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PHILOSOPHIC APPROACHES TO SACRED SCRIPTURE IN JUDAISM¹

According to the thesis of the late Harry Wolfson of Harvard², it was Philo, the Jew of ancient Alexandria, who was the most important Western philosopher after Plato and Aristotle, because he attempted to bridge the gap between Athens and Jerusalem, namely, to harmonize philosophy and revealed religion. All subsequent religious philosophy in the West was a Philonic attempt to relate philosophy and revelation, until Spinoza tore down that seventeenth-century old structure by liberating philosophy from Scripture. By breaking with medieval tradition, Spinoza paved the way for modern philosophy. In short, it was Philo who made possible medieval philosophy, and it was Spinoza who made modern Western philosophy possible. We thus owe it to Philo that there arose a new dimension in the encounter between philosophy and religion: philosophical exegesis of the Bible, which enables the religious philosopher to understand revelation philosophically and, simultaneously, to reconcile philosophic doctrines with the teaching of religion. Furthermore, it provides the religious philosopher with an occasion, a platform both for teaching philosophy within a religious community and for demonstrating the rational validity of religion within the philosophic community.³

In the Middle Ages as well as in modern times, Jewish thinkers have utilized diverse literary genres to present their philosophy.

1. This article is based on a larger study, "Biblical Exegesis as Philosophic Literary Genre: Abraham ibn Ezra and Moses Mendelssohn" in *Jewish Philosophy and the Academy*, edited by Emil Fackenheim and Raphael Jospe (Associated University Press, London, and Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison and Teaneck, 1996), pp. 48-92. This abridged article is prepared by Professor Joseph Pathrapankal, Dharmaram Vidya Kshetram, Bangalore, India.
2. Cf. Harry Wolfson, *Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy and Judaism, Christianity and Islam* (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1947).
3. Cf. Raphael Jospe, "Faith and Reason: The Controversy over Philosophy in Jewish History" in *La Storia della Filosofia Ebraica*, edited by Irene Kajon (Archivio di Filosofia, Milan, 1993), pp. 99-135, and "Faith and Reason: The

The Platonic form of dialogue was adopted by the medieval Solomon ibn Gabirol, Judah Ha-Levi, and Shem Tov ibn Falaquera, and by such moderns as Samson Raphael Hirsch. Like their non-Jewish colleagues, various Jewish authors also wrote philosophical novels. Some of the leading philosophers were also among the greatest Hebrew poets of the Middle Ages. As we consider the various problems that texts and translations present in the effective teaching of Jewish philosophy, we need to pay particular attention to an especially difficult literary genre the Jews employed to expand their philosophic views, namely, Bible exegesis. The problems of researching and teaching this genre of philosophic literature are great, given the frequently elliptic style of many of the exegetes as well as the inherent complexity of the subjects, combining as they do philosophic discussions with considerations of biblical language and grammar, as well as frequent explicit or implicit references to the vast body of rabbinic law and lore (*halakhah* and *aggadah*). Moreover, since this is not a systematic genre of philosophic exposition, it is almost inevitable that one must scan a vast body of commentaries to find an author's position on a given point.

Unless one is teaching advanced students who are familiar both with Hebrew and philosophic literature, one is accordingly forced to engage in a Herculean task of translation, in which virtually every phrase requires explanation, explication, and cross-references to other passages.⁴ To complicate matters further, only a tiny fraction of this literature has been translated into English and other modern European languages. Moreover, the existing translations are often incomplete and inaccurate, and sometimes even slanted, in order to censor passages that apparently were ideologically provocative or sexually explicit. Nevertheless, if we want to understand what various Jewish philosophers had to say, we must study all their writings, and not merely their overtly

Controversy over Philosophy in Judaism" in *Great Schisms In Jewish History* edited by Raphael Jospe and Stanley Wagner (Ktav, New York, 1981), pp. 73-117.

4. Regarding the problems of academic teaching Jewish philosophy, see Raphael Jospe, "Jewish Philosophy: Texts, Translations and Teaching" in *Jewish Studies* (World Union of Jewish Studies), Vol. 34, 1994, pp. 17-19, and "Jewish Philosophy" in *Teaching Jewish Civilization: A Global Approach to Higher Education*, edited by Moshe Davis (New York University Press, New York, 1995) pp. 155-159,

philosophic or systematic works. In some cases we may find ideas discussed in exegetical works that are not discussed in a philosopher's other works. In other cases, we may find that an author wrote for diverse audiences in different works.

It seems to me that Bible exegesis as a philosophic literary genre, or at least as literary device for expounding philosophic ideas, follows necessarily from the very nature of Western religious philosophy. I emphasize *Western* religious philosophy and not just Jewish philosophy, because, as Wolfson suggested, the fundamental problem of "faith and reason" is formally, and often substantively, identical in the three Western religious traditions that base themselves on claims of historic revelation in inspired Scripture. If one is committed to both scriptural faith and reason and sources of truth, then those two different aspects of truth must be interrelated, and the need to understand them in terms of each other, or at least consistently with each other, becomes an obvious philosophic as well as religious imperative.

Philosophic exegesis of the Bible is, then, at the same time a way of understanding Scripture philosophically and a way of reconciling philosophic doctrines with the requirements of revealed religion. Given the inherent tension of faith and reason underlying all Western religious philosophy, it is no accident that the exegetical genre of philosophic literature once begun with Philo Judaeus of Alexandria, the first "Jewish philosopher" and, according to Wolfson's thesis, the first and archetypal Western religious philosopher, enabled him to adapt Greek allegorization of their sacred mythology to Jewish Scripture. Whereas Philo, the Jew, built up the system of religious philosophy, Spinoza, the Jew, tore down and philosophy freed itself of Scripture, as we have noted above. The interim period may be called medieval philosophy in Judaism, Christianity and Islam. It is borne out by the fact that many medieval philosophers, such as Aquinas in Christianity and Ibn Rushd (Averroes) in Islam, saw fit to cite and relate to scriptural passages their philosophic works. The need to confront Scripture philosophically is thus a common problem for the three Western religious philosophical traditions.

In the case of Judaism it also gave rise to a genre of philosophic Bible exegesis, which need not be purely philosophical and, in

fact, often deals with other aspects of the Bible, including linguistic, grammatical, and literary analysis of the text, as well as the attempt to draw moral and religious lessons from biblical teachings. Whatever else we may find, the philosophic treatment of the Bible, in passages expected and unexpected by us as we read the biblical text through modern eyes, gives us greater insight into the thought of Jewish philosophers as they confronted the Bible, and as the Bible gave them the occasion to expound their philosophic perspectives.

Two Representatives of Philosophic Bible Exegesis

Here an attempt is being made to examine a few selected passages in the Bible commentaries of two very different Jewish philosophers, Abraham ibn Ezra (Spain, twelfth century) and Moses Mendelssohn (Germany, eighteenth century).⁵ The latter was thoroughly familiar with the corpus of medieval Jewish Bible exegesis, including that of Ibn Ezra, who is one of the medieval philosophers frequently cited or referred to in Mendelssohn's Bible commentary, *Be'ur*. Despite Mendelssohn's modernity in other writings, his Bible commentary is traditional in style, approach and content. Moreover, the behaviour, including apostasy, of Mendelssohn's children rendered their father's commentary suspect in the eyes of traditionalists down to our own days. But in the case of Abraham ibn Ezra things developed differently. His commentaries have always been included in traditional rabbinic Bibles and studied in the most Orthodox of circles, notwithstanding his son Isaac's alleged conversion to Islam and despite the fact that, unlike Mendelssohn's very conservative approach, Ibn Ezra included radical philosophic doctrines in his commentary.

A comparison of some points in the two commentaries of these scholars will be instructive as we attempt to understand the thought of two different and fascinating figures in the history of Jewish

5. On Mendelssohn, cf. Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem and Other Jewish Writings*, edited and translated by Alfred Jospe (Schocken, New York, 1969), and the later translation by Allan Arkush, with commentary by Alexander Altmann (University Press of New England, Hanover, 1983), as well as *Moses Mendelssohn: Selections from his Writings*, by Eva Jospe (Viking, New York, 1975). Also cf. Alexander Altmann, *Moses Mendelssohn: A Biographical Study* (University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa, 1973).

philosophy, and they will serve as an indication of Jewish intellectual concerns under radically differing circumstances. It will also illustrate the need of considering Bible exegesis as an integral component of Jewish philosophical literature over the centuries. The cases studied here may also exemplify the kinds of problems often encountered in teaching this genre of Jewish philosophic literature.

We begin with a comparison of Abraham ibn Ezra and Moses Mendelssohn on the question of the biblical text. The question would appear to be of general intellectual and historical, rather than purely philosophical, interest. However, the attitudes toward the biblical text reflect a larger philosophic stance and should be understood consistently in that light. For Abraham ibn Ezra revelation is essentially a rational process, and not merely a historic event. Reason therefore led him to question traditional assumptions regarding the revealed text. For Moses Mendelssohn, on the other hand, revelation is an indisputable historic fact. What was revealed at Sinai was a particular divine legislation, not universal rational principles or religious truth. Therefore, the biblical text was accepted as historically given and was not subjected by Mendelssohn to Spinoza's rationalistic critique. The question of the biblical text, then, is perhaps the prime test case for philosophic exegesis of Scripture, for it forces the philosopher-exegete to deal with the very meaning of revelation and its relation to reason-problems that have been fundamental to Western religious philosophy since Philo.

Ibn Ezra and Mendelssohn on the Biblical Text

In several areas of philosophic import, it is evident that Moses Mendelssohn, whose status in orthodox circles has been suspect for the two centuries since his death, in many respects affirms completely traditional and orthodox views, whereas the medieval philosopher Abraham ibn Ezra, whose orthodoxy is not generally questioned by the Orthodox themselves, affirms or at least manifests tendencies towards radical doctrines. It can be seen in the question of the integrity of the biblical text itself, which Mendelssohn seeks to defend at length. He holds that the entire Torah was written by Moses himself, including the last few verses describing Moses' death and burial. The text that Moses

wrote is the text we have today, unchanged and complete. He also maintains the view that Hebrew is the original human language, indeed, the divine language of creation.

Ibn Ezra, who lived much earlier, takes an entirely different approach.⁶ Spinoza himself refers to the critical mind of Ibn Ezra. Although his attitude towards the Masoretic text (lower criticism) was conservative, some scholars believe that he had a rather critical and radical attitude towards the question of Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch (higher criticism), whereas there are others who do not subscribe to this view. In fact, his views are intriguing and often evasive. He listed six pentateuchal passages which seem to be post-Mosaic interpolations, but did not explicitly subscribe to those views. A typical section of the Torah where this problem was to be applied was Dt 34: 1-9, where the last moments and burial of Moses are described, and the question was whether Moses wrote them or not. Some commentators on Ibn Ezra defend the view that he took these verses as written prophetically by Moses himself.

In assessing the arguments, medieval and modern, regarding Ibn Ezra's attitude toward the Mosaic authorship of the entire Pentateuch, we see that the question cannot be resolved unequivocally, precisely because of Ibn Ezra's elliptic form of expression. Accordingly, we must be careful in our reading of Ibn-Ezra not to infer too little or too much. He seems not to have objected to the radical ideological implications of a critical attitude *per se*, for example, on anachronisms, and contented himself with counselling discretion: "the intelligent should keep silent." Hence his arguments are often posed in narrow and methodological terms. Regarding prophecies we also have to be clear that Ibn Ezra did not reject all prophecies of the future as later interpolations. To do so would have been to deny the phenomenon of prophecy itself. Hence he rejects as impossible and as incompatible with the very rationality of revelation any revelation that is inherently unintelligible. For Ibn Ezra, if revelation is to be meaningful, it must be comprehensible to its recipients. The evidence on Ibn Ezra's attitude toward the biblical text is thus ambiguous, probably

6. Spinoza, *Theologico-Political Treatise*, Ch. 8, in R. Elwes, *The Chief Works of Benedict de Spinoza* (Dover, New York, 1951).

deliberately so. We cannot necessarily project on to him the later critical attitude of Spinoza. His general attitude was traditional. On the other hand, we cannot necessarily project onto him a traditionalist view, which, in modern times, has become ever more rigid in response to Spinoza's criticism.

In the case of Mendelssohn, whose knowledge and indebtedness to Spinoza are well established,⁷ the case is far clearer. He affirms the Mosaic authorship of the entire Torah, including the last twelve verses of Deuteronomy, although attributing them to Joshua had ample traditional precedent and scarcely could have been construed as suggesting anything critical about the text. Mendelssohn's silence and negative stance in these and similar biblical passages is deafening and clearly cannot be accidental. Despite his subsequent reputation in academic circles for having paved the way for radical innovations and what the traditionalists saw as the aberrations of Reform movement, his own position was clearly and explicitly to affirm, preserve and enhance Jewish tradition in a time of modernization. This is evident in his biblical work, which is overtly traditional in nature and tone, and was written for Jewish readers. It is also explicitly visible in *Jerusalem*, his political defense of Judaism in a modern context, written in German for a general non-Jewish readership. In this book Mendelssohn states with admirable forthrightness that, if it were true that traditional Jewish loyalty is inconsistent and incompatible with the type of modernization he was advocating, he would have to remain loyal to the Torah on both philosophical and socio-political level, and would have to give up his philosophical and political stance.

The Rationality of Scripture

As we have seen, Ibn Ezra tried to avoid undermining the rational foundations of his faith by questioning the integrity of the biblical text ("lower criticism") of the Torah while remaining open to the possibility of non-Mosaic authorship of its various

7. Cf. Julius Guttmann, "Mendelssohn's *Jerusalem* and Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*", in *Studies in Jewish Thought: An Anthology of German-Jewish Scholarship*, edited by Alfred Jospe (Wayne State University Press, Detroit, 1981), pp. 361-386.

passages ("higher criticism"). In a sense, and paradoxically, it is the rationality of revelation in Ibn Ezra's scheme that may render a conservative attitude to the text necessary, while permitting a free, if discreet, attitude to the more radical question of authorship. Here we must remember that, for Ibn Ezra, revelation is not only a historic event but also a rational process. Moreover, it is not limited to the written record of the Bible. It extends also to the oral traditions of rabbinic Judaism. Hence the oral Torah is no less revealed than is the written Torah. To question the written text as received and transmitted traditionally is to undermine the authority and reliability of rabbinic and masoretic tradition.

On the other hand, the belief in the revealed authority of the text need not preclude higher criticism. Later authors, beginning with Joshua, were also guided by revelation. The activities of the prophets, Ezra, and Soferim, and even the rabbis are ultimately also of revealed origin. For Ibn Ezra, then, as for at least some rabbinic traditions, additions to the Mosaic text by Joshua are certainly not a problem. Joshua, too, wrote them "prophetically", and there is ample rabbinic precedent for suggesting Joshua's authorship of various passages. The problem is more pronounced when dealing with later interpolations, but here again, for Ibn Ezra they were also sufficiently endowed with revelatory authority. From all these it seems that Ibn Ezra's position on Bible criticism follows consistently from the rationality of scriptural revelation. As I have suggested, to question the text itself is to challenge the authority of the oral Torah by imputing error to those who preserved and transmitted it. On the other hand, to reject even the possibility of later, non-Mosaic, authorship of some anachronistic passages in the Torah or prophets is to challenge the rationality of revelation with absurd results.

What we have to conclude from this is that, for Ibn Ezra, revelation and reason are not separate categories. Belief in both revelation and reason implies that, properly understood, they must ultimately convey the same truth and meaning and must be understood in the light of each other. A passage in Scripture which, when read literally, offends reason, must then be re-read in a manner compatible with reason. For Ibn Ezra, it may also mean occasionally questioning the traditional assumptions regarding the

Torah's unitary Mosaic authorship. Hence affirming the integrity of the text is not the same as taking it literally. In the first case one is affirming that the text as we have it accurately reflects divine revelation; in the second case one is dealing not with the source and integrity of the text, but with its meaning. Hence there is need for a conservative attitude toward the text, which must be taken literally as a rule, except under certain circumstances.⁸ Such a conservative attitude toward the text, and cautiously liberal stance regarding the literal meaning of Scripture both follow from the revealed character of Scripture. Unnecessary allegorization fosters error, both methodological and theological.

Another consideration is the fact that, whereas Jewish religious life rests on the observance of the biblical precepts and would be completely undermined by freely taking the biblical text allegorically, as was often the case in Christian exegesis, such freedom is unwarranted by the rationality of the revealed word as well as destructive to traditional Jewish practice.

On a more fundamental and methodological level, Ibn Ezra argues in his Introduction to the Torah for serious respect to be paid to the literal text, insisting that rationality is the very basis for its revealed authority. Therefore it is also rationality, in addition to proper philology and exegetical methodology, that provides the primary criterion for deviating from a literal reading of the text when it offends reason. In his survey of five different exegetical methodologies in his introduction to the Torah, Ibn Ezra compares the truth to the center of a circle. First of all, the exegetical approach of the Babylonian rabbinic academies is so methodologically faulty as to resemble the circumference of a circle, which

8. Ibn Ezra's view, in his "Introduction" to his Torah commentary, that the biblical text is to be taken literally except when the literal meaning contradicts what is known empirically or rationally, reflects the earlier criteria established by Sa'adiah Ga'on that the biblical text should be understood non-literally when (and only when) a literal reading contradicts empirical evidence or reason, or when the passage contradicts another biblical passage or authentic rabbinic tradition. Cf. Sa'adiah Ga'on, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, translated by Samuel Rosenblatt (Yale University Press, New Haven, 1948) 5:8 and 7:2. Such non-literal interpretation is also based on the statement of the rabbis in the Talmud, "The Torah speaks in human language", i.e., that the language of revelation is adapted to the level of human comprehension.

never reaches the truth at the centre. Their method is faulty because they have not sufficiently mastered "the external sciences" and they accordingly fail to provide proofs for their conclusions.

The second deficient approach is that of the Karaite Jews (who accepted only Scripture while rejecting the authority of rabbinic "oral Torah"),⁹ who think they are at the centre of the circle but don't even know its location. Their exegesis is faulty because of its inherent subjective individualism, even regarding the commandments. They are ignorant of proper Hebrew and grammar and, without having any recourse to authentic oral tradition, they have no way to understand many matters, regarding such biblical laws as the calendar upon which so much of Jewish observance depends, but which are not explicated in the Bible, and for which the Karaites therefore lack decisive evidence. The third approach, which is characterized by darkness and is completely outside the circumference of the circle, is that of Christian allegorists, who indiscriminately find secret meaning everywhere in Scripture. One should, however, only seek such secret meaning when the literal meaning contradicts reason or experience. They are only correct in that they subject every matter, whether pertaining to a major or minor commandment, to the judgement of reason.

The fourth approach, which is close to the centre of the circle, is the approach of the Jewish scholars of Greece and Rome. Their approach is faulty because they rely excessively on rabbinic homiletics, and not on reason or grammar. At least these scholars rely on the writings of the ancient rabbis. However, these scholars do not recognize that one rabbinic homily can often contradict another, and rabbinic statements may also have an implicit secret meaning. By taking these statements literally, one ends up contradicting reason. In short, there is no end to rabbinic homilistical exegesis, and one should rather abide by the rabbinic principle that "the Bible never leaves its literal meaning."

The fifth and true approach followed by Ibn Ezra avoids such false and faulty interpretations, by basing itself on philology. It

9. On the controversy between Karaite Judaism and normative Rabbinic Judaism, cf. Daniel Lasker, "Rabbanism and Karaism: The Contest for Supremacy" in *Great Schisms in Jewish History*, edited by Raphael Jospe and Stanley Wagner (Ktav, New York, 1981), pp. 47-72.

seeks, first of all, to understand the proper grammar of the text. There may be occasions to resort to rabbinic homiletical exegesis, but only to add to what the rabbis said, not merely to repeat it. In any event, "the literal meaning is never replaced by the homiletical meaning, for the Torah has seventy faces". Hence reason, for Ibn Ezra, is fundamental to the very notion of revelation, and therefore provides the primary basis for proper exegetical method. All the four other approaches described by Ibn Ezra ultimately fail for lack of solid, scientific methodology. They are guilty of ignorance of science in general, and specifically of philology, linguistics and grammar. Ultimately, reason is the key to understanding revelation, and reason, including fluency in the "external sciences", is the foundation of any scientific exegetical method.

Astrology as a Rationalist and Naturalist Cosmology

One of the most curious features of Ibn Ezra's thought, in general, and of his Bible commentaries, in particular, is his resorting to astrological explanations of various scriptural phenomena, such as the *terafim* (Gen 31:19, 1 Sam 19:13).¹⁰ Such astrological interest, at first glance, strikes us as peculiar for a person committed to a rationalist and scientific approach to life, and for whom revelation must be understood fundamentally in rational terms. Upon reflection, however, one can understand Ibn Ezra's interest in the astrological interpretation of Scripture as consistent with such rationalist and scientific approach. Recent studies by Tzvi Langermann and Gad Freudenthal¹¹ have attempted to understand how astrology represen-

10. For a study of Abraham ibn Ezra's astrological theory, cf. Raphael Jospe, "The Torah and Astrology According to Abraham ibn Ezra", in *Proceedings of the Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies* (World Union of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, 1994), Division C, Vol. II, pp. 17-24.

11. Cf. Y. Tzvi Langermann, "Some Astrological Themes in the Thought of Abraham ibn Ezra", in *Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra: Studies in the Writings of a Twelfth-Century Jewish Polymath*, edited by Isadore Twersky and Jay Harris (Harvard University Press, Cambridge, 1993), pp. 28-85 and Gad Freudenthal, "Levi ben Gershom as a Scientist: Physics, Astrology and Eschatology" in *Proceedings of the Tenth World Congress of Jewish Studies* (World Union of Jewish Studies, Jerusalem, 1990), Division C, Vol. II, pp. 65-72. Also cf. Ronald Kiener, "The Status of Astrology in the Early Kabbalah", in *Beginnings of Jewish Mysticism in Medieval Europe*, edited by Joseph Dan (*Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 6, 1987), pp. 1-42; Raphael Levy, *The Astrological Works of Abraham ibn Ezra*

ted, for such diverse medieval thinkers as Ibn Ezra and Ralbag (Gersonides), a naturalist cosmology. Ibn Ezra's interest in astrology was not limited to the purely "theoretical" level but extended to "practical" astrology as well. He may have translated into Hebrew Arabic manuals of practical astrology.

For Ibn Ezra astrology constitutes a consistent element within a larger Neoplatonic cosmological structure, which he outlines, inter alia, in his commentary to Exodus 3:15 and 6:3. Below God, the absolute One, are three realms. The highest of these is the supreme realm, the realm of the angels that resembles the human rational soul. Below this is the intermediate realm, the incorruptible stars and planets. The third and lowest realm is the terrestrial, sublunar realm, consisting of minerals, plants, animals, and humans. Astrology, then, involves understanding the influences of the higher realms on the lower, particularly on human affairs. However, and this is critical for Ibn Ezra as a faithful Jew, it is absolutely out of question to worship the stars, which are "servants" possessing no independent will or conscious purpose, and whose activity is purely automatic and necessary.

Astrology is not magic or theurgy for Ibn Ezra; it is a way of understanding how various components of natural reality influence each other, and thus represent a scientific or rational cosmology. Accordingly, Ibn Ezra's astrological interpretations are an attempt to provide appropriate scientific explanations of peculiar phenomena alluded to in Scripture. Astral influence, however, is not merely a function of the arrangement or constellation of the higher power. The influence of the higher power is affected by the receiver below, in the light of what Ibn Ezra calls its *toledet*, its constituent makeup or physical constitution. Despite this obvious deterministic implication of such an astrological scheme, he does affirm an element of free will. Free will can be limited, as when Pharaoh's heart was "hardened" (Exodus 7:3-13), in the sense that individuals receive from the universals according to their constitution (*toledet*), and because of the power of the universals they can change their constitution somewhat. In general, the effects of the stars cannot

(Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1927); Raphael Levy and Francisco Cantera, *The Beginning of Wisdom: An Astrological Treatise by Abraham ibn Ezra* (Johns Hopkins University Press, Baltimore, 1939).

be changed. But it is their predetermined predictability that provides an element of free will, since the person who knows of a certain effect can take steps to avoid it.

Israel, however, is thus ruled directly by God, and not by any astral intermediaries, and the Torah provides a way for the Jew to escape general astral influence. Israel's unique status is not a function of any special physical or biological faculty, as suggested by Judah Ha-levi's theory of Jewish genetic faculty for divine communication.¹² Such a physical faculty would, for Ibn Ezra, a necessary component of one's physical constitution (*toledet*), and would then necessarily be subject to astral influence. It is only by living according to the Torah's teachings that Israel is exempted or saved from astral influence; without the Torah, there is no difference between Jew and non-Jew.

Ibn Ezra and Ha-Levi thus present us with opposite interpretations of Jewish distinctiveness. For Ha-Levi, it is the genetic distinctiveness of the people of Israel that makes possible the revelation of the Torah to them. For Ibn Ezra, it is the divinely revealed Torah that make possible the existence of the people of Israel as a special group, governed directly by God's law rather than indirectly through a system of astral influences. In both cases, the interpretations of Jewish distinctiveness are attempts at a scientific explanation of an observed historic anomaly, Jewish survival and distinctiveness. In the case of Ha-Levi, that historic anomaly is explained in terms of a unique physiological or biological faculty, transmitted genetically, and as such, the phenomenon of

12. On Ha-Levi's theory of Jewish distinctiveness, cf. Judah Ha-Levi, *The Kuzari: An Argument for the Faith of Israel*, translated by Hartwig Hirschfeld (Schocken, New York, 1964). Also cf. Raphael Jospe, "Jewish Particularity from Ha-Levi to Kaplan: Implications for Defining Jewish Philosophy" in *Go and Study: Essays and Studies in Honor of Alfred Jospe* (Ktav, New York, 1981), pp. 307-325, and "Teaching Judah Ha-Levi: Defining and Shattering Myths in Jewish Philosophy" in *Paradigms in Jewish Philosophy*, edited by Raphael Jospe (Associated University Presses, London and Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, Madison and Teaneck, 1997, forthcoming). Also see Raphael Jospe, "The Superiority of Oral over Written Communication in Judah Ha-Levi's *Kuzari*", in *From Ancient Israel to Modern Judaism: Essays in Honor of Marvin Fox*, edited by Jacob Neusner, Ernest Frerichs and Nahum Sarna (Brown Judaic Studies No. 174, Scholars Press, Atlanta, 1989), Vol. 3, pp. 127-156.

a distinctive Jewish faculty is no more remarkable than is the phenomenon of a distinctively human faculty—reason—among all the animal kingdom. For Ibn Ezra, the explanation is equally scientific, and by no means involves any magical or miraculous considerations. The Torah, even more than the science of astrology, provides its adherents with insights into the natural structure of reality, thus enabling the person who follows it to take necessary precautions and to avoid harm. Indeed, the power of the Torah is superior to that of astrology, and thus provides a mechanism for transcending astral influence.

Given Ibn Ezra's Neoplatonic cosmology in which higher powers exert influence on lower realms, his astrological interest can be seen as a rational or scientific interpretation of reality. In his view, direct divine intervention, superseding the inferior influences of the stars, is understood not magically or theurgically, but naturalistically, in terms of a knowledgeable persons's ability to take advantage of predictable phenomena by employing the necessary measures to avoid evil effects. The Torah, which in any event should be interpreted, wherever appropriate, in the light of science, certainly needs to be elucidated wherever it touches on astrology, because the Torah provides a divine guidance for the people of Israel. The Jews are thus assured of a direct divine protection, through advance knowledge, from the otherwise inevitable effects of the stars. A scientific and rational Bible exegesis, accordingly, needs to involve astrological considerations: the Jews need to know the effects of the stars, if only to escape those effects through Torah.

Exegesis and Weltanschauung

Ibn Ezra brings to the biblical text a hidden, or not so hidden, rationalist agenda as an exegete. One of the fascinating benefits of studying and teaching exegesis is developing an appreciation of the correlation between the commentators' exegetical approaches and their underlying ideological premises. Good literature often admits of diverse levels of meaning, and this is certainly the case with biblical literature. A diversity of exegetical approaches to a given passage may bring out differing dimensions of meaning in the text itself, as in the oft-cited statement of the rabbis, "the Torah has seventy faces" and "the words of Torah are like a hammer breaking a rock, dividing into several meanings".

On the other hand, diverse exegetical approaches may teach us as much or more about the interests and underlying ideological premises of the exegetes than they do about the text. When teaching Jewish Bible exegesis, I often ask my students to attempt the following exercise. Study a favorite biblical passage, and list the questions that we today ask about this passage; then study the classical Jewish exegesis of this passage, and compare the questions that concerned the rabbis and medieval commentators with the questions that concern us. When we compare their questions with ours, what do the differences teach us about the text in question and what do the differences teach us about their and our respective interests, concerns and commitments? In the case of philosophic exegesis, it seems to me that this question becomes all the more significant. As I stated at the outset, philosophic Bible exegesis is, at the same time, a way of understanding or analyzing Scripture philosophically as a way of reconciling the differing approaches of "faith and reason".

As a result, when philosophical exegetes provide diverse interpretations of a given scriptural passage, they may be reflecting different insights into the meaning of the text. It can also happen that these differing interpretations may reflect, and be necessitated by, radically different ideological or philosophical positions held by these exegetes. Hence the exegesis can provide us with interesting and valuable insight into the consistent philosophical scheme of the various commentators. Approached in this way, a philosopher's Bible exegesis can be seen as a consistent and necessary extension of his or her philosophic structure. Exegesis can thus shed further light on the persons's philosophy, and proves to be a philosophic genre. By its very nature, exegesis cannot be a systematic method of philosophizing; it is shaped by the text it follows. The text provides the occasion and subject of the philosophizing and for working out a consistent philosophic stance.

The best way to illustrate this point is through a specific example of how philosophic Bible exegesis can, at the same time, shed light on the meaning of the text while furnishing the occasion for a philosopher to restate his or her ideological priorities, by contrasting the treatment of the opening line of the Decalogue, "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt" (Exodus

20:2 and Deuteronomy 5:6), in the commentaries of Ibn Ezra and Mendelssohn, and the latter was in so many ways profoundly influenced by Judah Ha-Levi's philosophy. By presenting these interpretations, we can understand them as consistent extensions and necessary components of a philosophic *Weltanschauung*.

For Judah Ha-Levi, the cognitive status and philosophic implications of "I am the Lord your God...." are that historical truth is superior to and more certain than metaphysical speculation. The personal "God of Abraham", who is the object of human love, is known historically by his public and miraculous involvement in the life of the people of Israel, whereas the impersonal "God of Aristotle", which at best is the object of rational speculative knowledge, has no relation to human life and existential concerns. Revelation is, for Ha-Levi, an indisputable historic event, and as such cannot possibly be reduced to some kind of impersonal process of emanation. Indeed, there is no clearer or more biting sharp critique of the Neoplatonic theory of emanation in the Jewish philosophy of this period than Ha-Levi's in the *Kuzari*. The theory of emanation is wrong not because it conflicts with revealed religion but because it is bad philosophy, and has no scientific validity.

In Ha-Levi's interpretation, as cited by Ibn Ezra, God identifies himself to the people in terms of the Exodus, a certain and undeniable fact of their national historical experience. In the same way, at the beginning of the *Kuzari's* dialogue of the King of the Khazars and the Jew, Ha-Levi has the king question why the Jew defines his belief in historical terms of God as the redeemer of the people, rather than in natural terms as the creator and ruler of the world. Ha-Levi's Jew explains that a religion that understands God in such natural terms is based on dubious rational speculation, whereas when God is identified in historical terms, the claim is undeniable and certain, because it is based on empirical fact, or on historical tradition which is like empirical fact, in terms of reliability and certainty.

Ibn Ezra, on the other hand, regarded the historical reference here as essentially a concession to the primitive level of the understanding of the Israelites who had just recently been brought out of Egyptian bondage. These common people had no way to

know God scientifically through the study of nature. The Torah therefore had to refer to their immediate historic experience, since the Torah was addressed to the entire nation. A more certain and a truer conception of God would have to be expressed in terms of the Neoplatonic structure of natural reality, and for Ibn Ezra this structure of emanation entails astrological components. He therefore brings astrological considerations into his discussion of our passage. The influences of the stars were such that Israel should have continued as slaves. However, Israel has, in the Torah, a power superior to that of the stars, and a direct relation to God, who, out of his love for and covenantal commitments to the Israelites' patriarchal ancestors, miraculously superseded the astral decrees. For Ibn Ezra, therefore, "I am the Lord your God...." means that God can be known only by his actions, that is, his influences in the world, which only Israel acknowledges. The differences between Ha-Levi and Ibn Ezra on the meaning of "I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt" are thus not merely exegetical. They reflect fundamentally opposing philosophical views of God and the world, according to which revelation must consistently be seen either as a historical process transcending mere reason or as a natural, rational process consistent with a Neoplatonic theory of emanation and astral influence.

Mendelssohn approaches our passage in the consistent light of his own philosophic *Weltanschauung*. He shares with Ha-Levi a fundamental respect for historic truth as the basis for revelation. Rational and scientific truth is inherently universal and does not provide any basis for Jewish distinctiveness. Indeed, "natural religion" consists entirely and exclusively of rationally demonstrable truths, and is therefore the universal basis of all true religions, including, but not limited to, Jewish religion. A particular revelation is affirmed as a historical fact, not as a rational truth. Revelation itself, being historically conditioned and limited to a particular people at a particular time and place, cannot convey the truth, which must be universally accessible to all humans through reason. What is conveyed in revelation is law, not truth, and "revealed religion", in the sense of the truths of natural religion, is a contradiction in terms.

That being the case for Mendelssohn, "I am the Lord your God...." cannot be construed as a commandment at all, but rather

as the historical preamble or preface to the subsequent commandments. It reiterates the historical truth upon which the legal injunctions are founded: because I am the God who brought you out of Egypt, therefore you should have no other gods in My presence, you should make no images, and so forth. It is, in short, the foundation of the other commandments, not one of them. Ibn Ezra had interpreted "I am the Lord our God" as a rational truth and, therefore, like Rambam (Moses Maimonides) after him, had posited it as the most fundamental of all commandments. There are, Ibn Ezra argues, commandments of the mouth and hands, namely, speech and actions, but most fundamental of all is the commandment of the heart, that is, to know the truth about God, which is at once the *arche* and *telos* of all the other commandments. Mendelssohn, while obviously agreeing that belief in God is a rational truth fundamental to all other religious affirmation and behavior, could not possibly construe it as a commandment. To do so would have been to confuse rational truth, which must be universal, with the content of a particular revelation, which can only govern behavior, not convictions.

According to Mendelssohn's interpretation, in purely syntactical terms, this verse, unlike the subsequent verses of the Decalogue, contains no imperative verb, but is merely a descriptive historical statement. Moreover, as Mendelssohn later developed his political philosophy and philosophy of Judaism in *Jerusalem*, belief admits of no command or coercion, whether human or divine. One can only coerce a person's external behavior. The inner convictions of the heart are subject and responsive only to persuasion, not to coercion. To command belief in God, even in divine revelation, is therefore again a contradiction in terms. One of Mendelssohn's explicit aims in *Jerusalem* was to provide a theoretical philosophic framework separating religious law from coercive political power. To suggest that human convictions are subject to command, even if only divine command, is to misconstrue the very nature of both rational truth and revelation, and is therefore to open a dangerous breach in the absolute barrier between religion, which must be free, and the legitimate but coercive political power of the state. It thus involves not only theoretical error but an immediate and practical danger to enlightened society.

To conclude: the interaction of Scripture and philosophy in Bible exegesis enhances our understanding and appreciation of both. It

enables us to see a pre-or non-philosophic body of literature in the light of philosophic insights and provides an occasion for and challenge to further philosophizing. Despite all the difficulties in teaching philosophical Bible exegesis because of language, literary references, and modes of thought and expression with which students may not be familiar, it remains an important, and as yet insufficiently explored, philosophic literary genre.