31.3. The Philosophical Exegesis

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1. Introduction

During the eleventh and twelfth centuries the Jews of Spain lived in an Arab cultural environment and were influenced by it. Through it they encountered Muslim theology, together with Muslim ascetic literature, Greek and Hellenistic philosophy translated into Arabic, and Arabic philosophy. In philosophy, they became familiar with the writings of both the neo-Platonic and the Aristotelian streams. The encounter with these streams of thought also led those Jewish philosophers who lived in Spain during this period to interpret Scripture under the influence of the ideas they absorbed from them.

The Arabic environment likewise influenced the language of writing of the Jewish philosophers. As both the language of cultural discourse and the spoken language of the Jews during that period was Arabic, the Spanish Jewish philosophers wrote their works in that language.[1] However, as they were addressing themselves to Jews rather than to the Arabic environment, this was written in Hebrew characters. When interpreting Scripture in these works, the words or verses under discussion are quoted in the original Hebrew, while the exegesis is conducted in Arabic, including at times a translation of words or phrases from the Hebrew text — itself an act of interpretation.

The interest of the Jewish philosophers is primarily theological and philo-

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[1] With the exception of Maimonides, whose central halakhic work, *Mishneh Torah*, which contains a theoretical section, *Seper nam-Mada'*, was written in Hebrew.

sophic, biblical exegesis being secondary to these interests. Hence, they do not write running contextual interpretations of the biblical books. Rather, their interpretations of words, expressions, isolated verses, passages, or even entire chapters of the Bible are incorporated within their philosophical and theological discussions.

2. Solomon ibn Gabirol

The first biblical exegete among the Jewish philosophers of Spain was *Solomon ibn Gabirol* (ca. 1021/22-1058). Ibn Gabirol is known in several respects: as a major poet, who wrote both sacred and secular poetry, including the famous *Keter Malkût* ("the Crown of the Kingdom"); as the author of a philosophic work in the neo-Platonic spirit, written originally in Arabic but which survived in its entirety only in its Latin version, *Fons Vitae*, selections from which by Shem Tov Falquera are extant in Hebrew translation; and as the author of the first Jewish ethical work written in Spain, *Kitâb Işlâḥ 'l-Aḫlâq (Seper Tiqqûn Middôt han-Nepeš)*. In addition, he composed Bible commentaries, fragments of which are cited by R. Abraham ibn Ezra in his own commentaries.

The passages from Ibn Gabirol's commentaries cited by Ibn Ezra do not contain any formulation of a theory of biblical exegesis, but it is clear from them that Ibn Gabirol's central tendency was to harmonize between philosophy and the biblical text by interpreting these texts as neo-Platonic philosophical allegory.

The exegeses cited by Ibn Ezra are concise, partial, truncated and enigmatic. Thus, at times they may be understood in a number of different ways and require exegetic completion by the reader, primarily on the basis of knowledge of Ibn Gabirol's philosophy in *Fons Vitae*. It is not clear whether this was Ibn Gabirol's original manner of writing, or was simply the way in which his words were cited by Ibn Ezra.

The richest and most important interpretation cited by Ibn Ezra is the exegesis of the story of the Garden of Eden. From what is given of this interpretation by Ibn Ezra, it would appear that Ibn Gabirol did not interpret it as a historical event, but as a trans-temporal philosophical allegory whose subject is "the secret of the soul". His interpretation of this narrative focuses primarily upon the key nouns therein, each one of which is given a philosophical meaning. For example: 'Eden' is the supernal world, the 'river' is the general matter of the world, and the 'four streams' that split off from it are the four elements. The protagonists of the Eden story are the various powers of the soul of neo-Platonic psychology. 'Adam' is the rational soul, 'Eve' the animal soul, while the 'serpent' is the appetitive soul. Ibn Gabirol justifies only some of the meanings that he attributes to the nouns in the Eden story, making use here of the conventional methods of rabbinic Midrash. One such method is the etymological interpretation of words. For example, the name 'Eve' (Heb. *ḥawâh*) is derived from 'life' (*ḥayâh*), indicating that she is the animal soul. The Serpent is the appetitive soul. Here, Ibn Gabirol incorporates another method used by

the Rabbis — the interpretation of a verse or a word from a verse by means of another biblical verse, explaining the word *naḥaš* (serpent) as derived from "such a man as I can surely divine" (*naḥeš yenaḥeš*, Gen 44:15).

The brief interpretation of Jacob's dream of the ladder, cited by Ibn Ezra in the name of Ibn Gabirol, is similar in nature to his interpretation of the Eden story. Here too, Ibn Gabirol identifies central nouns found in the description of the dream with philosophical concepts, this time without making any attempt to justify this interpretation in a philological manner or by means of the 'biblical lexicon': "And R. Solomon the Spaniard said that the ladder alludes to the supernal soul, and the angels of God are the thoughts of wisdom". It seems reasonable to accept here MUNK's interpretation, according to which the ladder is the intellective soul while the angels are the thoughts of this soul, at times relating to a more spiritual subject and at times to a bodily or more lowly subject.[2]

An allusion to a philosophic exegesis of the Creation narrative by Ibn Gabirol is given in his name by Ibn Ezra in his interpretation of Isa 43:7: "Every one that is called by My name, and whom I have created for My glory, I have formed him, yea, I have made him". Ibn Ezra notes that Ibn Gabirol remarked here, "for this is the secret of the world". It would appear that Ibn Gabirol specifically interpreted the verbs in this verse, which he saw as the key to understanding the Creation story.

In three places in his commentary to the Torah (on Gen 3:1; in the 'new approach' to Gen 1:3; and on Num 22:28), Abraham ibn Ezra also mentions Ibn Gabirol as one who opposed the literalistic interpretation of the supernatural phenomenon of the serpent's speech in the Garden of Eden narrative. In support of this, Ibn Gabirol invoked a logical argument, based upon the biblical text and upon experience. According to the biblical text, the serpent was not punished by being stricken dumb. This being so, had he been able to speak then he would also be able to speak today — which is not the case. Ibn Gabirol does not present here a philosophical exegesis, but only attempts to neutralize the supernatural dimension of the story and thereby harmonize between it and logical, and not necessarily philosophical, thought.

There is barely an echo of any religious belief in his philosophic work (apart from *creatio ex nihilo*), nor is even one biblical verse mentioned or interpreted therein. On the other hand, his ethical work, *Kitâb Işlâḥ 'l-Aḫlâq (Seper Tiqqûn Middôt han-Nepeš)* contains many biblical verses, most of which are cited without any elaboration in order to show that there is agreement between the ideas he brought — at times philosophical opinions — and the Bible. In some isolated cases, he does provide an interpretation of isolated verses, or even interprets several consecutive verses from the same chapter in their context.

His most interesting exegeses are found in the introduction to his ethical book, where they are brought to support the structure of his discussion of ethical qualities. Referring, for example, to Qoh 9:11:

I returned, and saw under the sun, that the race is not to the swift, nor the battle to the strong,

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[2] Munk, Ibn Gabirol (1955) 166.

neither yet bread to the wise, nor yet riches to men of understanding, nor yet favour to men of
skill; but time and chance happeneth to them all –

Solomon alludes the verse to the five senses. Thereafter he explains the metho-
dological principle of this interpretation, in his exegesis to Ps 37:1–23. He ar-
gues that there are two kinds of verse in the Bible: verses that are to be under-
stood literally, and verses that only allude to their subject. Qoh 9:11 is divided
into five units of meaning, each one alluding to one of the senses, in the fol-
lowing order: smell, hearing, taste, feeling, and sight. As, according to his in-
terpretation, the verse is not written literally, but allusively, he does not deal
with the meaning of its words, but only attempts to understand to what they
allude; for example: "not to heros is the battle" alludes, in line with his inter-
pretation, to the sense of hearing. He explains: "for war takes place through
hearing, with din and tumult".

According to the exegesis of Ibn Gabirol, Ps 37:1–23 presents all twenty
qualities of the soul which he discusses in his book. Here he provides a running
commentary of each verse of the chapter, in order to prove this exegetical
claim.

3. Baḥya ben Joseph ibn Paquda

Baḥya ben Joseph ibn Paquda (ca. 1100) is known in the history of medieval
Jewish thought as the author of the book of religious behavior that has been of
the greatest importance and influence since the Middle Ages until modern
times – *Al-Hidâya 'ila farâ'id al-qulûb* ("The Duties of the Heart"). Baḥya is
not concerned with the confrontation between religion and philosophy.
Rather, his book is intended to guide the believing Jew in the true service of
God, which is an inner spiritual service. Although *The Duties of the Heart* is
not devoted to biblical exegesis, Baḥya deals there not only with the interpre-
tation of biblical words and verses, but also with the theory of biblical exeg-
esis.

From remarks concerning biblical exegesis scattered throughout the book,[3]
it would seem that he distinguishes among several exegetical approaches. They
are also ranked according to the level of man's progress in understanding of
the biblical text:[4] (1) study of the linguistic aspect of the Bible, the morphology
of language; (2) study of the lexical aspect of the biblical text – the interpreta-
tion of difficult words and distinction among different kinds of nouns, particu-
larly the distinction between a regular noun and a derivative noun; (3) under-
standing the meaning of the biblical text. This is an almost literal form of exeg-
esis of text, and it is not based upon the rabbinic exegetical tradition. On this
level, one already finds the beginning of a theological interpretation of the bib-
lical text: a distinction is drawn there between those biblical words which are
to be understood literally, and those whose meaning is derivative or which are
of equivocal meaning. The discussion of the corporeality of God is based upon
this distinction. Finally, (4) understanding the esoteric level of the biblical text.
Here, evidently under the influence of Muslim ascetic literature, which may be
seen throughout his book, Baḥya distinguishes between the literal interpreta-
tion (Arab. *ẓahir*) and that based upon the 'inner' or hidden dimension (Arab.
baṭin) of the biblical text. In this one finds Baḥya's exegetical and theological
innovation in the history of Jewish thought. On the hidden level, we find *The
Duties of the Heart* – which is the central subject of this work.[5] The biblical
text 'alludes' to this level, which is only subject to understanding by "those
who have intellect and understanding".[6]

The most striking thing in Baḥya's use of the biblical text is his citation of
verses as prooftexts for his arguments, using the formula "as it is written", "as
Scripture says", or "as is said". Baḥya inherited this method from the Talmu-
dic Sages, who thereby strengthened the continuity and unity of the Jewish tra-
dition. In Baḥya, it is also used to demonstrate that the opinions which he pre-
sents, including those taken from the Arabic environment – the Kalam, neo-
Platonism, and the Muslim ascetic texts – appear in the Jewish tradition and
are not alien to it. Only rarely does he also interpret the verse which he cites as
a prooftext.

The interpretation of the divine attributes given by Baḥya in his biblical ex-
egesis is especially worth noting. He argues that those attributes corporealiz-
ing God have two meanings. The one is the literal interpretation, intended for
the average person. The Bible has an educational goal: to impress upon the
soul of the average person the knowledge of the existence of God, which is a
precondition for His worship. To that end, the Bible adapts itself to the under-
standing of the average person, utilizing corporeal expressions for Him.[7] This
is necessary in order for the average man to know of the existence of God. Ba-
ḥya relies here upon the rule of the Sages, "the Torah speaks in the language
of human beings" (*b. Ber.* 31 b, and numerous parallels in the Babylonian Tal-
mud). According to his interpretation, this rule explains the presence of cor-
poreal images of God in the Bible. But whereas the Rabbis used this rule in the
exegesis of texts bearing implications for Jewish law (halakhah), Baḥya, like
the Geonim before him, applies it to the biblical terms that corporealize God.
Baḥya is the first of the medieval Jewish philosophers to understand this rule
in this way.[8] Although Baḥya agrees with the Sages that "the Torah speaks in
the language of human beings", he also refers to the adaptation of the Bible to
the manner of speech of the masses of people, in this case the emphasis is upon
the adjustment of Scripture to the understanding of the average person, rather
than to his manner of speech.

Baḥya claims, secondly, that the same corporealizing attributes may also be

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[3] Cf. Introduction (17,41–42); 3.4 (148–51); 8.3 (367–69). All quotations are taken from the
edition of Y. Kafiḥ; the page numbers are in brackets.
[4] Cf. 3.4.

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[5] Introduction (41).
[6] Cf. 1.10 (79–80).
[7] Allusions to this idea also appear among the pure brothers. See Kaufmann, Die Theologie des
Bachja (1910) 76, n. 1.
[8] Cf. Bacher, Bibelexegese (1892) 72, n. 1.

given a non-literal, spiritual interpretation. "The enlightened, wise and under-
standing man" knows how to strip the corporealizing words "of their shells"
and to attain gradually a spiritual understanding of God, in accordance with
his power of understanding. In addressing the enlightened person, the Torah
makes use of a special method, a 'hint', which the enlightened man apprehends
and according to which he understands the matter.[9]

In explaining the attributes of action, Bahya anticipates Maimonides in the
exegesis of Exod 34:6–7: "The Lord, the Lord, God, merciful and gracious,
long-suffering, and abundant in goodness and truth; keeping mercy unto the
thousandth generation", etc. as referring to "God's ways in relation to the cre-
ated beings" — that is God's attributes of action, and not to the qualities of
God.

Another subject appearing in Bahya's biblical exegesis is the World to
Come. Bahya, like R. Saadiah Gaon before him, is aware that the Bible does
not explicitly discuss reward and punishment in the next world, nor survival of
the soul; he was also evidently aware that this subject was one that appeared in
the polemics of Christianity against Judaism. In several places in his book, he
hence deals with proofs that the belief in the survival of the soul and in the
World to Come do indeed appear in Scripture. In the 'Gate of Service', Chap-
ter 4, and in 'The Gate of the Unity of Action', Chapter 5, Bahya enumerates a
series of verses, without interpreting them, which in his opinion allude to the
belief in the World to Come. One of these verses, Zech 3:7, "then I will give
thee free access among these that stand by", is interpreted in the Fourth Gate,
The Gate of Trust', Ch. 4. He argues there that it is impossible to understand
this verse except as applying to a situation in which the soul survives after
death and thus constitutes a proof of the faith in the World to Come.

In addition, one finds in Bahya, as in Ibn Gabirol, a number of allegorical
interpretations of biblical verses, which are understood as prooftexts for his
ideas.[10] In his allegorical interpretations of verses from the Ecclesiastes,[11] he
dissects each 'parable' into the individual units of meaning comprising it, ex-
plaining why each such unit ought to be given the particular allegorical mean-
ing he ascribes to it. For example, in his interpretation of Qoh 9:14–15, "there
was a little city, and few men within it",[12] which he sees as a metaphor for the
subjugation of the human impulse to the intellect, he explains: "He described
man as a 'little city', because he is a microcosmos" (p. 249). In his interpreta-
tion of the verse, "Now there was found in it a man poor and wise" (v. 15), he
uses, like Ibn Gabirol before him, yet another exegetical technique, which as
mentioned was very widely used by the rabbinic Sages: the interpretation of
one biblical verse by means of another biblical verse. Here he interprets the
verse by means of another portion of the same verse, and by part of another

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[9] Bahya holds that the Torah alludes to other spiritual matters as well, such as the World to
Come and the hidden wisdom, because they are difficult to understand and intended only for the
enlightened, for whom such hints are sufficient to understand; cf. 1.10 (798).
[10] Qoh 12:11, in 2. Introduction (97) and a number of parables concerning the Evil Impulse:
Qoh 9:14–15 (5.5) 2 Sam 12:4; Ps 1:1 (8.3 [354–55]).
[11] See above, n. 10.
[12] 5.5 (249–50).

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verse further on in the same chapter: "That is to say: the Intellect, which he de-
scribed as an unfortunate person because of the small number of those follow-
ing it and assisting it, as is said of him, 'yet no man remembered that same
poor man' (v. 15), and it says, 'the poor man's wisdom is despised' (v. 16)"
(ibid.).

4. Judah Halevi

Judah Halevi (Toledo, 1075 — Egypt / Palestine, 1141) is known as one of
the greatest Jewish poets of the Middle Ages and as the author of the *Book of
the Khazars* (*Al-Kitâb al-Khazarî*), commonly known as the *Kuzari*, a theolo-
gical-philosophical treatise of an apologetic-polemical nature. The *Kuzari* was
written as a defense of the Jewish religion against philosophy, the other mono-
theistic religions, and Karaism.

Unlike Bahya, Halevi hardly deals at all with the theory of biblical exegesis.
According to his teaching, revelation belongs to a unique realm of its own,
which it is impossible to base upon philosophy and whose contents cannot be
proven by means of the intellect. This being the case, he does not engage in
philosophical exegesis of Scripture so as to harmonize between it and philoso-
phy, as was done by Maimonides after him.[13] His biblical interpretations are
primarily historical-philosophical and theological. Their central subjects are
the nature of the Jewish people as a chosen people, the place and importance
of the Land of Israel, exegesis of the prophetic visions, and interpretation of
the attributes of God and His names.

According to his theory, the Jewish people are "the chosen[14] among all hu-
man beings" by virtue of being the people of prophecy, a people that has a di-
rect connection with God. Halevi interprets the biblical stories concerning the
history of mankind from Adam through the twelve sons of Jacob as a history
of the 'chosenness' or 'election'. Parallel to this, Halevi argues that the Land of
Israel has a special religious status: only there is prophecy of the 'chosen' possi-
ble; hence, one who is 'chosen' needs to live there in order to attain prophecy.
He establishes this feature of the land of Israel, among other things, by the in-
terpretation of the biblical stories concerning the relationship between the cho-
sen individuals of the people of Israel and the Land.

Halevi takes special interest in the interpretation of prophetic visions. Ac-
cording to his interpretation, these are extra-mental concrete realities which
were created by God and apprehended through prophetic experience. Prophe-
tic visions are a unique religious phenomenon, which cannot be based upon ra-
tional concepts. Hence, Halevi does not see them as 'parables' requiring inter-
pretation in order to determine their 'true meaning'. On the basis of this funda-
mental approach, Halevi interprets various phenomena mentioned in Scrip-
ture, such as: "the pillar of cloud", "the consuming fire", "thick cloud and
mist", "fire", "radiance" (*Kuzari* 2.7), "the glory of the Lord", "the Lord", as

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[13] Nevertheless, in *Kuzari* 5.2 he mentions, in the name of others, a philosophical exegesis of
the first verses of the account of the Creation in Genesis.
[14] Halevi here uses a term taken from the Shiite lexicon, *safwa*.

well as the verse, "And the Lord descended on Mount Sinai" (*Kuzari* 2.4), "fire and cloud and image and picture", "the angels seen by Isaiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, and Ezekiel's vision of the Chariot" (*Kuzari* 4.3). In his view, these phenomena are "fine spiritual matter" (2.4) or "a refined body" (2.3) created by God, whose ontological status is an intermediate stage between the pure spirituality of God and the corporeality of the physical world which we are able to perceive by means of our senses. This matter is embodied in spiritual form at the will of God, by means of "the spark of divine light" (2.7). Elsewhere, he interprets part of these phenomena as physical forms which were created by God at His will for a particular prophet at a particular moment.

One of the foci of Halevi's biblical exegesis, like that of Baḥya, is the doctrine of the deity. Here, Halevi is interested in removing any anthropomorphic perception of God, building a doctrine of attributes according to which one may ascribe to God attributes of action, attributes of relation, and negative attributes, but no essential attributes. He goes on to explain the nature of the concrete qualities ascribed to God by the Bible on the basis of this doctrine of attributes; for example, "merciful and gracious" (Exod 34:6), "a jealous and avenging God" (Nah 1:2), are attributes of God's actions; "High and Lofty One" (Isa 57:15) are attributes which man ascribes to God out of his admiration of Him, while "living" is a negative attribute, meaning that God is not dead, but also that He is not alive in the same sense in which human beings are alive. To these terms, which conform to the Aristotelian god, he adds other attributes based upon the perception of God as acting wilfully: "forming", "creating", and "alone doing great wonders" (Ps 136:4).

Halevi displays particular interest in interpretations for the names of God. These interpretations also reflect an explicitly theological tendency. He interprets the Ineffable Name, YHWH, and the names *'elôhîm, qâdôš* (Isa 6:3), *'ehyeh* (Exod 3:14) and *'adônây*. Halevi sees the Tetragrammaton, YHWH, as the 'personal' name of the Divine. This name is used to identify the specific God who appears in revelation. The name *'ehyeh* is likewise connected with revelation, according to his interpretation: *'ehyeh* is the God who reveals Himself to the people of Israel when they seek Him. The name *'elôhîm* is the name for the philosophical God, whom one reaches by means of rational proof; its meaning is 'ruler' and 'judge'. As opposed to YHWH, which is the personal name of God, *'elôhîm* is a generic name, a term used for a group of different powers, different from one another, which are the causes of motion in the world and rule those things therein.

Like Baḥya before him, Halevi also utilizes the rule: "the Torah speaks in the language of man", which he applies to the doctrine of the deity. Halevi interprets only one subject in the Bible by its means — those verses which seemingly indicate that God needs to be reminded of something or to have His attention drawn to something (Num 10:9-10; Lev 23:24). He argues that we find here an example of the rule: "the Torah speaks in the language of man"; that is, that the Torah speaks in the manner generally known to human beings, according to the understanding of the masses. Therefore, things are formulated as if one were speaking of the remembrance of the people of Israel before

God. In fact, these verses teach the idea that when the deeds and intention will be perfect, they will merit recompense from God.

One also finds in Halevi one allegorical interpretation, namely, the exegesis of Cant 5:2-4. Whereas in Jewish medieval philosophy the Song of Songs is commonly interpreted as a parable for the human soul, Halevi sees these verses as a historical parable relating to the Jewish people in Exile during the Second Temple period.

A number of Halevi's biblical interpretations bear a polemical character. Halevi interprets one of the central passages in the biblical Jewish-Christian polemic, the words of Isaiah to the "Servant of the Lord" (Isa 52:13; 53:1-4), in a manner that rejects the Christian interpretation of these words. According to his exegesis, the "Servant of the Lord" in Isa 52:13 is the Jewish people itself, not Jesus. Isa 53:1-4 depicts the suffering of the Jewish people in Exile. The people of Israel, and not Jesus, suffer on behalf of mankind, and will thereafter redeem it. The Jewish people as a whole has a messianic task; its function in human history is to bring about the connection between God and the world.[15]

5. Moses ben Maimon / Maimonides (Rambam)

R. Moses ben Maimon (Lat. Maimonides, acronym: Rambam; Cordoba, 1135/38 - Fostat, 1204) is known as both the greatest Jewish philosopher and the greatest Jewish jurist (halakhist) of the Middle Ages. Similar to Baḥya and Halevi before him, Maimonides did not write a systematic commentary of any of the biblical books or any part thereof. His biblical exegeses appear within his halakhic works, in his epistles, and in his philosophic-theological work, *The Guide of the Perplexed (Dalâlat al-Ḥâ'irîn)*.

Particularly in his halakhic works, but also in the *Guide*, Maimonides, like Baḥya, utilizes the biblical text as a prooftext for the ideas that he articulates or for the practical instructions that he gives to the reader. These prooftexts are frequently invoked without any commentary; their interpretation is left to be inferred by the reader from the fact of their use in support of a particular opinion or instruction. Less frequently, he also interprets these prooftexts. However, unlike Baḥya, Maimonides does not suffice with bringing biblical prooftexts for his opinions. Rather, biblical exegesis occupies a central place in his writings, primarily in the *Guide of the Perplexed*.

Whereas Baḥya and Halevi, as well as Maimonides in his halakhic works and his epistles, only incorporate biblical interpretations within their theological discussions, Maimonides represents the exegesis of the Bible — specifically, the interpretation of equivocal terms according to their logical classification, and the interpretation of parables in the Bible — as the purpose of his theological-philosophical work, the *Guide of the Perplexed*.[16] This goal is not ex-

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[15] *Kuzari* 2.34-44; 4.22-23.
[16] Interpretations of the Bible also appear in those sections of Maimonides' halakhic writings that deal with matters of faith and belief: the *Commentary on the Mishnah*, the *Mishneh Torah* [abbr. MT] (the Code).

pressed in the structure of the book. The majority of the chapters dealing with the interpretation of equivocal terms appearing in the Bible are concentrated at the beginning of the book; thereafter, Maimonides proceeds to deal with theological-philosophical subjects. His interpretations of textual units, consisting of a verse, a paragraph, or even a chapter, as well as the interpretation of equivocal terms, are scattered within these discussions throughout the various chapters of the book, and are not presented in any systematic manner.

The Guide of the Perplexed is meant to answer a challenge presented by the period in which Maimonides lived — namely, the confrontation between religion and philosophy. According to the Introduction, the book is intended for the reader who is, on the one hand, a believing religious person, who observes the commandments and accepts the Bible as a sacred and authoritative text, not only in the realm of religious-ethical behavior, but also in that of beliefs and opinions. On the other hand, he is an intellectual who is well acquainted with the philosophy of the Aristotelian tradition that was widespread in his day (primarily that of a Alfarabi and Avicenna) and accepts them as true. Such a person finds inconsistency and even contradiction between the literal understanding of Biblical texts and Aristotelian philosophy, and for this reason is 'perplexed'. Maimonides' goal is to free this individual from his 'perplexity' by means of a reinterpretation of Scripture which will demonstrate that the truth of philosophy and that of the biblical text are in fact harmonious. Maimonides thus engages in philosophical exegesis of the Bible, by means of which he shows that the inner significance of the biblical text is none other than that of Aristotelian physics and metaphysics.

The attempt to harmonize between religion and philosophy by means of biblical exegesis acquires a specific coloration in Maimonides. Maimonides adopts the idea of philosophic esotericism, particularly in the version of this idea promulgated by Avicenna. He argues that the philosophic contents, especially metaphysical ideas, ought to be concealed from the broader public, because knowledge of philosophy is liable to damage their religious faith. He identifies this esotericism with tannaitic and amoraitic esotericism — namely, the requirement not to expound publicly the *Ma'aseh Berešit* ('Account of the Beginning') and *Ma'aseh Merkâbâ* ('Account of the Chariot') — explaining that 'Account of the Beginning' refers to Aristotelian physics, while 'Account of the Chariot' corresponds to Aristotelian metaphysics. Since this philosophic esotericism is embodied in legal instructions of the Sages, Maimonides is himself required to obey it, and needs to conceal his philosophic opinions from the masses, primarily in metaphysical matters, as well as part of his philosophical interpretation of Scripture. The Sages not only prohibited the public dissemination of the 'Account of the Beginning' and 'Account of the Chariot', but also stated that one may only transmit the contents of the 'Account of the Chariot' in "chapter headings" — that is, by means of allusion — to those individuals who are deserving to receive them, to one who is "wise and understands by himself". In *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides uses a method whereby he simultaneously hides and reveals a part of his biblical exegesis: hiding it from the broad masses, and revealing it to one who is capable of understanding matters by himself. This being the case, he does not always give a

full and clear interpretation of words, verses or entire biblical passages, but only alludes to their meaning. Moreover, at times he also uses another method: the scattering of allusions among a number of different chapters of the *Guide*. The reader is then required to complete these interpretations by himself: to understand the hints that Maimonides gives to certain interpretations, and to combine these with one another. Thus, at times Maimonides' Bible interpretations themselves require interpretation.

What makes Maimonides' approach to biblical exegesis unique is that he not only deals with the interpretation of the Bible in practice, but that he also presents, particularly in his Introduction to the *Guide*, the exegetical theory underlying his biblical exegesis. This theory deals with the language of the biblical text and its literary form, justifying his claim that the inner meaning of the biblical text is philosophical and his theory concerning the literary form of the biblical text.

In his Introduction to the *Guide*, Maimonides explicitly mentions two components of the biblical text that require interpretation: individual words or 'terms', and textual units consisting of a verse or a number of consecutive verses, which he designates as 'parable'. In the chapters on prophecy, he also speaks of a number of forms of expression that are characteristic of the prophets: "figurative uses, exaggerations and hyperbole".

In practice, the *Guide of the Perplexed* contains two different theories concerning equivocal 'terms'. The first theory, which he presents in the Introduction to the work, is the theory of homonyms taken from the literature of Aristotelian logic, which he knew through the writings of al-Farabi. He applies this to the Bible, arguing that a number of different kinds of homonymal nouns appear in the Bible: completely equivocal terms, derivative terms, conventional terms, amphibolous terms, and equivocal terms used in a general and particular sense. In order properly to understand the biblical text and to avoid error in its interpretation, it is necessary to discern that there are in fact words there that are of multiple meaning, to recognize the nature of their multiplicity of meaning, to know their various significances, and to apply them in a proper manner in the proper context.

The second theory argues that the Bible contains equivocal words whose second meaning is to be determined on the basis of their etymology (in fact, frequently on the basis of their imagined etymology), or by changing the order of their letters. This theory is presented by Maimonides at the beginning of his interpretation of the story of the Creation and of the story of the Garden of Eden (end of *Guide* 2.29), and in the chapters on prophecy (*Guide* 2.43).

According to Maimonides' teaching, the 'parables' are verses or passages that have two levels of meaning: a revealed level (Arab. *zahir*) and a hidden level (Arab. *batin*). In the Introduction to the *Guide*, he distinguishes between two basic types of parable: (1) parables which are no more than a complex of terms, each one of which has its own meaning. In order to understand their hidden level, it is necessary to interpret each of the equivocal terms which comprise it on the basis of the semantic axis of the parable, and to combine them together. In this kind of parable, each word is of importance, because it contributes to the understanding of its general meaning; (2) parables con-

structed around one central image, not all of whose words are significant on the hidden level. Some of them appear simply to adorn the parable, while others are intended to create a deliberate obscurity on the level of the parable, so as to conceal its true meaning from the reader for whom the hidden level is not intended. In order to understand them, it is therefore sufficient to interpret their central image and a number of key words conducted with them, and there is no need to attempt to interpret all of the words therein.

In the chapters on prophecy in *Guide* 2.43, Maimonides presents a further classification of parables: (1) "Parables whose purpose it is to imitate certain notions"; (2) parables "whose purpose it is to point to what is called to the attention by the term designating the thing seen because of that term's derivation or because of an equivocality of terms"; (3) parables using "certain terms whose letters are identical with those of another term; solely the order of the letters is changed; and between the two terms there is in no way an etymological connection or a community of meaning" (Pines, 392).

In this classification, we find that there are in practice two central kinds of prophetic parables. The first type is group (1), in which the significance of the 'parable' is alluded to by means of the object seen in the prophetic vision or in the prophetic dream. Its appearance and qualities indicate the significance which it wishes to convey. The second type of prophetic parable is composed of groups (2) and (3). Here, the significance of the parables is rooted, not in the objects seen in the prophetic vision, but in the names of those objects; the visual serves as an intermediary for the verbal. One must relate to these dreams as linguistic phenomena, rather than as systems of sensory images requiring interpretation.

In addition to the parables, in the chapters on prophecy (*Guide* 2.47) Maimonides discusses three further literary forms used by the prophets, far less widely found than the parables, which also require interpretation: hyperbole, exaggeration and derivative uses. The common denominator of all three is that in a literal reading the text appears to be saying something absurd. The problem that occupies Maimonides in their interpretation is not the harmony between philosophy and revealed religion, but the harmony between the biblical text and logic.

Maimonides justifies his exegetical theory in a number of ways. Like Baḥya and Judah Halevi, Maimonides utilizes, in his halakhic writings, in his epistles, and in the *Guide of the Perplexed*, the rabbinic dictum that "the Torah speaks in the language of human beings", which he applies to corporealizing expressions of God in the Bible. "The Torah speaks in language of human beings" means, in his understanding, that the Torah speaks according to the understanding and apprehension of the multitude. According to his epistemology, the apprehension of the multitude is characterized by the imaginative faculty, whereas the philosopher apprehends things in an intellectual way. He also cites a psychological reason for corporealization: the ordinary person understands God through comparison to himself, and therefore thinks that He is corporeal and possesses the same perfections as human beings. Like Baḥya, Maimonides believes that corporealization of God in the Bible serves an educational function. However, whereas Baḥya thought that the corporeal expres-

sions for God in the Bible were simply intended to bring the average person to faith in the existence of God, Maimonides claimed that they were also intended to lead him to faith in the perfection of God. In order to convey the concept of God's perfection to the average person, the Torah attributes to God that which would constitute perfection in man.[17] Whereas Baḥya justified by means of this expression the very existence of corporealizing terms in the Bible, Maimonides understood this rule primarily as justifying the non-corporealizing interpretation of nouns, primarily derivative nouns, spoken by God in the Bible.[18] Similarly, Maimonides utilizes another rule of the Sages in order to justify his claim that the Torah contains hyperbolic expressions which cannot be understood literally: "[The Sages] have given an explanation by saying, 'The Torah speaks in exaggerated language' (*b. Ḥul.* 90 b; *b. Tamid* 28 a) — that is, hyperbole".[19]

He bases his claim that there are parables in the Bible which are to be interpreted on the basis of the etymology of their key words upon the Scripture itself — the prophecy of Jeremiah (Jer 1:11–12) — "I see a rod of an almond-tree", and that of Amos (Amos 8:1–2), who saw a basket of "summer fruit" in his prophetic vision. What is unique about these two prophecies is that the visions seen therein are interpreted within the prophecies themselves on the basis of the etymology of the central word therein: 'almond' (*šāqēd*) in Jeremiah and 'summer fruit' (*qayîṣ*) in Amos. Maimonides is thus able to infer that the exegetical principle of the interpretation of words in the prophetic parables on the basis of etymology is found in the Bible itself.

His double claim — that the literary form of the 'parable' is found in the Bible, and that the true meaning of the 'parable' is a philosophic one, to be found on its esoteric level — is justified by Maimonides, among other things, by the psychology of prophecy. According to his teaching, prophecy is an intellectual emanation overflowing from the Active Intellect to the rational faculty of the prophet, from whence it acts upon his imaginative faculty, in which the intelligible concepts are embodied in sensory images. It follows from this that the significance of the prophetic parables is rational, identical to Aristotelian philosophy, which is the fruit of intellectual thought. Thus, in order to understand them, one needs to interpret the sensory images which compose them in an intellectual way.

The claim that the esoteric level of the parables consists of Aristotelian philosophy is justified by him through a variation of a tradition that was widespread in Jewish and Arabic philosophy of the Middle Ages, according to which philosophy had originally been the legacy of the people of Israel, but was lost during the Exile (*Guide* 1.71).

As we have seen in the Introduction to the *Guide of the Perplexed*, the purpose of the book is to interpret equivocal terms of the logical type and biblical parables. Maimonides devotes 42 chapters of the *Guide* to this lexicon of equi-

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[17] *Guide* 1.26, 29, 33, 46, 47, 53, 59; 3.13; *MT, Yesodê hat-Tôrâh* 1.9, 12; Introduction to *Heleq,* 3rd sect.; *Iggeret Teḥiyat ham-Metim* (letter on Resurrection).
[18] In the *Guide* 1.59, he understands this rule in a manner more similar to Baḥya.
[19] *Guide* 2.47.

vocal terms, most of them concentrated in the first half of the first part of the work. This lexicon serves, first and foremost, the goal of removing the corporealization of God in the Bible. This being so, the predominant structure in these chapters is the following: (1) presentation of an equivocal term or terms at the beginning of the chapter; (2) listing of the various meanings of this term or terms. Alongside each meaning, Maimonides cites biblical verses from which one may understand the meaning he points out, through the context of that same verse or passage to which it belongs. By this, he confirms the existence of each meaning by means of Scripture itself, and establishes a 'biblical lexicon'. (3) Finally, Maimonides explains which of the significances of the term in question may be applied to sentences in which God is either the subject or object. His exegetical assumption here is that God is not corporeal, so that there is an obligation to choose, among those existing meanings of the terms noted in the beginning of the chapter, those which will not lead to His corporealization. At this stage, he also brings examples of the biblical use of these terms in their non-corporeal sense, thereby providing an interpretation for some concrete verses in which they appear.

Within the framework of the lexicographical chapters of the *Guide*, Maimonides interprets, not only biblical verses that refer to God, but also biblical verses dealing with other subjects, such as 'the Account of the Beginning', 'the Account of the Chariot', and his doctrine of prophecy. In this way, his lexicon serves further exegetical goals of the *Guide* — the interpretation of verses connected to subjects that are "secrets of Torah". In his interpretation of those terms that are to be understood on the basis of their etymology, more specifically on the basis of their imagined etymology, as well as through the interpretation of names by means of switching letters, Maimonides uses an accepted Jewish exegetical method: the interpretation of terms by means of etymology appears in the Bible and in rabbinic Midrashim, while the interpretation of words through the switching of letters is also found in rabbinic literature.[20] In practice, only infrequently does Maimonides interpret terms by means of etymology or by switching letters, and even then only in order to interpret texts which involve a particular exegetical difficulty.

In the Introduction to the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Maimonides claims that most of the parables in Scripture belong to the second type mentioned above, those constructed around one central image. As an example of a parable of this type, he cites Prov 7:6–21, built around the central image of "a married harlot", which he identifies with matter. According to this interpretation, the parable of the "married harlot" is a warning against following one's corporeal nature, which is the source of man's bodily desires. Nevertheless, most of the parables interpreted in the *Guide* are closer to the parable of the first type mentioned above: namely, a parable built upon a series of equivocal words. In the Introduction to the *Guide*, Maimonides cites as an example of such a parable the dream of Jacob's ladder in Gen 28:12–13, which he divides into seven units of meaning. In *Guide* 1.15, this parable is interpreted as being concerned

[20] As we have noted, he claims that he learns the interpretation of names on the basis of their etymology from the biblical text.

with the structure of the physical world, which devolves from God and descends to the element of earth in the sublunar world, or to the four elements of which all things in the sublunar world are composed, man's graduated cognition of the ladder of nature, a cognition which ultimately brings him to apprehension of the eternal God who is beyond the highest sphere, and the prophet, who is also the ideal political leader, who knows nature and guides human society through imitation of God's actions in the world.

Maimonides here utilizes his biblical lexicon in interpreting the equivocal terms 'stand' (*niṣab*), 'descend' (*yârad*), 'ascend' (*ʿâlâh*), and 'angel' (*malʾâkh*), but also in interpreting terms that do not appear in his biblical lexicon: 'earth' (*ʾereṣ*) and 'heaven' (*šâmayîn*), which according to his exegesis allude to terms from Aristotelian physics. He only alludes to the meaning of 'ladder' (*sullâm*).

Parallel to, and simultaneously with, the exegesis of parables by means of the interpretation of their central image or the equivocal words which constitute them, Maimonides uses an additional method of interpreting biblical parables: interpreting the Bible by means of its rabbinic Midrash. The assumption underlying this usage is that the Sages are the authoritative exegetes of the biblical text, and therefore one should rely upon their interpretations to assist its understanding.

The use of Midrash in order to interpret a biblical parable stands out particularly in two of Maimonides' interpretations of Jacob's dream of the ladder,[21] in his exegesis of the account of the Creation and of the Garden of Eden, and in his interpretation of the figure of the 'Satan' in the frame story of the book of Job.

One may speak of at least four basic types of biblical exegesis by means of Midrash in Maimonides. The first is that of biblical interpretation based upon aggadic expansions found in the Midrash; that is: upon elements added to the biblical text by the Midrash in order to interpret it, in which there are found the additional explanations by the Rabbis of the biblical text. For example, in his exegesis of the story of the Garden of Eden, we find an exegesis of a biblical parable by means of a Midrash, in which Maimonides also saw a 'parable'. In order to understand this interpretation, Maimonides first needs to interpret the rabbinic Midrash, and thereafter interpret the biblical text by its means. Maimonides states that the figures of Adam, Eve and the Serpent in the biblical account are none other than the components of man, primarily those of the human soul: Eve is either the body and the animal soul of man, or his animal soul alone; Adam is the intellect; while the serpent is the appetitive faculty of the soul. In order to explain man's attraction towards physical appetites, it is important for Maimonides to introduce another figure into the biblical story. Here he relies upon a Midrash from *Pirqê de-Rabbi ʾEliʿezer*, Ch. 13, which introduces another protagonist into the story — the demon Samael, who 'rode' upon the 'serpent'. This Midrash makes it possible for him to allude to an interpretation according to which the serpent ridden by Samael is identified with the appetitive faculty of man, which is ruled by the imaginative faculty. It fol-

[21] In *Yesodê hat-Tôrâh* 3.7; *Guide* 2.10.

lows from this that the sin of the Garden of Eden consisted in following irra-
tional appetites.

Yet another, second, form of biblical exegesis based upon Midrash is the
citing of a midrashic interpretation which is understood literally. In that case,
the exegetical act essentially consists in the choice of this particular Midrash
among the various Midrashim which interpret the text, and its use as a proof-
text for the interpretation of the biblical text.

A third type of midrashic-related biblical exegesis is the interpretation of
the Bible by means of an implicit Midrash. In this case, Maimonides does not
actually cite the Midrash, but one can see that he derives his basic exegetical
idea from a midrashic interpretation of the text. A clear example of an inter-
pretation of this type is found in another interpretation of Jacob's dream of a
ladder, found in the Introduction to the *Guide* and in *Guide* 1.15. The division
of this biblical text into seven units of significance, and its interpretation as
speaking about a prophet who is a political leader, is implicitly based upon
Gen. R. 68:12. This Midrash likewise divides the dream of the ladder into se-
ven units of meaning, drawing a numerological equation (*gematria*) between
'Sinai' and 'ladder' (סלם equivalent to סיני) seeing the dream of the ladder as a
dream of the ascension of Moses and Aaron to Mount Sinai.

A fourth type of biblical interpretation based upon Midrash is one in which
the biblical exegesis occurs by means of a Midrash which serves as an allusion
to its exegesis. Maimonides does not complete the exegesis, but expects the
reader who "understands by himself" to do this for himself. An example of an
interpretation of this kind is that of the figure of 'Satan' in the frame story of
Job. Maimonides alludes to its meaning by referring to a Midrash in *b. B. Bat*
16 a which interprets this figure, and by a number of comments concerning the
direction in which it is to be interpreted.

As we already have seen, Maimonides deals also with the interpretation of
certain biblical texts which he sees as 'parables' — that is, as texts which have
two levels of meaning: a revealed level and a hidden level, and whose true
meaning is to be found on the hidden level. He devotes several chapters or por-
tions of chapters in the *Guide of the Perplexed* to such interpretations. *Guide*
2.30, for example, deals with the exegesis of the Creation narrative, which
Maimonides sees as a parable whose true subject is Aristotelian physics. The
account of the Creation is hence not cosmogony, but cosmology — that is, a
description of the structure of the physical world. *Guide* 1.2 and 2.30 contain
exegesis of the stories of the creation of man and of the Garden of Eden (Gen-
esis 1-3). The stories of the creation of man, the Garden of Eden, and the sons
of Adam (Genesis 4-5) are to be understood as philosophical anthropology
rather than as historical accounts. Adam and Eve are not two individual hu-
man beings, but the two basic components of the substance 'man' — matter
and form. The protagonists of the Eden narrative are thus the faculties of the
human soul and intellect. *Guide* 1.54 deals with the exegesis of the revelation
of God to Moses in the cleft of the rock in Exodus 33-34. According to Mai-
monides' interpretation, these chapters are concerned with the doctrine of the
divine attributes. In *Guide* 2.22-23, Maimonides engages in exegesis of the
frame story of the book of Job and of the main part of the book. For him, the
book of Job is a parable dealing with divine Providence and the problem of the
source of evil.

Guide 3.1-7 engages in exegesis of Ezekiel's vision of the chariot. This exeg-
esis is conducted by means of hints, and is rather obscure. In general terms, he
interprets Ezekiel's vision of the chariot as an apprehension of the structure of
the world of spheres, the primary matter and the four elements of the lower
world, and the apprehension of the separate intellect.

In addition to his interpretation of equivocal terms of the logical type, equi-
vocal terms that are to be understood on the basis of etymology, parables, ex-
aggerations, hyperboles, and derivative terms, Maimonides engages in the ex-
egesis of other subjects in the Bible. Like R. Judah Halevi before him, Maimo-
nides addresses himself to the problem of divine names in the Bible. Like Hale-
vi, Maimonides claims that the name YHWH is God's unique name. Indeed,
for Maimonides this is the only divine name that indicates His essence. All
other names are interpreted by him as describing various attributes of God de-
rived from his actions in the world. He interprets the name "I will be" (*'ehyeh*),
following the teaching of Avicenna, as indicating God as 'necessary existence'
— a concept of God that may be attained by philosophical means, through
proof of the existence of God. *'Elôhim* (generally translated as 'God') is inter-
preted as denoting God as judge, but not as ruler (*Guide* 1.2, 61; 2.6, 30).

Maimonides pays special attention, both in his halakhic writings and in the
Guide of the Perplexed, to the interpretation of the phenomenon of biblical
prophecy, to the historical images of the prophets mentioned in the Bible, and
to the manner of their prophecy. His concern is to give meaning to the Bible
within the framework of his theological-philosophical teachings and on their
basis. He deals with the question as to whether one is to see certain biblical fig-
ures as prophets, arguing that Hagar, Manoah, Laban and Abimelekh were
not at all prophets. Those who were prophets prophesied, according to his in-
terpretation, on different degrees of prophecy, which he presents in *Guide*
2.45. The true prophets prophesied on degrees 3-11 of prophecy. In describing
these degrees, Maimonides notes the degree of various actual prophecies in
the Bible according to his classification.

King Solomon and the books attributed to him according to Jewish tradition
— Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, and the Song of Songs — occupy a special place in
the biblical exegesis of Maimonides. Maimonides sees Solomon as an esoteric
metaphysician, who on the one hand warns against publicly disseminating
knowledge of the 'Account of the Chariot', and on the other hand, as the
'sage', who guides those who are capable towards attaining the final perfec-
tion. According to his interpretation, the Book of Proverbs is concerned with
physics and with anthropology (the parable of the "married harlot" is com-
mented in *Guide* 3.8 and in the Introduction to the *Guide*, referring to
Prov 7:6-21 and Prov 6:26 respectively) and hence with the 'Account of the
Beginning'. However, its uniqueness lies in the fact that it also deals with theo-
retical aspects of biblical exegesis. According to Maimonides' exegesis,
Prov 25:11, "A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver", is
a parable of the perfect biblical parable.

This survey has shown that, even though Maimonides did not write running

commentaries to the Bible, one finds in his writings a biblical exegesis unu-
sually rich in exegetical ideas, dealing with many and varied aspects both of
the exegetical theory of the biblical text and of its actual interpretation, on the
basis of a philosophical-semantic axis. Maimonides' exegesis of the Bible had a
profound influence upon all of the philosophical Bible exegesis which followed
him. All subsequent medieval Jewish philosophical biblical exegesis carries his
stamp. It is impossible to understand and to evaluate the history of philosophi-
cal Bible exegesis among the Jews in the Middle Ages after Maimonides with-
out familiarity with his exegesis.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

The School of Literal Jewish Exegesis in Northern France

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