" (30). With this, Joabin becomes more than just an ambiguous merchant, but is revealed to be some sort of intermediary between the scientific "Solomon's House" and the peoples of Bensalem, ostensibly existing as one of them but reporting directly to the Father. Though it is difficult to say with absolute certainty, perhaps Joabin is one of the twelve "merchants of light" (38) that brings knowledge from abroad back to Bensalem and that he converses with the travelers in such capacity. Indeed, Bacon only uses the term "merchant" twice in his story, once using it to describe Joabin and a second time to name the "merchants of light."

In any case, the allusive and sonic implications of King Solomona and Joabin are intentional, meant as a nod to the fraught relationship of their respective namesakes. As "Solomon's House" clearly takes roots in King Solomon's interest in natural philosophy, by assigning Joabin a role in the order itself and connecting him to the science studied therein, Bacon rectifies the biblical drama. But, it's dangerous to interpret Joabin as representative of the entire Jewish race; truly, it's better to understand him as a parable in and of himself. Such is to say, by connecting Joabin to both the Jewish-Christian conflict and to the science, Bacon implies that the latter can help to quell the former. In addition to connecting aspects of Bensalem through religious allusion, Bacon unites the entirety of his utopia around the pursuit of natural philosophy. Firstly, he relates King Solomon as an original natural

philosopher, ultimately extracting that the study of the God's creations increases man's appreciation of and utility for them. King Solomona, then, continues this practice, codifying it in "Solomon's House" and rendering it absolutely central to Bensalem's existence. And finally, Bacon includes Joabin, connecting him to both "Solomon's House" and to Bensalem's greater population, ultimately relating him as an intermediary between the two. At the core of Bensalem, it is natural philosophy that allows religious toleration, and to convey this, Bacon relies on religious allusions and homophonic names, using them to rectify age-old religious conflict and to urge his society to a less divided, more objective future.