



BIBLIOTECA UNIVERSITARIA DI GENOVA – PERCORSI TEMATICI

## UNIVERSALITAS & PERVASIVITAS

*il costituirsi e diffondersi della S.J. e suoi echi (1540 - 1773)*  
di A. Pisani

*Schede autori Sotto attacco*

### Isaac La Peyrère

Isaac La Peyrère, or Pererius, (1596–1676) was a French Millenarian theologian and formulator of Pre-Adamite theory.

#### Life

Born into a Huguenot family in Bordeaux, and possibly of Jewish descent, La Peyrère was a lawyer by training and a Calvinist by upbringing, though he later converted to Catholicism.

La Peyrère served as secretary to the Prince of Condé on whose orders he lived for one month in 1654 in a house in Belgium adjoining that of the recently-abdicated Queen Christina of Sweden. Christina is said to have financed the anonymous publication of *Prae-Adamitae*.<sup>[1]</sup> During this time both Christina and La Peyrère met with Menasseh Ben Israel, who was later invited by Oliver Cromwell's government to England to negotiate the readmission of Jews to that country. Menasseh became a convert to La Peyrère's belief that the coming of the Jewish Messiah was imminent. La Peyrère also argued that Messiah would join with the king of France (that is, the Prince of Condé, not Louis XIV of France) to liberate the Holy Land, rebuild the Temple and set up a world government of the Messiah with the king of France acting as regent. It has since emerged that, in fact

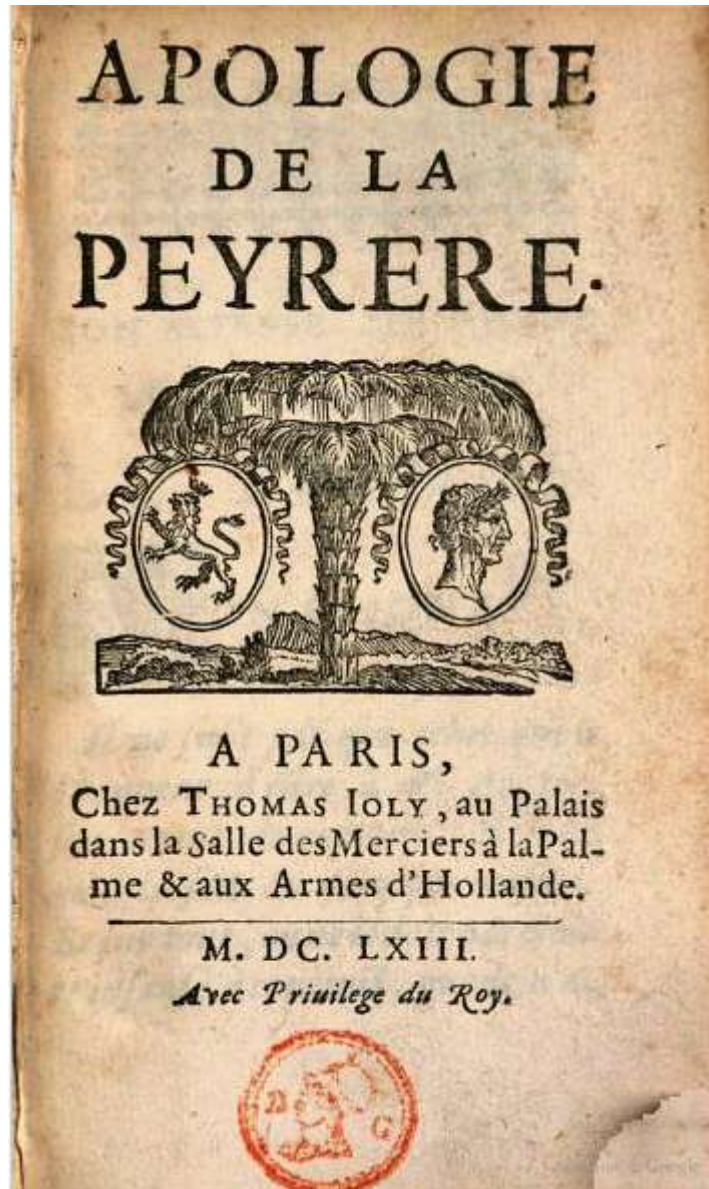
"Condé, Cromwell and Christina were negotiating to create a theological-political world state, involving overthrowing the Catholic king of France, among other things".<sup>[2]</sup>

La Peyrère was influenced by Thomas Hobbes and was an influence on Baruch Spinoza.

#### Works

For more details on this topic, see "Prae-Adamite".

In his *Prae-Adamitae*, published in Latin in 1655 and in English as *Men Before Adam* in 1656, La Peyrère argued that Paul's words in Chapter 5, verses 12-14 of his *Epistle to the Romans* should be





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interpreted such that "if Adam sinned in a morally meaningful sense there must have been an Adamic law according to which he sinned. If law began with Adam, there must have been a lawless world before Adam, containing people".[3] Thus, according to La Peyrère there must have been two creations: first the creation of the Gentiles and then that of Adam, who was father of the Jews. The existence of pre-Adamites, La Peyrère argued, explained Cain's life after Abel's murder which, in the *Genesis* account, involved the taking of a wife and the building of a city. This account of human origins became the basis for 19th century theories of polygenism and modern racism.

In 1656 after a storm of indignation the *Prae-Adamitae* was publicly burned in Paris and La Peyrère was imprisoned briefly during a visit to Catholic Spanish Netherlands, but was released after he supposedly recanted his views.

In 19th Century Europe polygenism and Pre-Adamism were attractive to those intent on demonstrating the inferiority of non-Western peoples, while in the United States those attuned to racial theories who found it unattractive to contemplate a common history with non-Whites, such as Charles Caldwell, Josiah C. Nott and Samuel G. Morton rejected the view that non-whites were the descendants of Adam. Morton combined pre-Adamism with cranial measurements to construct a theory of racial difference that justified slavery. As Michael Barkun explains,

‘In such an intellectual atmosphere, Pre-Adamism appeared in two different but not wholly incompatible forms. Religious writers continued to be attracted to the theory both because it appeared to solve certain exegetical problems (where did Cain's wife come from?) and exalted the spiritual status of Adam's descendants. Those of a scientific bent found it equally attractive but for different reasons, connected with a desire to formulate theories of racial difference that retained a place for Adam while accepting evidence that many cultures were far older than the few thousand years humanity had existed, according to biblical chronology. The two varieties differed primarily in the evidence they used, the one relying principally on scriptural texts and the latter what passed at the time for physical anthropology.’ [4]

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### Notes

1. Pyenson, 1989, p. 149.
2. Garber & Ayers, Cambridge History of Seventeenth-Century Philosophy, p. 407.
3. Almond, 1999, p. 53.
4. Barkun, 1996, p. 153.
- 5.



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LA PEYRÈRE, ISAAC (1594 or 1596–1676), French theologian, Bible critic, and anthropologist, apparently of Marrano background. He was born in Bordeaux and raised a Calvinist. In 1640 he became the Prince of Condé's secretary. In 1642–43 he wrote *Praeadamitae* and *Du Rappel des Juifs*, which constitute one continuous theory of Bible criticism and Messianism. The *Rappel des Juifs* was published anonymously in 1643, while the more revolutionary *Praeadamitae* ("Men Before Adam") was banned and circulated privately in manuscript in France, Holland, and Denmark. In 1644 La Peyrère went to Copenhagen with the French ambassador, and there wrote *Relation de Groenland* (published 1647), and *Relation de l'Islande* (published 1663; *An Account of Iceland*, 1732), landmarks in early anthropology. Queen Christina of Sweden saw his manuscript of the *Praeadamitae* in Brussels, urged its publication, and agreed to pay the costs. It was printed in 1655 in Amsterdam and Basle (five editions in Latin, 1655; English as *Men Before Adam*, 1656; Dutch as *Praeadamiten*, 1661). The book was banned and burned everywhere for its heretical claims that Adam was not the first man, that the Bible is not the history of mankind, but only the history of the Jews, that the Flood was a local event, that Moses did not write the *Pentateuch*, and that no accurate copy of the Bible exists. Many refutations immediately appeared. La Peyrère was arrested and told he would be released if he turned Catholic and recanted to the Pope, which he did in hypocritical fashion, saying that his heresies resulted from his Calvinist upbringing, and that though all Jews and Christians disagreed with him, and though he could still find no Scriptural or reasonable evidence against his theories, he would abjure them because the Church said they were wrong (*Lettre de la Peyrère à Philotime*, 1658; *Apologie de Peyrère*, 1663). The Pope offered him a post, but La Peyrère returned to Paris and became Condé's librarian and a lay member of the Oratorians. There he collected more evidence for his pre-Adamite theory, arguing with the great Bible scholar, Father [Richard Simon](#), and trying unsuccessfully to publish a new version of his *Messianic Rappel des Juifs*. When he died, one of his friends wrote:

‘Here lies La Peyrère, that good Israelite, Huguenot, Catholic and finally Pre-Adamite. Four religions pleased him at the same time and his indifference was so uncommon that after 80 years when he had to make a choice the Good Man departed and did not choose any of them’.

La Peyrère has been interpreted as a heretic, atheist, deist, Socinian, father of Bible criticism, and father of Zionism. His overall theory is a Marrano Messianist view. La Peyrère argued that the Jews are about to be recalled, that the Messiah is coming for them, that they should join the Christians, and with the king of France rebuild Zion. Then the Jews will rule the world from Jerusalem. La Peyrère was a combination of hard-headed scientist and kabbalistic messianist in developing his case. He argued his pre-Adamite theory first on a farfetched interpretation of St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans, then from information about pagan history, and finally from anthropological evidence about the Indians, Eskimos, and Chinese. His analysis of the Bible played a great role in the development of Higher Criticism, influencing Spinoza and Richard Simon. La Peyrère's messianic theories resemble those of some of the Spanish New Christians and Postel's Kabbalism, but seem unrelated to Shabbetai Tsevi's movement. His separation of Jewish and gentile histories



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influenced Vico in the developing secular historiography. La Peyrère's pre-Adamite theory was revived in the early 19th century as a basis for polygenesis and modern racism, claiming the American Indians and the blacks were not sons of Adam.

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[Richard H. Popkin]

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