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Introduction

Jewish thinkers have been engaged with the fundamental questions of human existence from time immemorial, but, with the significant exception of Philo Judaeus, they began to compose philosophical[1] treatises only in the ninth century of the common era. Philosophical speculation can be found in post-Biblical and rabbinic literature, albeit in rudimentary form, but philosophical writing in the manner of the Greeks achieves preeminent status among the Jews only in the Middle Ages. Why did the Jews compose so many works of philosophy between the tenth and fifteenth centuries, when they had produced virtually nothing beforehand? The phenomenon of medieval Jewish philosophy is all the more remarkable when one takes into account the often precarious nature of Jewish existence during this period, the need for institutions and financial resources to support a leisure class of scholars, the focus of rabbinic Jewish culture around traditional texts, and a Talmudic antipathy towards "Greek wisdom."

Part of the answer is that medieval Jewish intellectuals combined a culturally ingrained sense of spiritual and intellectual superiority with an awareness of their deficiencies in the area of philosophy. On the one hand, they saw themselves as the sole heirs of a divine revelation that constituted not only a history of the world, but also a repository of all wisdom, theoretical as well as practical. On the other, they knew that only a small number of scholars of their faith had engaged in studying philosophical works, compared with the canonical books of Judaism, and that

[1] The terms "philosophical" and "philosophy" used here include matters pertaining to natural science and medicine as well as philosophy, proper.

philosophical knowledge was to be found among the gentiles. Accordingly, some conceived of their project as recovering an authentic Jewish scientific-philosophical tradition that had been lost. It did not bother these intellectuals that they were relatively few in number, compared to the Talmudists. That was to be expected, given the esoteric nature of the enterprise. Only students who were properly prepared – that is, who had first studied philosophy – were entitled to unlock the "secrets of the Torah," which they interpreted as philosophical in nature. This required that students be trained in philosophy, which necessitated the production of primers, manuals, encyclopedias, and philosophical commentaries.

Historians have often neglected this production, focusing their attention instead on medieval Jewish philosophy's preoccupation with the conflict between the Jewish and Greek traditions, between religion and science. This may be because of the enormous influence of Maimonides, who wrote his *Guide for the Perplexed* for Jews who had difficulty reconciling the truth of Jewish teachings with those of the philosophers. The most famous works of medieval Jewish philosophy follow this pattern; although they may contain political philosophy, philosophical theology, and even science, their focus is on understanding Judaism and reconciling its truth claims with those of philosophy, whenever possible.

Yet while this aspect of medieval Jewish philosophy is important, it is mistaken to claim that Jewish intellectuals in the Middle Ages were interested only in religious philosophy. Such a claim reflects the interests of some modern scholars[2] more than of the medieval Jewish philosophers themselves, who saw their aim as the pursuit of wisdom *tout court*, interpreting that in terms of the love, knowledge, and awe of God. It is likewise mistaken to claim that only two Jews in the Middle Ages, Isaac Israeli and Solomon ibn Gabirol, produced works of "pure" philosophy, rather than philosophical interpretations of Judaism. A considerable number of works in Hebrew logic, philosophy, and medicine are extant in manuscripts that await critical editions and study. These commentaries and compendia bear witness to Jewish interest in topics that did not have direct bearing on questions of religious philosophy. There are only slightly fewer

[2] For the traditional historiography of Jewish philosophy, see Steven M. Wasserstrom, "The Islamic social and cultural context," in: *History of Jewish Philosophy*, eds. Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman (London/New York: Routledge, 1997), pp. 93–114. Cf. Dimitri Gutas, "The Study of Arabic Philosophy in the Twentieth Century: An Essay on the Historiography of Arabic Philosophy," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* (2002) 29: 5–25, esp. 12–15.

manuscripts extant of the Hebrew translations of the *Treatise on Logic* attributed to Maimonides – a work with no Jewish content – than those of his famous *Guide of the Perplexed*, and it is by no means certain that more people read the latter than the former.

Interestingly, the production of "pure" philosophy flourished more among Jewish intellectuals who lived in the Christian world – especially in Spain, Provence, and Italy – than those who lived in Muslim Spain, Northern Africa, and the Near East. The reason is not hard to surmise: the acculturated Jews in Islamic lands were able to read philosophy with commentaries in Arabic; there was no need for them to transmit these works into Hebrew and to comment upon them. By contrast, Jewish intellectuals in Christian Europe generally did not read Arabic or Latin, and so had to appropriate the philosophical material through translation and commentary in Hebrew. Once this appropriation was completed, there was a corpus of "pure" philosophy in Hebrew that laid the foundations for a Hebraic philosophical tradition which lasted well into the modern period. In renaissance Italy there were Jewish teachers and translators of Averroes' commentaries; around the same time, prominent Jewish savants in Spain were debating issues of scholastic philosophy in Hebrew, such as the ontological status of universals. No doubt this was considered as a "marginal" intellectual activity by their traditionalist opponents, as it was by modern Jewish historians who were interested in philosophy of religion. Even though Jewish intellectuals lacked the institutional resources of the Christian university, and a philosophical tradition akin to that of the Church Fathers, they did not neglect purely philosophical matters.

Whether the philosophy studied and taught by medieval Jewish philosophers was "pure" or "applied," it was characterized by two overarching principles: the unity of truth, and its accessibility to human reason. The first principle was implicitly adopted by all the philosophers appearing in this anthology, even those who are highly critical of the truth-claims of the Aristotelians. There may be truths that are difficult to obtain by unaided reason, but they are in principle reconcilable with it. Thus, the Aristotelian philosophers viewed the idea of creation *ex nihilo* as absurd, but to Maimonides it was not only not absurd, but true, whereas according to Gersonides, its truth can be demonstrated. Medieval Jewish philosophers disagreed more over the epistemic status of beliefs backed by traditional authority than about those grounded in reason. Do the latter beliefs

provide certainty? Maimonides says no; Albo disagrees; Saadia holds the middle position that rational speculation *increases* the certainty of one who believes on the basis of traditional authority. None of the philosophers holds that reason is an unreliable instrument when used properly.

The medieval Jewish belief in the supremacy and authority of reason derives in part from the belief that God is described by the Aristotelians as reason or intellect (Hebrew: *sekhel*). If God is intellect, and we humans are created in His image, then it is intellect that binds us to God. Even Crescas, whose theology is more voluntaristic than that of the Aristotelians, does not exempt God from being subject to the laws of logic. And it is noteworthy that the major medieval Jewish philosophers, unlike their Christian counterparts, did not develop a voluntaristic divine command theory of ethics. God's justice may often be unfathomable to the medieval Jewish philosophers, but it is never irrational or the product of an arbitrary will.

As we shall see in the introductions to specific texts, medieval Jewish philosophers were very much creatures of their time and their intellectual milieu. I have employed the common practice of categorizing them according to the dominant perceived influence: Kalamic, neoplatonist, Aristotelian, Averroist, etc. This is a convenient way of arranging the material, but it fails to do justice to the individual authors, who, we should never forget, are more than just the sum total, or pale image, of their authorities, even in the Middle Ages. Terms like "minor figure," "unoriginal," and "derivative" have no currency in the medieval mindset.

Saadia Gaon: *The Book of the Beliefs and Convictions*

Saadia ben Joseph al-Fayyūmī (882–942), the leading rabbi of his day and the dean ("gaon", pl. "geonim") of the academy in Sura (present-day Iraq), is generally recognized as the first medieval Jewish philosopher of note. That reputation is based primarily on his *summa* of religious philosophy, *The Book of the Beliefs and Convictions* (or *The Books of the Choicest Beliefs and Opinions*), which was one of the first philosophical works translated from Arabic into Hebrew. It is not an exaggeration to say that Saadia helped shape much of the rabbinic thought that is characteristic of traditional Judaism. His moderately rationalist presentation of rabbinic

Jewish doctrine managed to survive not only because it was theologically more palatable to the traditionalists than Jewish Aristotelianism and neoplatonism (not to mention kabbalah), but also because it was not associated by his traditional readers with any foreign philosophical school.

Yet scholars since Maimonides (1138–1204) have recognized that Saadia's philosophy was deeply influenced by "Kalām" (literally, "speech" or "discourse"), the term used to designate the rationalist theology that began to develop in the beginning of the eighth century. As a result of the Islamic conquests that extended from Spain to Persia, including the prominent centers of culture in the Middle East, and because of the enlightened policies of the Abbasid rulers, classical philosophy, science, and belles lettres were transmitted to the Islamic world in the form of translations, commentaries, and manuals. The absorption of peoples of different faiths and ideologies, coupled with the exposure to philosophy, led some Muslims to imitate the example of Christian theologians and to develop subtle theological defenses of their dogmas; indeed, the very attempt to formulate Muslim dogma dates from this period. The Kalām theologians positioned themselves between the orthodox, who felt no need to mount a sophisticated defense of the faith, and the philosophers, who viewed Greek philosophy, with its commentarial tradition, as paramount. The most famous early school of Kalām was the Mu'tazila, which became the semi-official theology of the Abbasid emperors during the early ninth century. The Mu'tazilites viewed reason as a reliable instrument for acquiring knowledge and deciding the correctness of moral judgments. If the demands of reason ran counter to the simple meaning of the text of the Qur'ān, then the latter had to be interpreted accordingly.

Saadia's *Beliefs and Convictions* follows the pattern of a Mu'tazilite theological work. Its ten treatises fall unevenly into the two chief areas of Mu'tazilite inquiry, divine unity and divine justice. Its introduction addresses epistemological topics, including a defense of the ability of humans to achieve knowledge through reason. According to Saadia, human error results from an incomplete knowledge of the object and method of inquiry, as well as a careless approach to one's research. He complains that his generation in particular is beset by perplexity: "I have seen men sunk, as it were, in a sea of doubts and covered by the waters of obscurity, and there was no diver to bring them up from the depths

and no swimmer to grasp their hands and bring them to shore" (Introduction). Whether this was merely a rhetorical flourish, or whether there was a real crisis of religious belief among Saadia's coreligionists, is not clear. In any event, Saadia's purpose in the book is to remove their doubts and to render their beliefs not merely true but also certain. He does not hesitate to proclaim the superiority of belief "on the basis of speculation and education" to belief "on the basis of tradition alone."

Saadia differs from later Jewish philosophers in his understanding of what brings about certainty, and what methods one should employ in order to remove doubts. He initially lists three "principles" that provide us with certain knowledge: observation, intellect, and necessary inference. Observation provides us with reliable sense-knowledge so long as our senses are healthy and we guard ourselves against illusions. As for intellectual knowledge, Saadia states that "whatever is conceived in our intellect free of all defects is to be regarded as true and indubitable knowledge." This includes not only theoretical but moral knowledge as well. Indeed, one of the underlying assumptions of the *Beliefs and Convictions* is that humans can discover ethical principles and imperatives, provided that they think clearly and rationally. The third operation is necessary inference, which is not so much logical consequence but rather the inference to the necessary conditions of an existent state of affairs. The inference can be direct, as when we observe smoke and infer the existence of fire. It can also involve several steps, as when we observe the ingestion and excretion of food, and infer the existence of an unobserved digestive process. Saadia realizes that people may be mistaken in their inferences, and so he provides a list of maxims that will ensure their validity – guidelines that can also be employed in scriptural exegesis.

In addition to these three principles, Jews are said to possess a fourth, namely, authentic tradition. Saadia appears to offer conflicting statements about this principle's status. On the one hand, it is said to be based on the first two; on the other hand, it is said to confirm the first three. For Saadia, reason and revelation are mutually reinforcing, since any contradiction between the two is only apparent.

This belief in the essential harmony between faith and reason supports Saadia's defense of rational investigation against the objections of the traditionalists. The defense appears to have been purely theoretical, since the geonim, unlike the Kalām theologians, constituted the orthodox within rabbanite Judaism. Saadia not only reinterprets the Biblical

and rabbinic dicta that apparently forbid or limit rational investigation; he underscores the importance of that study for understanding Biblical prophecy, and for answering ideological opponents. As for the objection that such investigation is dangerous because it may lead to heresy, Saadia, ever the philosophical optimist, claims that this will not occur if the investigation is carried out rigorously and carefully.

Saadia asks why divine revelation is needed at all, given that unaided reason can attain truth in both theoretical and moral spheres. His answer is that while reason can eventually derive the moral truths taught in scripture with certainty, this is a process that takes time, is fraught with difficulty, and is not for everybody. Since God did not wish the Jews to remain without religion in the meantime, or that the investigators be pressured into finding their answers in a hasty and careless manner, He revealed to them the truths amidst wonders and miracles.

Solomon ibn Gabirol and Shem Tov Falaquera: *Excerpts from "The Source of Life"*

When Saadia was espousing a kind of Jewish Kalām in Babylonia, the physician Isaac Israeli was writing works of neoplatonist philosophy in Northern Africa. Neoplatonist ideas entered the Arabic world chiefly through adaptations of Plotinus and Proclus in books known as the *Theology of Aristotle* (in two versions), and the *Book of the Pure Good* (in the Latin West, the *Liber de Causis*). Among those ideas one finds the notion of a hierarchy of being; the eternal emanation of being from the One that is beyond being; the crystallization of being in a series of "hypostases" that mediate between the One and the world; the descent of the soul from the One, and its subsequent journey back to it. Neoplatonic concepts also reached the Arabs via neoplatonically inclined commentators on Aristotle, such as the Muslim philosophers al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā; even a more orthodox Aristotelian like Ibn Rushd was not immune to neoplatonic influences.

However, a purer form of neoplatonism can be found in *The Source of Life*, a remarkably original work by the eleventh-century Spanish Jewish poet and philosopher, Solomon ben Joseph ibn Gabirol (c. 1020–c. 57). One is hard pressed to find anything like it in medieval philosophical literature. Presented as a dialogue between master and pupil, the work was intended as the first volume of a projected trilogy; unfortunately, the

second and third volumes were never written, due to the author's untimely death. Athough the original Arabic text has been lost, some citations are found in *The Garden*, a philosophical work by the twelfth-century Spanish-Jewish poet, Moses ibn Ezra. Gabirol's work was translated into Latin in the twelfth century as *Fons Vitae* by the Spanish archdeacon Domingo Gundisalvi, with the aid of John of Spain, and was influential in late twelfth- and thirteenth-century scholastic philosophy. In the thirteenth century Shem Tov ben Joseph Falaquera abridged and translated the work into Hebrew in numbered paragraphs. Although neither the *Source of Life* nor Falaquera's abridgement appears to have had much influence on subsequent Jewish philosophy, Gabirol's system is interesting in its own right, and represents the crowning achievement of medieval Jewish neoplatonism. His emphasis on the primacy of divine will reappears in Jewish philosophers such as Maimonides and Crescas, albeit in different forms.

According to Gabirol, the soul begins its journey to God through the knowledge of matter and form among the lowest form of being, i.e., sensible things and corporeal substance. From there it moves on to the knowledge of the simple substances that are intermediate between First Substance and corporeal substance, until it achieves the knowledge of universal matter and universal form. Once the soul has achieved this knowledge and the knowledge of God's action/will, it has achieved all that can be known about the First Substance, which is the purpose of human existence. Gabirol thus begins the *Source of Life* with a treatise on the existence of matter and form in sensible things.

In Treatise Two we move from the level of sensible substance (body) to a higher level of corporeal substance. Whereas the first sort of substance possesses a corporeal matter that supports the visible forms of the qualities (figure, color, etc.), the second sort of substance possesses a spiritual matter that supports the form of quantity, or corporeity.

Gabirol provides in Treatise Three a battery of demonstrations for the existence of substances that are intermediate between the First Agent (God) and the substance that supports the categories. Some of these demonstrations are based simply on the idea that, if there is any relation between God and corporeal substance, which are utterly different from each other, then there must be some intermediate entity or entities that bridge the ontological gap, just as the sensible forms of the soul are

intermediary between the intellectual forms of the intellect and the corporeal forms of corporeal substance.

The constant refrain that the lower is the image of the higher because the lower emanates from the higher, is the nub of the argument for two of Gabirol's best-known claims: first, that all of created existence, including simple substances, possesses matter and form, and, second, that the varieties of matter and form are united within universal matter and universal form. The first thesis (the theme of Treatise Four) sounds odd at first: how can simple substances be *composed* of anything? Gabirol's answer is that substances are called "simple" in relation to what is inferior to them in the hierarchy of being, and "composite" in relation to what is superior to them. This assumes that the relation of form to matter does not render a substance *in itself* composite; on the contrary, form gives a particular kind of existence to an entity; matter sustains its existence. In another formulation, Gabirol claims that each substance is form for its superior substance and matter for its inferior substance in the hierarchy of being. We see then that matter and form are relative terms and that substances are both matter *and* form.

Universal matter and universal form, as conceived in themselves, are the subject of Treatise Five. Here Gabirol offers a new description of universal matter and form via their properties. Universal matter and universal form are found in all created existents but, as prime matter and prime form, they are ontologically prior to all other created existents; combined, they constitute the universal intellect. Much of Falaquera's abridgement of this treatise, the longest of the book, is devoted to the universal intellect, which, lacking its own proper form, is the totality of all forms. The identification of universal form with the form of universal intellect ensures that the real and the knowable are coextensive.

In addition to the properties of universal matter and form described above, Gabirol notes that form is active in the process of emanation (a favorite image is that of the sunlight permeating and penetrating where it can), and that matter moves to receive the form out of love and desire for the source of the form, namely divine will. This is very different from the Aristotelian notion of matter as a passive and inert receptacle. He argues that because universal matter is created together with universal form, and hence close to the "source of life," universal matter is infused from the outset of creation with the light of unity (from universal form) which

awakens within it the desire to receive more light. All actually existing matter is already informed in some manner.

Moses Maimonides: *The Guide of the Perplexed*

Andalusian Jewish philosophy reaches its peak in the writings of Rabbi Moses ben Maimon (whence the popular acronym "Rambam"), known to the Arabs as Abū 'Imran Mūsā ibn Maymūn ibn 'Abd Allāh, and to the scholastics as Maimonides or Rabi Moyses. Maimonides was born in Cordoba, Spain, in 1138, to a distinguished family of jurists and communal leaders. After the Almohad conquest of Southern Spain, and the subsequent persecutions of Jews and Christians, Maimonides' family left Cordoba and spent the next eighteen years or so traveling through Spain, Northern Africa, and Palestine, before settling in Egypt in 1166. Shortly after he arrived there, Maimonides completed his first major work, a commentary on the basic law code of rabbinic Judaism, the Mishnah (c. 1168). Over the next ten or so years, he labored on a comprehensive code that was to include "all the Laws of the Torah and its regulations, with nothing omitted." After the dissemination of the *Mishneh Torah* (*Code of Law*, 1178–80), his only major work written in Hebrew, Maimonides became famous throughout the Jewish world.

Maimonides discusses in these early legal writings "the fundamentals of the Torah," i.e. the fundamental beliefs and opinions underlying the divinely revealed Law. These include belief in the existence, unity, incorporeality, and absolute priority of God, who alone is to be worshiped; prophetic revelation, and the supremacy and immutability of Mosaic revelation; divine omniscience, reward and punishment, the coming of the Messiah, and the resurrection of the dead. Maimonides implies that in order to accept these beliefs, especially the theological ones, one needs at least a rudimentary understanding of them. This suggests that there is a religious obligation to study the fundamentals of the Law, especially the theological ones; otherwise, one is left with a misleading and false conception of God and His relationship to the world.

In the *Mishneh Torah* Maimonides expands upon the philosophical theology that underlies Jewish belief in God's existence, unity, and incorporeality. Moreover, the commandments to love and fear God, we are told, presuppose an examination of nature, which, in turn, presupposes a rudimentary knowledge of physics and metaphysics. So Maimonides

provides in his law code a précis of Aristotelian cosmology and physics, which he appears to accept without reservation. At this point in his literary career, there is little in his philosophical writing that distinguishes him from the Muslim Aristotelians, especially al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā. But ten years later he declares his independence from the philosophers and attempts to stake out a middle path between them and the dogmatic theologians of the Kalām.

The context of the new development is his defense of the world's createdness in the *Guide of the Perplexed* (c. 1190). For the first time in his writings, Maimonides declares belief in creation out of nothing to be a fundamental of the Torah, second only to the affirmation of divine unity. This declaration put him squarely in the camp of the theologians. Some harmonizing philosophers, notably Ibn Sīnā, and arguably Gabirol, had tried to give a philosophical intepretation of creation as eternal or continual, which would make it compatible with the Aristotelian thesis of the world's eternity. Maimonides may have accepted a similar interpretation of the world's creation in his legal writings. But he explicitly rejects it in the *Guide,* because he there accept that our view about the world's origins has direct implications for our concept of God. If the world is eternal or proceeds eternally from God, he argues, then divine causality is natural and not voluntary. This means that God did not choose to create the world in the way that he did, but rather that it proceeded (and proceeds) from him of necessity. In that case, Maimonides reasons, God cannot change the wing of a mosquito or the leg of a fly. Such a limit to divine power implies the destruction of the Law.

But Maimonides makes it clear that he does not wish to be associated with the Kalām theologians, whose philosophical principles and methods he severely criticizes. He feels that their religious and ideological commitments overly influence their science, and that they buttress their views with discredited theories. Since the science that Maimonides accepts is mainly Aristotelian, which implies the eternity of the world, he is in a dilemma. His way out is first to argue that the eternity of the world has not been demonstrated, and hence that the creation of the world is possible. He then offers proofs that he concedes are not conclusive but merely probable on behalf of the creation of the world.

It is a tribute to Maimonides' acuteness that he realized the implications for his (Aristotelian) philosophy of including creation *ex nihilo* as a fundamental principle, although he may not have realized how far

reaching the damage would be. Yet he was compelled to do so in order to remain faithful to what he considered to be the "fundamentals of the law."

Isaac Albalag: *The Emendation of the "Opinions"*

After a century of translation activity from Arabic into Hebrew, beginning in the twelfth century, Aristotelianism emerged as the philosophical school *par excellence* among the philosophically minded Jews of Southern France and Northern Spain. Students now studied Ibn Rushd's paraphrases, compendia, and commentaries of Aristotle, many of which had been purged, at least to some extent, of the neoplatonic elements that had shaped the Aristotelianism of al-Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā. At the same time, Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* was widely read and commented upon, and here too the impact of Aristotelianism was felt. Some readers implied that Maimonides secretly adhered to Aristotelian naturalism, and that his statements to the contrary were intended for non-philosophers. These readers were doubtlessly influenced by Ibn Rushd's view that philosophical truths and theories should be concealed from non-philosophers, who would only mistake them as heretical. By reading the *Guide* through an Averroist prism, they were able to harmonize the two main philosophical authorities of the period, Maimonides and Ibn Rushd.

As for Ibn Sīnā, although few of his philosophical writings were actually translated into Hebrew, it would be mistaken to say that his doctrines were neglected. Several of Ibn Sīnā's writings were available in Spain as late as the fourteenth century, and some Arabic-reading Jewish philosophers made use of them. Besides, the Jewish intellectuals who read only Hebrew were familiar with Ibn Sīnā's main doctrines in logic, physics, and metaphysics from Ibn Rushd's restatement and criticisms in his commentaries, and from al-Ghazālī's exposition of Ibn Sīnā's philosophy in the widely read *Opinions of the Philosophers*. Ironically, two of the most Averroistic philosophers of this period, Isaac Albalag and Moses of Narbonne, were responsible for disseminating the views of Ibn Sīnā through their commentaries on the *Opinions*. Both viewed al-Ghazālī's work as a well-written summary of philosophy for beginning students, so long as it was supplemented by their own critical notes and comments from an Averroist perspective.

Albalag was active at the end of the thirteenth century, probably in Catalonia. In 1292, he composed his only surviving work, *The Emendation*

of the "Opinions." Albalag saw the *Opinions* as a "middle way common to philosophy and popular beliefs." He took it upon himself not only to translate the text but also to transform its method from the popular mode of philosophizing to the demonstrative. Where al-Ghazālī deviated from the truth, Albalag would be there to provide the correct (Averroist) doctrine.

One such deviation concerns the question of metaphysical indeterminism and its implications for divine foreknowledge. Ibn Sīnā's metaphysics is strictly determinist. Although only God necessarily exists in Himself, and all other things have merely possible existence, they are all causally determined to exist when they exist. At one point in the *Opinions* al-Ghazālī argues that if future events were only possible with respect to their causes, and not necessitated, then they would be undetermined. In that case God could not have foreknowledge of their existence, since knowledge is always through necessitating causes. Al-Ghazālī explains further that if future events are always necessitated by their causes then we can infer not only that they are knowable by God, but we can also understand *how* they are so knowable: God's complete knowledge of the causes enables Him to foresee whether and when future events will come to pass. According to al-Ghazālī, God's knowledge is like that of an omniscient astrologer who knows all future possible events because he knows the hierarchy of the causes that determine them. However, God, unlike the astrologer, has complete knowledge of the causes.

With respect to metaphysical determinism, Albalag, like Ibn Rushd, rejects the distinction between things that are possible in themselves, yet necessary with respect to their causes. It is true that effects necessarily follow from their causes when those causes are *essential*. But this is not true of *accidental* causes, which do not necessitate their effects. Some effects are possible because their nature does not dictate the final outcome. In such cases the outcome is essentially possible, and it is not necessary (as Ibn Sīnā claims).

Consider, he writes, the case where Reuben inadvertently damages his eye with his finger when he raises his hand. It is impossible to foreknow this event, or the time of its occurrence, because the causal sequence does not conform to any order; nor does the existence of the effects follow necessarily from the existence of the causes. The damaging of the eye does not follow necessarily from the raising of the finger, nor is the meeting of the finger with the eye a necessary event when the

finger is raised, even though the damaging of the eye follows necessarily from the finger meeting it, and the finger meeting it follows necessarily from its being led in a straight line to the eye. For the finger's being led on that line to the eye has no cause except for Reuben's inadvertent action. For Albalag, a cause necessitates its effect when and only when there is something in the nature of the cause that necessitates a particular effect, and something in the nature of the particular effect that renders it necessitated.

Yet if some future events are undetermined, especially those that occur as a result of human choice, does this imply that God does not know them? Albalag says no. It implies only that God does not know them in the way that al-Ghazālī suggests, which is the way of an omniscient predicter. Albalag does not elaborate on his view of divine knowledge. He may adopt the position offered by Ibn Rushd elsewhere, that God knows things insofar as they exist within His essence in the noblest way possible. Still, Albalag recommends teaching al-Ghazālī's theory as appropriate for the multitude, since it will be easy for them to grasp.

Albalag's critical gloss on al-Ghazālī's position on divine knowledge was the first time a Jewish Aristotelian responded to the challenge of Avicennan determinism, but it was by no means the last. The Jewish scientist/philosopher Abner of Burgos (c. 1270–c. 1346) composed several treatises in which he advocated strict causal determinism based on Avicennan metaphysics. According to Abner, God's eternal knowledge causally necessitates, via the instrumentality of the heavenly bodies, the temporal existence of individual substances and accidents. Since human volitions are accidents, they too are necessitated, but this does not make them any less voluntary. Agents are said to will something, insofar as they accord, desire, and choose it, even if this results from compulsion, *a fortiori* if the compulsion is not felt. Abner's deterministic views achieved notoriety only after he converted to Christianity, adopted the name Alfonso de Vallodolid, and began to write polemical treatises against the Jews and Judaism. Yet despite his apostasy, Abner was admired by Jewish savants for his philosophical prowess. His former student and chief adversary Isaac Polgar called him "quick-witted and knowledgeable in the ways of religion and philosophy," and Narboni considered him to be "one of the most distinguished of his generation." Narboni was so impressed by Abner's philosophical acumen that he doubted the sincerity of the apostate's commitment to determinism, and even to Christianity.

An examination of Abner's writings and arguments shows that he had already been committed to Avicennan determinism as a young man, and that he had worked out its philosophical and religious implications in early writings. Moreover, even after his much-publicized conversion, his causal determinism (which he also called the "divine decree" and "predestination") remained a live option for Jewish philosophy. It re-emerges, as we shall see below, in the philosophical theology of the leader of Spanish Jewry in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, Ḥasdai Crescas. Both the apostate Abner and the orthodox Crescas had a common enemy in Jewish Averroists like Albalag, Polgar, and Narboni who, in their eyes, denied God's omniscience and individual providence, and over-intellectualized Judaism.

Moses of Narbonne (Narboni): *The Treatise on Choice*

Moses of Narbonne's *Treatise on Choice* (1361), his response to Abner's *Epistle on the Divine Decree*, was one of the last things this prolific author wrote. Born in Perpignan at the end of the thirteenth century, he spent most of his life in Spain, where he composed commentaries on works by Ibn Rushd, al-Ghazālī, and Ibn Ṭufayl. He is best known for his commentary on the *Guide of the Perplexed*, which he completed around the same time as the *Treatise on Choice*.

Narboni begins his short work by citing the deterministic theses of Abner and then claiming that Aristotle had already showed their absurdity. He attempts to show that Abner's brand of determinism implies fatalism, notwithstanding Abner's protests to the contrary. For if God has decreed that Reuben will be rich, then he will be rich no matter what he does, and he need not do anything. Narboni's arguments indicate that he does not appreciate the distinction between Abner's causal determinism, which masquerades under the name of the "divine decree," and a more simplistic view of fatalism. More importantly, he attacks Abner's causal determinism by repeating at length the main points from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* that had occupied Albalag.

With respect to God's knowledge, a subject that had occupied him considerably in his commentary to the *Guide*, Narboni appeals to Ibn Rushd's claim that "God knows Himself which, in a certain respect, is all existing things. Therefore, when he thinks himself, he thinks all existing things in a more excellent manner." God does not know things

as particulars – because these are apprehended by the senses – or as universals – because these are abstracted from the sensible particulars. Rather, in thinking Himself, he is able to understand all that will occur as a result of this divine productive knowledge.

Gersonides: *The Wars of the Lord*

Rabbi Levi ben Gershom ("Ralbag," "Gersonides", 1288–1344) was medieval Jewry's most intellectually diverse philosopher, making contributions to logic, mathematics, astronomy, astrology, physics, biology, psychology, philosophy, rabbinics, and Biblical exegesis. He left behind philosophical commentaries on Ibn Rushd's summaries and paraphrases of Aristotle that are extant in many manuscripts, some of which were translated into Latin. He also wrote extended commentaries on the Torah, the books of the early prophets, and some of the later biblical writings, including a commentary on the book of Job, which was one of the first Hebrew books to be printed.

Relatively little is known about Gersonides' life. He lived in various towns of the Languedoc area of Provence, which did not then belong to the Kingdom of France. That was lucky for him, since he avoided the persecutions and expulsions that his coreligionists endured during those years. Gersonides spent several years in Avignon, and he may have been acquainted with Pope Clement VI. He speaks of contacts with Christian clerics who shared his interests in astronomy. There is evidence that he earned his livelihood as a professional physician, astronomer, and moneylender.

It has been said of Gersonides that he strived to be original in all that he undertook. His earliest literary work was an attempt "to correct the errors" in Aristotle's theory of the modal syllogism. His commentary on Euclid's *Elements* attempted to construct a geometry without axioms. His voluminous treatise on astronomy, in which he criticized his predecessors, included astronomical tables based largely on his own observations. In his commentary on the Torah he claimed to have discovered the legal rules of inference by which established rabbinic law was derived from the Torah, a claim that led him to be accused (two centuries later) of intending to compose a new Talmud! Because of his philosophical worldview Gersonides has been called an "Averroist," but that is an error; there is

hardly a significant doctrine of Ibn Rushd that he does not criticize and reject.

Gersonides' major work, *The Book of the Wars of the Lord*, was composed over a twelve-year period. Originally intended to discuss the creation of the world, its scope expanded to include six controversial sets of problems that had stymied previous philosophers: (i) Is the rational soul immortal, and are there degrees of immortality? (ii) Do humans predict the future (e.g., in dreams or prophecy) by chance or essentially? (iii) Does God know existing things, and if so, in what way? (iv) Is there divine providence, and if so, does it extend to individuals? (v) How do the movers of the heavenly bodies move them? How are they related to each other and to God? (vi) Is the universe eternal or created, and if created, then how?

The fifth treatise, a consideration of cosmology, may seem out of place in a book of philosophical problems. Yet cosmology for Gersonides is the ultimate science, since the heavenly bodies and their movers are the most noble creatures in the universe. At the top of the hierarchy of being is God, the First Cause, from whom emanates directly the incorporeal intellects, the movers of the spheres. Each intellect governs a celestial sphere whose soul possesses a partial representation of the univeral order within the mind of God, each of which is called the "nomos" (law) or the "intelligible plan of the existents." The different partial representations account for their different celestial influences upon sublunar entities. The goal of these influences is to preserve and maintain the sublunar world.

Because the apprehension of each celestial sphere is a partial one, Gersonides posits the existence of an intellect that coordinates the different influences. This is the Agent Intellect, the "giver of forms," which possesses in its soul the intelligible plan of sublunar existence. This is not the same as the more comprehensive intelligible plan of all existence that is within God's soul, although Gersonides is fond of saying that the plans are "in a certain manner" the same. To use an Aristotelian analogy, if God is like the commander of an entire army, then the Agent Intellect is like the captain of a unit, who arranges his soldiers according to his understanding of the commander-in-chief's plan.

This brief description of Gersonides' picture of the world provides the context for the problem considered in the third treatise: "Whether or not God knows particular sublunar things, and if He does, in what manner does He know them?" If we give the problem a Gersonidean interpretation, its answer is related to the answer to another question:

Are particular sublunar things *scientifically understandable*? Gersonides' answer is a qualified "yes"; they are understandable insofar as such things are determined according to the plan within the soul of the Agent Intellect (which is "in a certain sense" the same plan that is within the soul of God). Gersonides makes a similar point earlier in the *Wars* where he argues that future events can be known before they occur because such things are determined according to the plan within the soul of the Agent Intellect. The sort of knowledge to which he refers here is not sense-knowledge. It involves understanding why a thing is what it is, and why it cannot be otherwise. All knowledge of sublunar things is via knowledge of the plan that orders them. When we say that God knows sublunar things, we mean that He knows and determines the plan from which these things follow.

In chapter 3, Gersonides subjects Maimonides' theory of divine knowledge (as he understands it) to a devastating critique. He correctly points out that, if there is no shared meaning between the term "knower" when applied to God and to other knowers, which he takes to be Maimonides' position, then there is no philosophical justification to apply the term "knower" to God. Whether this argument is a *reductio ad absurdam* of Maimonides' theory, or of Gersonides' own understanding of it, is a subject for another place; here one should note the two main assumptions that both philosophers hold in common. First, there are problems predicating terms that denote essential attributes of God. Maimonides thinks that these problems are insurmountable; Gersonides does not. Second, there is no proportion between God and His creatures – Maimonides thinks that this rules out the possibility of essential predication; Gersonides does not. Gersonides accepts a type of predication of attribute-terms – predication by "priority and by posteriority" – which Maimonides does not discuss. Would Maimonides have rejected this sort of positive predication, or, what is similar to it, predication by analogy? That question needs to be examined further.

Ḥasdai Crescas: *The Light of the Lord*

The flourishing of Arab Aristotelianism among Jewish savants in Provence and Spain, in the early to mid-fourteenth century, was followed by a conservative reaction in Spain and Italy in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. The Aristotelian worldview was rarely challenged, but the "enlightened" interpretation of the Jewish religion, i.e., the synthesis

of Aristotelian naturalism and intellectualism with rabbinic Judaism, was soundly rejected by most thinkers. Spanish Jewish philosophers denied that human happiness consists in intellectual perfection, that the Biblical stories and rabbinic legends are to be interpreted as philosophical allegories, and that divine activity should somehow be naturalized. They emphasized the uniqueness of the Jewish people, the spiritual value of faith, and the efficacy of divine will and grace. Some have called the Spanish Jewish philosophers "theologians," but that is primarily because the texts that entered the Jewish literary canon from this period were dogmatic and theological in nature. Apart from the fact that there was never a clear distinction between theology and philosophy in Jewish philosophy – on the contrary, philosophical theology was subsumed under metaphysics in the Arab and Jewish Aristotelian tradition – this is historically inaccurate. Some of the Spanish Jewish philosophers who were most averse to Jewish Aristotelianism wrote commentaries on Aristotle, or "pure" philosophical treatises. They were simply less willing than their predecessors to fashion Judaism from Aristotelian cloth.

This conservative reaction has at times been presented as a natural reaction to the overly philosophical interpretation of Judaism that was typical of fourteenth-century Provence. Others point to a Spanish Jewish conservative tradition extending back to Judah Halevy in the twelfth century, Moses ben Naḥman and Meir ben Todros Abulafia in the thirteenth century, and Isaac Bar Sheshet and Nissim of Gerona in the fourteenth century. Still others see it in light of the difficulties of Spanish Jewry in the fifteenth century, which culminated in their mass expulsion in 1492. But recently scholars have noted the impact of the contemporary Christian religious and intellectual environment on fifteenth century Spanish Jewish intellectuals. Christian scholasticism had rejected the intellectualism and naturalism of Arab Aristotelianism already in the thirteenth century. The elevation of the will over intellect, the superiority of faith to reason, the emphasis on piety and the observance of religious precepts over the study of science and philosophy, the voluntarist reading of divine omnipotence – these and many other doctrines had parallels within Spanish Jewish philosophy, although rarely were they openly acknowledged.

The most vehement critic of Jewish Aristotelianism was Ḥasdai Crescas (c. 1340–1412), a prominent rabbi and leader of the Spanish Jewish community. Born in Barcelona, he studied under the noted Talmudist Nissim of Gerona, and acquired a reputation as a rabbinic scholar. In 1387 he

moved to the capital of Aragon, Saragossa, where he was awarded the title "member of the royal household," and where he taught rabbinics and philosophy. His proximity to the court afforded him protection in the anti-Jewish riots that swept Spain in 1391, but a royal order of protection arrived too late to save his son in Barcelona.

Aside from a polemical anti-Christian tract and a philosophical sermon, Crescas left only one work, the *Light of the Lord*. The *Light* is an exposition of the fundamental principles of Judaism. It was intended to be the first part of a comprehensive work whose second part would be devoted to Jewish law. Crescas wanted the work to replace the twin pillars of Jewish law and philosophy: Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* and the *Guide of the Perplexed*. But the second part was never composed, and so Crescas' impact on subsequent Jewish culture was limited.

The selection from the *Light of the Lord* takes up the themes of divine knowledge, determinism, and human choice. Crescas believes that God's knowledge determines things to be as they are, but he appears to waver between two types of determinism. The first is metaphysical determinism, the view that things are causally determined to exist in the way they exist by an external determinant. In this case the external determinant is God's "knowledge and conception of His will." However, Crescas often adheres to a weaker version of determinism that claims that, although divine foreknowledge entails the occurrence of future possibles, it does not causally necessitate them. The claim is found in Crescas' discussions of divine knowledge, Mosaic prophecy, and human choice. Here Crescas implies that future possibles are genuinely possible. How does one deal with these two very different ways of looking at divine knowledge? One possible interpretation is that Crescas' "theological determinism" belongs to a later stratum of the *Light of the Lord* and reflects scholastic influence. Perhaps Crescas' initial acceptance of Ibn Sīnā's and Abner's metaphysical determinism was tempered in later years as a result of his new acquaintance with scholastic treatments of divine foreknowledge. Rather than replace the old with the new, he presents them as alternatives.

As for the appropriateness of divine reward and punishment, given the truth of metaphysical determinism, Crescas offers two methods of reconciliation which, although they share elements in common, are independent of each other. His first method is to distinguish sharply between divine equity or justice (*yosher elohi*) and other forms of justice. God legislates, rewards, and punishes out of love for his creatures, in order that

they achieve their ultimate real happiness. The commandments that He promulgates and their recompense motivate humans to act in such ways as to lead them necessarily to this goal. Since God is not Himself benefited or wronged by anything, a retributive model of divine justice, which repays good with good and bad with bad, is inappropriate. Retributive justice is appropriate, however, for political justice (*yosher medini*), the aim of which is, presumably, to guarantee social well-being. Crescas holds that political justice requires people to be able to choose without any compulsion or coercion at all. He probably means by this to exclude inadvertent actions rather than not causally necessitated actions. If this interpretation is correct, then Crescas holds that it is unjust politically to punish someone for an inadvertent crime, but not according to divine justice, where the punishment is intended to benefit the agent.

Crescas feels that divine sanctions are appropriate only when the agent feels no coercion or compulsion, i.e., when they are voluntary, for only then are they acts of the agent's soul. Here Crescas parts company with his predecessor Abner of Burgos, who held that, since divine recompense follows from actions necessarily, there is no difference between the recompense of one who acts under compulsion and one who does not; somebody who is forced to drink poison will die just as quickly as one who drinks it willingly. It may seem initially that Crescas' insistence upon voluntariness as a prerequisite for the appropriateness of reward and punishment, and his distinction between felt and unfelt compulsion, puts him squarely in a long compatibilist tradition, which views determinism as compatible with the moral appropriateness of praise and blame. Compatibilist determinists believe that agents are to be praised or blamed for what they do voluntarily, even though they bear no ultimate responsibility for their character, desires, genetic dispositions, etc., which determine their volitions. As long as they can do what they want to do, without being compelled to do it, or (according to some) as long as their actions arise from their character, then praise and blame are appropriate.

But Crescas offers no justification of this sort. Rather, he begins his second method of reconciliation by saying that the goal of acts of worship and good deeds is for the soul to achieve states of desire and joy, through which the soul attains conjunction with God, who is absolute pleasure and love. This joy is nothing other than the pleasure of the will in doing good. So it is fitting for reward and punishment, i.e., the soul's conjunction with

God and its separation, to follow from voluntary actions, for only these activate the soul through desire. Here "fitting" simply means something like "reasonable," not "morally appropriate." Crescas seems to be saying that it makes sense that reward and punishment are linked to the states of the soul, not that reward and punishment are morally appropriate because they are so linked. If this is correct, then Crescas has simply taken the rationalist solution offered by the Jewish Aristotelians – that spiritual reward follows upon the perfection of the intellect – and has substituted will for intellect. Through desire and love one conjoins with God, who is desire and love. This is not the move of a soft determinist, who wishes to justify ascriptions of praise and blame.

Because Crescas requires voluntariness in order for reward and punishment to be "fitting," he needs to explain how God can reward and punish beliefs, which he holds are involuntary. To do this he posits the existence of "something conjoined, attached, and concomitant to beliefs, and this is the pleasure and joy that we experience when God grants us His belief and the diligence to apprehend its truth, which is without a doubt a matter of volition and choice." Crescas does not believe that pleasure and joy are freely chosen by us; they are as metaphysically determined as anything else. But they are acquired without any *felt* compulsion, as when, for example, we delight in our knowledge that God exists. Crescas concludes by saying that volition is significant for determining the reward and punishment for actions as well as for beliefs, although he allows that inadvertent actions also are subject to punishment.

Crescas' second method, which is not found in Abner, accords well with his emphasis upon the will rather than the intellect. But it does not represent a softening of Crescas' determinism; indeed, from various parts of the *Light of the Lord*, it appears that Crescas, like Abner, is a determinist of the astral sort. In the section on human choice, he repeats Abner's claim that the will, understood as the accordance of the appetitive and imaginative faculties, is determined by the heavens. In another passage, he goes farther than Gersonides by making the *intellect* subject to astral determinism.

Yet when Crescas confronts the question of astral determinism at the end of the *Light*, as well as in his discussion of individual providence, he allows that at least certain choices are not subject to stellar influence. It may be that, in the discussion of choice, he simply appealed to astral determinism in order to present a stronger case for determinism. More

likely, this is one of the many inconsistencies in the book. But whether human choice is subject to astral determinism or not, Crescas implies that it is subject to metaphysical determinism – except in those passages that demur from determinism and were probably added later.

Joseph Albo: *The Book of Principles*

Crescas had several students who became prominent philosophers in their own right. One was the Spanish rabbi Joseph Albo (c. 1380–1444), whose *Book of Principles* (c. 1425) is arguably the last major treatise of medieval Jewish philosophy to make any significant impact on Jewish intellectual life. The book is part religious polemic, part systematization of religion, and part *summa* of Jewish religious philosophy.

As religious polemic, the *Book of Principles* attempts to show that the Christian and Muslim religions do not have the status of divine law, and that the only two laws in effect that are genuinely divine are the Mosaic Law (for Jews) and the Noahide Law (for gentiles). To show this, Albo proposes and defends what he considers to be the necessary principles and branches of *any* divine law, and then examines various religions to see whether they include these principles or not; if they do, and if they provide complete proof of the veracity of their messenger, then they are divine. Christianity is disqualified, mainly because it substitutes belief in the Trinity and the Incarnation for the principle of divine unity and incorporeality, and because it substitutes belief in the arrival of the messiah and his resurrection for divine reward and punishment. Islam is disqualified because it substitutes belief in predestination for divine providence, which vitiates belief in reward and punishment for actions undertaken voluntarily. Albo also holds that neither religion provides complete proof of the veracity of its messenger.

Before Albo elaborates on the principles of divine law he considers what he calls natural law and conventional or nomic law. Natural law comprises those laws which are universal and necessary for man insofar as he is political by nature; "all those measures which are calculated to maintain the political group and to enable the people to live in a suitable manner." These include the bare minimum of laws that maintain justice and suppress wrong, and that apply to all societies. Albo may have appropriated the terms "natural law" and "conventional law" from the Christian tradition, but he uses them differently. "Natural law" is closer to the

notion of "governmental law" that one finds in the *Kuzari* of Judah Halevy (twelfth century), i.e., laws that are necessary for the survival of humans as political creatures. More important, however, are conventional or "nomic" laws, i.e. laws promulgated by a lawgiver or ruler in order to promote human welfare. If the purpose of natural law is to ensure survival, the purpose of nomic law is to promote human flourishing and, more accurately, to perfect the welfare of a given society. Nomic law can include laws requiring the worship of gods or God and the performance of good actions. divine law includes the law of the first two categories but in a much more perfect state, because the lawgiver is an omniscient and benevolent God. So not only does the divine law teach the correct beliefs essential for human happiness that are not found in nomic law; it provides for justice and morality in a much better way.

Albo stipulates three principles (i.e., necessary presuppositions) of any divine law: God's existence, revelation (lit., "Torah from heaven"), and reward and punishment. It is incumbent on every follower of a divine law to believe in these, and failure to believe any of them constitutes heresy. However, they are not prerequisites either for divine law in general or Mosaic law in particular. Albo thus diverges from Maimonides, who considers creation *ex nihilo* to be a fundamental and necessary principle of the Law, presumably any divine law. In this Albo follows his teacher Crescas.

Albo also appears to diverge from Maimonides on the question of what Menachem Kellner has called "inadvertent heresy."[3] According to Maimonides, failure to affirm any one of his thirteen fundamental principles of the Law in the *Commentary on Mishnah* constitutes heresy; ignorance does not constitute a valid excuse. Albo, in at least one significant passage, defends scholars whose research and investigation have led them to affirm heretical doctrines, provided that their intentions are pure. Writing at the end of three centuries of philosophical discussion on the principles of Judaism, where there was much disagreement over what constituted a principle, Albo adopted a more tolerant approach than Maimonides.

Albo's project to axiomatize Judaism, or "divine law in so far as it is divine" had no followers, even among those fifteenth-century rabbis who wrote on Jewish dogma. The project was famously criticized by Isaac

[3] *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought from Maimonides to Abravanel* (Oxford: Littman Library, 1986), p. 199.

Abravanel, who wrote disparagingly of scholars who had copied the ways and customs of the gentile scientists by positing first roots and principles upon which the Torah is based. According to Abravanel, the entire Torah, with all its beliefs, is completely true; there is no reason to posit some as more fundamental than others. This position was later used both to defend an orthodox approach to scripture, as well as the claim that Judaism knew of no dogmas, i.e., articles of faith.

In any event, the attempt to construct "systematizations" of Jewish belief would not return in a sustained way until the nineteenth century.