Tamás Visi

The Early Ibn Ezra Supercommentaries: A Chapter in Medieval Jewish Intellectual History

Ph.D. dissertation in Medieval Studies

Central European University
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To the memory of my father
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Introduction

This study focuses on a largely unedited and unstudied source material concerning the history of Jewish philosophy and biblical exegesis in the late thirteenth and early fourteenth century. This source material will be called “the early Ibn Ezra supercommentaries” – a justification of the term and a closer definition will be provided later. My primary intention in the following pages is to make available as much information as possible about the early Ibn Ezra supercommentaries – about the authors and the texts in general, and about philosophical and exegetical ideas contained in them. My secondary intention is to outline an overall interpretation of the material in the broad context of medieval Jewish intellectual history. This analysis will focus on the relationship between philosophy and biblical exegesis in post-Maimonidean Jewish thought.

By an Ibn Ezra supercommentary I mean any text that is a commentary on the twelfth-century Jewish exegete, Abraham Ibn Ezra’s commentary on the Pentateuch. Biblical commentaries based on Ibn Ezra’s commentary or exegetical ideas, paraphrasing Ibn Ezra’s text, often referring to or criticizing Ibn Ezra’s exegetical ideas are not subsumed under the category ‘Ibn Ezra supercommentary.’

By early Ibn Ezra supercommentaries I refer to those Ibn Ezra supercommentaries written before the Black Death (1348/1349) and after the completion of Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s Hebrew translation of Maimonides’ The Guide of the Perplexed (1204). Alexander Altmann and Uriel Simon (following the footsteps of Heinrich Graetz) argued that after the Black Death a new interest in Ibn Ezra’s texts arose among medieval Jewish philosophers. Altmann coined the term “Ibn Ezra renaissance” to describe this phenomenon. There was a boom in the production of Ibn Ezra supercommentaries in the decades following the great plague. However, these texts are deliberately excluded from the scope of the present study. I will discuss only those texts that were written before 1348. The term ‘early Ibn Ezra supercommentaries’ itself was coined by Uriel Simon as far as I know.

The early Ibn Ezra supercommentaries are goldmines of information about almost every facet of medieval Jewish civilization. They evidence interesting readings of Ibn Ezra’s commentary not attested by surviving Ibn Ezra-manuscripts. Textual emendations are often explicitly discussed by the supercommentators. Sometimes there is information about differences in biblical manuscripts as well. Interesting textual variants are attested in quotations from the Talmud and other post-biblical literature up to Maimonides’ The Guide of the Perplexed. Supercommentators often treated a wide range of scientific problems pertaining to philosophy, physics, astronomy, astrology, and Jewish theology including Cabbala in one case. Observations about everyday-life, natural and political history, human psychology, and ethnography also found their ways into the supercommentaries. Occasionally, there are critical reflections on the behavior of contemporary people, halakhic questions are discussed and decided in Eleazar ben Mattityah’s work while Moses Nagari suggests a liturgical change as a result of his analysis of Ibn Ezra’s text.

Unfortunately, all aspects of the supercommentaries cannot be discussed within the framework of a single dissertation. The analysis offered here will have three focal points. I will try to characterize the social context of the supercommentators on the basis of what we know about them and about the environment they lived in. In the second place, I will quote and analyze in detail the supercommentators’ contribution to the exegesis of the creation

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1 Fragments of supercommentaries composed before 1204 I call “earliest supercommentaries.” Besides a short note in the Prolegomena they will not receive detailed analysis in this paper.
narrative. Originally, I wanted to discuss other important exegetical and theological topics treated in the supercommentaries as well, including Ibn Ezra’s famous essay on the divine names in Exodus 3: 15, the allegoric exegesis of the Garden of Eden, the essay on the Decalogue and on the commandments in general, the explanation of the Tabernacle, the sin of Moses and Aaron, and Ibn Ezra’s famous theological formula “Everything knows everything according to the way of everything.” However, the topic of creation has turned out to be much more complicated (and interesting) than expected; the dissertation grew too long, so I decided to leave the remainder of the topics for later research. Thirdly, I will outline the supercommentators’ methods of exegesis and their general approach to the biblical works and Ibn Ezra’s text.

These choices are justified by the introductory character of the present work. Although excellent *bibliographical* essays have been written on the Ibn Ezra supercommentaries by Solomon J. Rapoport,3 Moritz Steinschneider,4 Abraham Berlinger,5 Michael Friedlaender,6 Yehudah L. Fleischer,7 Naftali Ben-Menahem,8 and recently by Hannah Kascher,9 Abraham David,10 Uriel Simon,11 and William G. Gärtig12 and much information can be learnt from the manuscript catalogues of Steinschneider, Neubauer, Schiller-Szinessy, and Cassuto as well, these studies do not highlight the nature of Ibn Ezra supercommentaries as such since they barely offer more than bibliographical and bibliographical data. Needless to say, results of this kind are very important: they form a solid foundation for further research. Unfortunately, in recent publications such data on the Ibn Ezra supercommentators are often presented incorrectly.13 Therefore, I will review and revise briefly the biographical and bibliographical

13 For example, Dov Schwartz claims that Eleazar ben Mattityah was an older contemporary of Don Yitzhak Abarbanel and wrote his supercommentary in 1452 (*Yashan be-qanqan hadash*, 103). In fact, Eleazar worked in the second half of the thirteenth century: Schwartz apparently misunderstood a remark of Ben-Menahem (*Mi-ginzei Vatican*, 38) saying that a manuscript of Eleazar ben Mattityah’s supercommentary (MS Vat. ebr. 249) was copied in 1452. Similarly, Irene Lancaster claims that “[Moses] Ibn Tibbon influenced the greatest of all supercommentators, Joseph ben Eliezer, the Spaniard (also known as Bonfils Tov Elem) through the work of Ibn
data concerning the authors discussed in this study when their social and intellectual background is described (Part I).

Besides bio-bibliographical researches, previous scholarship concentrated its efforts on textual editions. Nineteenth-century scholars have decided that Joseph ben Eliezer Bonfils Tov Elem’s (hereafter: Joseph Bonfils) supercommentary written at the end of the fourteenth century is of the greatest value of all the supercommentaries since Joseph Bonfils’ interpretation is closest to Ibn Ezra’s original intentions – a statement repeated sometimes by recent writers as well. Neubauer declared this supercommentary to be “worthy of publication” and David Herzog did publish it in 1911. This remains the most important achievement in the field of textual editions even today. However, Joseph Bonfils wrote his supercommentary after the Black Death; consequently his work will not be discussed in the present work.

As for the early supercommentaries the most important textual edition is Naftali Ben-Menahem’s printing of Eleazar ben Mattityah’s supercommentary on Genesis from MS Vatican, ebr. 54. Ben-Menahem has also published the introduction of the supercommentary Avvat Nefesh. I will argue that this text was written not by Asher Crescas in the fifteenth century as Ben-Menahem thought but probably by Sen Bonet de Lunel in the first half of the fourteenth century. William G. Gärtig edited the part on Genesis from Avvat Nefesh as his PhD-dissertation – unfortunately I have not yet been able to consult his work. The rest of the early supercommentaries have not yet been published in any form. One purpose of this study is to inform the reader about the contents of this largely unedited source-material.

As for the deeper analysis of the texts themselves, almost nothing has been carried out before the present attempt. Nineteenth-century scholars evaluated the supercommentaries according to the degree the medieval authors supported their own image of Ibn Ezra – thus Joseph Bonfils was declared to be the “most important” supercommentator and became “worthy of being published.” Supercommentaries were occasionally consulted in order to gather information about the textual history of Ibn Ezra’s commentary on the Pentateuch – especially concerning the authenticity of the Long Commentary on Exodus that was a much discussed question in the nineteenth century. However, very little attention was paid to the Ibn Ezra supercommentaries as a sui generis phenomenon of medieval Jewish thought and literature.

It has been remarked that Alexander Altmann coined the term “Ibn Ezra renaissance” to describe the growing interest in Ibn Ezra’s commentary from the second half of the fourteenth century. Altmann gave only a very brief and rudimentary description of the phenomenon. Moreover, his brief description does not discuss the early supercommentators who lived before the Black Death.

Uriel Simon’s article discusses the influence of Cabbala on the later fourteenth-century supercommentators and the importance of Ibn Waqar’s attempts at combining Cabbala with Tibbonide philosophic tradition. At the same time, he has little to say about the

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14 Cf. Friedlaender: Essays, 220: “This Commentary may be considered as generally containing a correct interpretation of ibn Ezra’s opinions.”
16 Ben-Menahem, Mi-ginzey Vatican, 105-165 and 30-33.
early supercommentators (besides his excellent bio-bibliographical remarks about Rabbi Abishay of Sagora, Moses Ibn Tibbon and others, see below).

Dov Schwartz’s monograph (Yashan be-qanqan hadash: mishnato ha-iyyunit shel ha-hug ha-neoplatoni be-filosofia ha-yehudit be-mea ha-14 “Old wine in a new barrel: The philosophy of a fourteenth-century Jewish neo-Platonic circle”) published in 1996 is the first study that uses Ibn Ezra supercommentaries extensively and systematically as sources for the reconstruction of the philosophical ideas of a particular group among the late fourteenth-century Jewish thinkers.17 Schwartz is also the first to emphasize the significance of Ibn Ezra’s legacy in the works of these post-Maimonidean thinkers: the disciples of Maimonides consulted Ibn Ezra’s writings on both philosophical and exegetical problems almost as often as they did The Guide of the Perplexed. Schwartz focused his investigation on a particular circle of philosophers from Christian Spain of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries; however, his book does not treat the early Ibn Ezra supercommentators at all.

To sum up, although the present study can rely on bio-bibliographical researches carried out by excellent scholars from the nineteenth century on, in other respects it will necessarily be a pioneering work.

The overall framework of this study was determined by two decisions on my part. The early Ibn Ezra supercommentaries will be approached as a subject in its own right: therefore, I will de-emphasize their significance in reconstructing the textual history of Ibn Ezra’s commentary or understanding Ibn Ezra’s original thought. I will rather interpret them within the context of thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century post-Maimonidean philosophy and biblical exegesis pursued in the Jewish communities of the Mediterranean basin. Why did these people stand under the banner of Ibn Ezra instead of standing under their own banners? This is the basic question to answer.

However, I will not write a “history of Ibn Ezra-ism” in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries either for the simple reason that there was hardly anything we can call ‘Ibn Ezra-ism’ – on the analogy of ‘Maimonideanism’ – in those times.18 As will be argued later the early supercommentators were adherents of the Tibbonide branch of Maimonideanism; they saw Ibn Ezra’s text through Maimonidean eyeglasses. Moreover, even in those cases, when a proposed interpretation of a passage in Ibn Ezra did follow neo-Platonic models, a direct connection between Ibn Ezra’s version of neo-Platonism and the supercommentators’ ones cannot be firmly established.

Therefore the basic research question does not concern so much the reception and further development of Ibn Ezra’s original ideas in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries — although this is certainly a legitimate approach as well and I will not avoid it completely. It rather concerns the role one particular text (Ibn Ezra’s Torah-commentary) played in the savoir of the Tibbonide philosophers of this period. The fact that Ibn Ezra’s text acquired such an importance and authority within the Maimonidean philosophical school — despite the
obvious differences between Maimonides and Ibn Ezra’s approaches both in biblical exegesis and philosophy – makes this aspect of the question even more dramatic. As Maimonideans they should have refuted and rejected Ibn Ezra. So why did they embraced him and made him a major authority?

The term savoir is meant to evoke Michel Foucault’s L’archéologie du savoir. By savoir Foucault means the “discursive practices” producing knowledge, the “know-how” of sciences. My basic working hypothesis is that writing a supercommentary on Ibn Ezra’s Torah-commentary formed an important part of the Tibbonide philosophers’ “know-how” of scientific knowledge. It was a practice “highly recommended” to anybody who wanted to become a true philosopher. A more elaborated description of the phenomenon will be attempted below.

The research question outlined above requires a methodological approach similar to Foucault’s “archeology of knowledge” – a methodology not often applied in Jewish studies. On the other hand a proper “archeology” of medieval Jewish philosophy could be written only on the basis of much wider source material and broader perspectives than a study like this one can tolerate. Therefore I will not attempt to write an “archeology” of Jewish philosophy at all; I will rather take Foucault’s concept of “epistemologization” as my point of attack and I will concentrate on the questions how medieval Jewish biblical exegesis crossed several thresholds of ‘scientificity,’ how a group of scientific practices (an episteme to use Foucault’s term) emerged and was maintained during this period, and what role was assigned to Ibn Ezra’s Torah-commentary in these practices.

The second decision is that the present study should be an introduction preparing the ground for further research. Therefore, I will not try to exhaust any aspects of this many-faceted source-material. All that is intended here is to outline the most fundamental characteristics of the early Ibn Ezra supercommentaries that can facilitate the appreciation of these much-neglected texts and help their proper use in further researches.

In the first part of the dissertation I will collect all available data on the early supercommentators and their works. This assemblage will lead to the important conclusion that the post-Maimonidean supercommentators of whom we have information belonged to the Tibbonide tradition of Jewish philosophy and as a rule they were rich and influential people.

The second part will discuss in extenso the supercommentators’ interpretation of Ibn Ezra’s words concerning the first three words of the Bible (be-reshit bara elohim – “In the beginning God created…”). The reader will have the occasion to see through examples of particular texts how the supercommentaries work. Moreover, analyzing the concept of creation in the supercommentaries will help to establish some facts concerning the doctrinal pedigrees of the supercommentators: for example, I will argue that Bonet’s interpretation of Genesis 1: 1 is probably inspired by William Ockham’s notion of time and Moses Nagari was definitely influenced by Christian neo-Platonic ideas that he might have read in Judah Romano’s Hebrew translations of Aquinas’ and Giles of Rome’s works.

In the third part, I will analyze the supercommentators’ approach to the biblical text on the one hand and to its authoritative commentaries – Ibn Ezra and Maimonides – on the other hand. The investigation will focus on the problem of the relationship between philosophy and biblical exegesis in medieval Jewish thought.

I think this choice needs little further justification: the first two parts should sufficiently demonstrate that the supercommentators were first and foremost philosophers and exegetes: philosophy and biblical exegesis are the most obvious contexts for the supercommentaries – and a pioneering work should concentrate on the most obvious context.

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Prolegomena

1. Ibn Ezra: The Man and the Exegete

Many books could be (and will be) written about Ibn Ezra’s life, thoughts, and works. In the present context a rudimentary recollection of the guiding principles of his biblical exegesis will suffice.20 Abraham ben Meir Ibn Ezra (cc. 1089-1164) was born, brought up and educated in Muslim Spain. The commentaries on the Pentateuch were written in Italy and France; nonetheless, his exegetical program was molded by his distinctively Sephardic cultural background.

Poetry, Grammar, Astrology and Biblical Exegesis

Poetry played an eminent role in the social life, culture, and education of Jewish intellectuals in eleventh-century and early twelfth-century Muslim Spain. This was partly due to the influence of Muslim courtly culture on the elite of Jewish society and partly due to theological and spiritual considerations. Jews serving at the courts of Muslim emirs could hardly avoid partaking in the culture of the ruling elite at least to some degree. Moreover, Muslim theologians of the age referred to the poetic beauty of the Koran and the Arabic language in general as proofs for the divine origin of Islam. For those Jews whose mother tongue was Arabic and were educated according to the norms of the courtly culture these claims must have sounded extremely persuasive. Don’t you see with your own eyes how beautiful are the poems of the Arabs? To develop poetry of similar quality in Hebrew (and also theories about biblical poetry and Hebrew as the primordial language) was the only efficient way of sustaining and defending the Jewish faith of these people. The competition between Judaism and Islam was enacted as a competition between Hebrew and Arabic language and poetry. Hebrew poetry in Muslim Spain was not just a matter of pleasure and artistic taste. It was also a means of re-stating and re-living Jewish identity.21

On the other hand, the Talmudic heritage of Judaism could play only a limited role in defending Judaism. The Talmud was a key element of the rabbinic identity as opposed to the Karaite dissidents. However, Karaism was never particularly strong in Spain. Consequently, there was hardly any significant Talmud scholar in Spain during the period besides Rabbi Yitzhak al-Fasi, himself a refugee from Fez, Morocco.

Ibn Ezra’s own exegetical program corresponded to the intellectual and emotional needs of the members of the Jewish elite in Muslim Spain. For Ibn Ezra the Bible was first and foremost an evidence of the Hebrew language. In order to use Hebrew language correctly in poetic and scientific compositions Jews had to acquire firm knowledge concerning the grammar and lexicography of Hebrew.


21 A fine introduction to the topic is Adena Tanenbaum: The Contemplative Soul: Hebrew Poetry and Philosophical Theory in Medieval Spain (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2002), 7-15. Tanenbaum’s analysis of a poem by Ibn Ezra on pp. 146–159 is also very illuminative.
This task proved to be much more difficult than one would assume. In the tenth and eleventh centuries there were great debates between Jewish scholars in Muslim Spain about the actual grammatical rules of Hebrew and about the meaning of certain words. Although the ultimately victorious paradigm had been invented by the time Ibn Ezra was born many questions were still unsettled. Commenting on biblical books gave Ibn Ezra a good opportunity to test his own grammatical theories and to argue for their correctness. Ibn Ezra held that such knowledge was instrumental in composing Hebrew poetry worthy of the name.

The second corner stone of Ibn Ezra’s exegesis was his belief that Judaism was a religion providing salvation from astrological fate. Like many of his contemporaries Ibn Ezra held that future can be predicted from the movement of the stars since the stars themselves determine fate. However, according to Ibn Ezra the stars are not the ultimate factors in the universe and the fate determined by them is not unchangeable. God is above the stars. He is able and willing to interfere with the astrological destiny: if He sees a pious human praying to Him for avoiding the fate He will overpower the astral forces. For example, according to Ibn Ezra, Abraham and Sarah were fated not to have any child but God miraculously changed their fate (together with their names – Genesis 17) so they could have child. This interpretation Ibn Ezra learnt from the Talmud (cf. Shabbat 156a); he was looking for similar exegetical solutions at other places as well. In the commentary on the Pentateuch the biblical stories are reconstructed in terms of astrological fate and salvation from it. Around the two basic topics Ibn Ezra organizes a number of exegetical themes that are often interconnected: identification of astronomical and astrological terms in the Bible, chronology of events, interpretation of certain rites and objects in terms of astral magic, pointing out the spiritual prerequisites of salvation, etc.

Two Forms of Rationalism

Ibn Ezra is often associated with medieval forms of “rationalism” in secondary literature. It is important to see the implications of this term. I find David Biale’s comment on Ibn Ezra’s exegesis very useful:

We have called this a negative litmus test for ambiguities: reason does not dictate what the text should say, as Sa’adiah would have it, but rather detects where the text is problematic, contradicting man’s reason.

Biale points out a basic tension in Ibn Ezra’s thought. “Rationalism” can mean two different things: On the one hand, we call “rationalism” an attempt at understanding the world in terms of rational models. On the other hand, “rationalism” can mean a critical approach to a text that detects “where the text is problematic,” identifies inconsistencies and tries to offer solutions in terms of textual history. The first type of rationalism is associated with

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philosophy and science. The second type is associated with philology. Any culture that strives to be rational and is centered on the study of authoritative texts is likely to be caught in the trap of the two rationalisms. When Alexander of Aphrodisias, Averroes, Thomas Aquinas or Sir David Ross interprets Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* each of them in their own way will have to cope with the dilemma of either accepting what the text *prima facie* seems to say (even if this sense is in open contradiction with other statements of Aristotle or with sound reason), or overwriting the *prima facie* sense with acceptable Aristotelian lore, in other words, to let reason dictate what the text should say.

The tension between the two forms of rationalisms is built into the “historical a priori” of textual studies. The first type of rationalism is concerned with doctrinal consistency: the text makes a point, presents an argument or outlines a theory the content of which can be understood on its own terms. The second type of rationalism gives up the idea of doctrinal consistency and replaces it with historical consistency: the text in the present form is unintelligible or irrational but it can be explained as a result of a historical process that is intelligible and rational.

Biale correctly points out that Ibn Ezra was more involved in the second form of rational exegesis of the Bible than, for example, Saadyah gaon. This is not to say that Ibn Ezra did not impose his own theological, philosophical, and astrological ideas on the biblical text – of course he did. Despite his notorious insistence on literal exegesis he accepted that certain passages of the Bible, such as the Eden-narrative, have to be interpreted allegorically. But in other cases he did not try to explain away the inner contradictions of the text. For example, he is of the opinion that Abraham simply lied when he told Pharaoh that Sarah was his sister – he rejects the traditional interpretation that tries to prove that Sarah was indeed Abraham’s sister. At the same time Ibn Ezra justifies Abraham’s behavior with an account about why and in what circumstances the true prophets are permitted to lie.

Similarly, Ibn Ezra does not deny for a moment the existence of anthropomorphic imagery concerning God in the Bible. The prophets do talk of God as if He had human body. As a philosopher Ibn Ezra rejects this idea, but as an exegete he finds the denial of the obvious sense of the relevant biblical texts (which was Saadyah’s practice) irrational. The tension between his rationalism in philosophy and his rationalism in exegesis is again resolved in a separate argument that has linguistic, logical, rhetorical, and historical aspects. Human language is full of metaphors; it is not a big surprise that the prophets also use metaphoric language when they talk about God especially when they have to address simple-minded and uneducated people.

We shall return to this topic in the next section.

The second form of rationalism in exegesis led Ibn Ezra to the discovery of anachronistic passages in the Torah. Using very cautious language Ibn Ezra suggested that these passages were not written by Moses. On the other hand, as a theologian Ibn Ezra believed in the supremacy of Mosaic prophecy: Judaism was the true religion because it was the religion of the most perfect man ever lived on the earth. It is not clear what sort of account bridges the gap between the exegetical and the theological positions in this case. We shall see in the third part that the supercommentators had very interesting ideas on this topic.

On the Textual History of Ibn Ezra’s Commentaries

Ibn Ezra wrote two series of commentaries on the Pentateuch. The so-called Short Commentary covers all the five books and was composed around 1145 in Lucca, Northern Italy. The Long Commentary is attested on Genesis 1-17 and on the whole book of Exodus. It

26 Cf. Short Commentary on Genesis 1: 1 (s.v. ‘Elohim’) and 1: 26.
27 The *loci classici* are Short Commentary on Genesis 12: 6 and Deuteronomy 1: 2.
is not clear whether the rest was ever written. The Long Commentary on Genesis 1-17 was not circulated widely. On the other hand, the Long Commentary on Exodus practically replaced the Short Commentary on Exodus in the textual transmission by the second half of the fourteenth century.

We can date roughly to the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries the emergence of a “textus receptus” of Ibn Ezra’s Torah-commentary. The “textus receptus” contains the Short Commentary on Genesis, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy and the Long Commentary on Exodus. However, in some manuscripts the Long Commentary on Exodus is contaminated with interpolations from the Short Commentary on Exodus; moreover, there are manuscripts containing the Long Commentary on Exodus 1-19 and the Short Commentary on the rest of the book. Moses Ibn Habib, the man responsible for the editio princeps (Naples, 1488) purged many passages from the Long Commentary on Exodus. Later printed editions are based on Moses Ibn Habib purged text and they suffered further alterations from Christian censors concerning the anti-Christian passages. The so-called critical edition of Weizer returns to Moses Ibn Habib’s text without attempting to integrate the rich textual material of the manuscript tradition into the critical apparatus. A proper critical edition is a desideratum.

Ibn Ezra’s Statement on Method


30 Such mixed versions were commented on by many supercommentators from late fourteenth-century Spain (Franko, Samuel Motot, Shem Tov ben Joseph of Toledo); see Yehudah L. Fleischer: “Perushim le-perush R. Abraham Ibn Ezra...” *Ozar Hachaim* 12 (1936): 49 and 11 (1935): 100. Fleischer mentions two manuscripts containing such a mixed text on Exodus: MS Oxford, Bodleian, MS Pac. 393 (Neubauer 217) and MS Opp. Add. Qu. 6 (Neubauer 219). A third example is to be found in the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America, New York, according to Alexander Marx’s short description; cf. his *Bibliographical Studies and Notes on Rare Books and Manuscripts in the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America*, ed. Menahem H. Schmelzer (New York: JTS and KTAV Publishing House, 1977), 49.

31 Abraham Ibn Ezra: *Perashey ha-Toru* 3 vols., ed. Asher Weizer (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1976). For example in the famous essay on the divine names inserted into the Long Commentary on Exodus 3: 15 medieval manuscripts contain a remark from a scribe (Joseph ben Jacob of Modeville?) indicating that he added a paragraph to Ibn Ezra’s text in order to make the master’s ideas clearer about the arithmetical properties of the squares of the four sacred numbers (1, 5, 6, and 10). This passage was purged from the editio princeps. Weizer follows the editio princeps without mentioning in the footnotes the addition found in the manuscripts.

32 An important collection of variae lectiones was published by Wilhelm Bacher, “Varianten zu Ibn Esra’s Pentateuch-Commentar (aus dem Cod. Cambridge No. 46),” *Magazin für die Wissenschaft des Judentums* 18 (1891) [Hebrew Part]: 1-51. The only discussion on the textual history of Ibn Ezra’s Torah-commentary I know of is to be found in the introduction of Leo Prijs’s supercommentary (probably the latest achievement in this genre): Leo Prijs: *Abraham Ibn Esra’s Kommentar zu Genesis Kapitel 1: Einleitung, Edition und Superkommentar* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1973), L1 – LV.
Ibn Ezra wrote two separate introductions to the Short and the Long Commentaries. In both versions he criticizes four groups of previous commentators who failed to interpret Scriptures correctly. Two of the two groups are the Christians and the Karaite heretics. Both of them attribute heretic doctrines to the Scripture and both of them are refuted by the literal sense of the Scripture. The case of Christianity need little further comment in Ibn Ezra’s opinion. The Karaites’ denial of the validity of rabbinic tradition is refuted by the movement of the sky according to Ibn Ezra. Scripture does not contain a clear statement on how the months and the feasts of the Jewish calendar should be calculated; nonetheless, biblical passages with implications concerning the calendar and observed astronomical phenomena prove according to Ibn Ezra that the rabbinic calendar is the correct one and that the various systems proposed by the Karaite dissidents are wrong. And the rabbinic calendar is a piece of oral tradition; it cannot be inferred from Scripture alone, although it is supported by both biblical and astronomical evidence. Thus Nature and Scripture testify together the truth of the Oral Torah and the error of the heretics.

An implicit assumption of the criticism against the Karaites is that the Bible is in harmony with Nature (as known from natural sciences). An explanation that attributes false statements to the Bible in terms of natural sciences must be false. This is an important regulative principle of Ibn Ezra’s exegesis: contradictions between biblical and scientific truths are not allowed.

The third and the fourth groups of interpreters are within the framework of rabbinic Judaism. The geonim [spiritual leaders of the Jewish community in earlier Islamic times] of Iraq from Saadyah’s time on produced long scientific biblical commentaries. However, Ibn Ezra argues, they did not apply scientific knowledge to biblical exegesis in the proper way. They incorporated long excurses on scientific questions into their commentaries. But these excurses do not help us understand the meaning of the text itself. Moreover, Ibn Ezra argues, even their scientific value can be questioned. It is better to treat scientific problems in separate works; a biblical commentary should about the sense of the Bible.

In other words, the geonim’s exegesis violates the textual integrity of the Hebrew Bible by introducing themes that are alien to the inner logic of the text. If the Christian explanation is refuted by the grammatical sense of Scripture and the Karaite exegesis by Nature, the geonim’s “path” is contradicted by the textuality of the Biblical books. By ‘textuality’ I mean a group of assumptions about how texts function or do not function (e.g. to determine the exact meaning of a word according to the particular context in which it appears, to reflect on the general intentions and strategies of the author in structuring the text, etc.) Besides Hebrew grammar and scientific truth Ibn Ezra points to the textuality of the Bible as a further criterion that any interpretation must meet. Geonic exegesis meets the first two criteria (grammar and natural sciences); however, it fails to comply with the third one.

The fourth group criticized by Ibn Ezra is formed by the contemporary midrashic exegetes living in Latin and Greek Christian lands. These commentators, Ibn Ezra remarks, compile their works from the midrashim of talmudic times such as the Bereshit rabba on Genesis, the Mekhilta on Exodus and the haggadic passages from the Talmud. Ibn Ezra considers this practice futile: there is no point in repeating what previous authors said. Moreover, Ibn Ezra claims that the haggadot often have secret, esoteric senses which the Ashkenazi and Byzantine commentators do not understand. Thus they practice a vulgarized

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33 The introduction to the Short Commentary is to be found at the beginning of the printed editions. A recent English translation with excellent comments and further studies: Irene Lancaster: Deconstructing the Bible (London: Routledge Curzor, 2003). The introduction to the Long Commentary is edited with a German translation by David Rosin: David Rosin: Reime und Gedichte des Abraham Ibn Ezra (Jahresbericht des jüdisch-thelogisch Seminars Fraenckel’scher Stiftung) (Breslau: S. Schottlaender, 1887), 56-70.
and misunderstood form of midrashic exegesis. In a long paragraph Ibn Ezra parodies midrashic exegesis by offering a number of explanations of certain biblical passages in the style of the midrashim. These exegetes do not enter the sense of the biblical text either in Ibn Ezra’s opinion.

At the same time Ibn Ezra cautiously avoids any direct criticism of the holy rabbis of the talmudic times on whose authority midrashic exegesis stands. Quoting a famous sentence from the Talmud “no biblical verse can ever loose its literal sense [pshuto]” he claims that the talmudic rabbis acknowledged literal exegesis and the midrashim were meant to be extensions of the literal sense, “hanging like cloths on the body of the peshat.” Other midrashim might have esoteric senses. On the other hand, Ibn Ezra also admits the possibility that the talmudic rabbis might have had a superior knowledge no longer accessible to us.

Ibn Ezra’s own method is described very briefly:

The fifth way is on which I base my commentary. And this is what is the correct in my opinion and pleasing to God – the only one whom I fear. I will not look for “aspects” in the Torah / I will not be biased concerning the Torah [ve-lo essa panim ba-tora]. I will scrutinize the grammar of all the words with all my power, and then I will explain it according to my capacities.

In the continuation Ibn Ezra further describes what he will not do: he will not attribute sense to the orthographical peculiarities and other external phenomena of the text “for these explanations are good only for children.” The Masoretic traditions are useful for preserving the correct text but no further significance can be ascribed to them in the process of interpretation. On the other hand, Ibn Ezra remarks, the Aramaic translation (Targum) has a great value in clarifying the simple sense (peshat) of the text. Finally, Ibn Ezra emphasizes that his predilection for the literal or simple sense (peshat) is not meant to deny the value of the midrashic exegesis of the rabbis from the talmudic period. “The Torah has seventy faces” quotes Ibn Ezra an ancient tradition to the effect that other interpretations besides the literal one are also permitted. In matters pertaining to the practice of religion (halakha) the preference should be given to talmudic tradition in any case, Ibn Ezra underlines this point once more.

The Episteme of Biblical Exegesis

The reader might be slightly disappointed by the vagueness of Ibn Ezra’s methodological statement. Much is said about what should not be done in biblical exegesis, but the positive instructions we are told are hardly more than examining the grammatical features of the text and “to explain it.”

In fact, Ibn Ezra’s statement might be poor as for its propositional content, but it is still powerful if we consider the way it restructures previous statements (its ‘enunciative field’ to use Foucault’s term). Using sometimes the weapons of parody and sarcasm besides arguments Ibn Ezra disqualifies a number of exegetical practices and by this he restructures the very episteme of biblical scholarship. A proposed interpretation must be tested at three

34 Shabbat 63a, Yevamot 11b. Note, however, that according to David Weiss Halivni’s conclusion the phrase ‘pshuto’ does not mean ‘literal sense’ in the original talmudic sense. It was the innovation of medieval scholars to use this quotation as a proof-text for the primacy of literal sense. This practice is first documented in Samuel ben Hofni gaon in the tenth century. Cf. his Peshat and Derash, 52-58
35 Episteme is again a term taken from Foucault. It means the relations between the discursive practices responsible for producing knowledge, especially scientific knowledge within a particular discursive formation or constellation. In a way, it is the episteme what makes a science, it is the episteme through which a discursive formation may cross the threshold of scientificity. Cf. Foucault, The Archeology of Knowledge, 191.
different levels and it has to pass all the tests in order to become something serious, something “good” not “only for children.”

First, there is a test of grammar. Hebrew grammar was a well-established science and a secure point of reference for Ibn Ezra. Any interpretation of biblical texts must comply with the rules of Hebrew grammar. A major reason for Ibn Ezra’s rejecting Christian or midrashic exegesis is the fact that they disregard the solid facts of Hebrew grammar.

In the second place, interpretations are tested at the level of their scientific implications. Ibn Ezra accepts both the traditional image of the Bible as a sacred text coming from God, and consequently, speaking truth and the authority of natural sciences in revealing at least certain aspects of truth. Truth cannot contradict truth; consequently any biblical exegesis that implies statements contradicting the secure results of sciences must be rejected.

Thirdly, a proposed interpretation must meet the criteria of ‘textuality.’ Texts have their own lives, their own structures, and their own logic that cannot be simply derived from grammatical rules. An interpretation that complies with both the rules of Hebrew grammar and scientific truth but violates the order of textuality – such as the commentaries of the geonim that introduce much irrelevant scientific material – cannot be tolerated.

It is quite revealing how Ibn Ezra rejects the midrashic way of exegesis. The point of his criticism is not that the talmudic rabbis were wrong, but that their exegesis is no longer knowable. The domain of the ‘knowable’ is defined by the criteria given above; this is what we can know, what we can discuss in a meaningful way. Talmudic exegesis might represent some truths of higher order that are hanged on the body of the literal sense “like cloths,” but these truths do not belong to the domain of the ‘knowable’ for us. The contemporary Ashkenazi and Byzantine exegetes who continue the talmudic tradition fail to realize the fact that midrashic exegesis is no longer possible. The ancient rabbis were superior to us, we have to believe them at least concerning halakha, but we have to go on our own ways in exegesis if we want to know something of the Bible.

Thus, Ibn Ezra’s introductions define a domain of the ‘knowable’ in biblical exegesis by establishing some requirements that any exegesis must meet if it is to be granted the honorific title “knowledge” (and not just ‘amusement’ or ‘entertainment’ or ‘ethical instruction’ or even ‘tradition to be accepted on the basis of authority’). Although Ibn Ezra definitely continued the exegetical tradition started by Saadyah gaon, his approach seems to be much more mature and systematic than that of the geonim.

Ibn Ezra’s Secrets

The characterization of Ibn Ezra’s exegesis presented above is not complete. In both versions of the introduction Ibn Ezra, while criticizing the Christians for their non-literal exegesis, also argues for the possibility of non-literal interpretation in certain cases. In the introduction to the Longer Commentary, after rejecting the Christian way of allegorizing Ibn Ezra adds:

Nonetheless some words have secrets [sodot],
Though they are true in themselves as well, but they are also puzzles [hiddot]
Such as the Garden of Eden and the Tree of Knowledge.
The wisdom of the heart should join the wisdom heard from the Father’s mouth.
And the faithful witness in all our explanations
Is the intellect [sekhel] of the heart planted into us by our Holy One.36

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36 Rosin, Reime und Gedichte, [1887], 58-59.
Commenting on the Garden of Eden Ibn Ezra indeed offers two interpretations in both versions. The first one is literal and follows spontaneous theological insights: all the miraculous elements are explained by a simple reference to God’s omnipotence. However, after finishing the literal interpretation Ibn Ezra proceeds to an allegorical explanation of the text. This part of the commentary is a collection of enigmatic remarks suggesting that the whole story of the “fall” of Adam and Eve is a parable of the soul’s fall into human body: thus we learn that ‘Adam’ stands for the intellectual part of the soul, ‘Eve’ for the animal part, the ‘tree of knowledge’ for the vegetative part, the ‘snake’ is a symbol of sexuality connected to the ‘tree of knowledge,’ i.e. vegetative soul, etc. In these explanations the “wisdom” of human intellect (i.e. Greco-Arabic sciences) and the “wisdom heard from the Father’s mouth” (i.e. Holy Scriptures) indeed cooperate.

The introduction to the Shorter Commentary justifies non-literal exegesis of such texts that contradict sense perception or reason if taken literally:

... for there is reason [daat] in the human heart  
Planted there from the wisdom of the Eternal One  
And if reason cannot bear a thing [from the Bible],  
Or it is contradicted by the senses  
Then you should look for a mystery [sod],  
Because the insight of reason is the fundamental principle [yesod].  
For the Torah was not given to those who lack reason,  
And the angel [intermediating] between man and God is his intellect [sekhel].  
But all things that reason does not refute  
Are to be interpreted according to the literal sense [ki-fshuto].

This second text is clearly a variant of Saadyah gaon’s famous exegetical canon (literal sense is to be preferred unless it is contradicted by reason, sense perception, rabbinic tradition or another biblical verse that is more definite – see below). Therefore, these instances of allegoric exegesis actually comply with the second criterion enumerated above: they are in harmony with scientific results and they replace a peshat that would fail to do so.

However, the allegoric interpretation of the Garden of Eden cannot be subsumed under this category since Ibn Ezra does not reject it according to its literal sense either. The same is true about the mystical exegesis of the Hebrew letters that make up the divine names (see for example, Longer Commentary on Exodus 3: 15). Why did he propose non-literal interpretations in these cases?

The apparent reason is simply the capacity of being allegorically interpreted inherent in these texts. The Eden-narrative can be read as a “puzzle” [hidda]. Ibn Ezra himself as a teacher of Hebrew grammar and biblical knowledge complied puzzles to inspire his pupils. He probably assumed the same pedagogical strategy on the part of God in composing the Eden-narrative. The human intellect alone is sufficient for identifying such passages as “puzzles” and also to offer a definitive solution (which might contain unspeakable or unthinkable “mysteries,” nonetheless). “And the faithful witness in all our explanations / Is the intellect of the heart planted into us by our Holy One.”

On the other hand, there are a number of further “sod-passages” in Ibn Ezra’s text that cannot be simply derived from the two cases discussed above. He sometimes remarks that a certain Hebrew phrase or word – which has a perfectly clear sense on the level of the peshat –

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37 In the Longer Commentary there is a famous quotation from Solomon Ibn Gabirol concerning the esoteric meaning of the Garden of Eden. This is one of the few testimonies about Ibn Gabirol’s esoteric exegesis.
38 For a collection of such texts see Rosin, Reime und Gedichte des Abraham Ibn Ezra (Jahresbericht des jüdisch-theologisch Seminars Fraenckel’scher Stiftung) (Breslau: S. Schottlaender, 1891), 203-219.
has a further *sod*, that is to say, a ‘secret,’ a ‘mystery,’ or an ‘allusion’ to something else. Both modern and medieval commentators suspect a scientific or allegoric intention in most of these cases. To quote just one example, commenting on the grammatical form of the numeral ‘eleven’ [*ashtei asar*] at Numbers 7: 72 Ibn Ezra remarks that this grammatical form is a ‘great mystery’ [*sod gadol*]. We shall see that Eleazar ben Mattityah at the end of the thirteenth century interpreted this remark in a numerological way (i.e. the ‘mystery’ is the mystery of the number ‘eleven’).

How are these passages to be explained? I think here we can discover a ‘gap’ or an ‘archeological shift’ in Ibn Ezra’s exegetical practice. The lastly mentioned category of *sod*-passages are based on a different type of ‘textuality’ (i.e. discursive practices concerning texts) than literal exegesis. To clarify this matter first I will quote a passage from an eleventh-century Spanish Muslim writer’s handbook on the art of love:

> WHATEVER it may be that one is seeking after, one must inevitably contrive some means of coming in to it, some expedient whereby one may achieve access to and attainment of it. There is but one person uniquely able to create without intermediary; the Prime Omniscient Himself, be He ever exalted and extolled!

> The first device employed by those who seek union, being lovers, in order to disclose their feelings to the object of their passion, is allusion by means of words. Either they will quote a verse of poetry, or dispatch an allegory, or rhyme a riddle, or propose an enigma, or use heightened language. Men vary in their methods according to the degree of their perspicacity, or the amount of aversion or sympathy, wit or dullness, which they remark in their loved ones. I know a man who commenced his declaration of love by quoting to his lady some verses of my own composition. This and the like are the shifts resorted to in the first stages of the love-quest. If the lover detects some sign of sympathy and encouragement, he then proceeds further. When he observes one or other of the characteristics we have described, while in the actual course of quoting some such verses, or hinting obliquely at the meaning he wishes to convey in the manner we have defined, then as he waits for his reply, whether it is to be given verbally, or by a grimace, or a gesture, he finds himself in a truly fearful situation, torn between hope and despair; and though the interval may be brief, enough, yet in that instant he becomes aware if his ambition is attainable, or if it must be abandoned.

> There is another variety of verbal allusion, which is only to be brought into play when an accord has been reached, and the lover knows that his sentiments are reciprocated. Then it is that the complaints begin, the assignations, the reproaches, the plighting of eternal troths. All this is accomplished by means of verbal allusions, which to the uninitiated hearer appear to convey a meaning quite other to that intended by the lovers; he replies in terms entirely different from the true purport of the exchanges, following the impression which his imagination forms on the basis of what his ears have picked up. Meanwhile each of the loving pair has understood his partner's meaning perfectly, and answered in a manner not to be comprehended by any but the two of them; unless indeed the listener is endowed with a penetrating sensibility, assisted by a sharp wit and reinforced by long experience. Especially is this the case if the intelligent bystander has some sense of what the lovers are hinting at; rarely indeed does this escape the detection of the trained observer. In that event, no single detail of what the lovers are intending remains hidden from him.\(^{40}\)

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Ibn Hazm’s text evidences a practice of esoteric communication in medieval Arabic love-culture. The lovers are situated at a royal court or some other place of the highest social elite. They share a common cultural heritage including codes of behavior and poetic texts. This common background opens up the possibility of encoding messages with the hope that the intended receiver will understand it — and none else.

In another work Ibn Hazm describe the necessity of esoteric communication concerning knowledge:

To spread knowledge among those incapable of understanding it would be as harmful as giving honey and sugary confections to someone with a fever, or giving musk and amber to someone with a migraine caused by an excess of bile...

Anyone who has a natural inclination towards a branch of knowledge, even if it is inferior to other branches, should not abandon it, or he would be like someone who plants coconuts in al-Andalus or olive trees in India where neither would produce fruit...

The most noble branches of knowledge are those which bring you close to the Creator and help you to be pleasing to Him...

The mysterious branches of knowledge [al-‘ulūm al-ghāmidat] are like a strong drug which benefits a strong body but damages a weak one. In the same way, the esoteric branches of knowledge enrich a strong mind [‘aql], and refine it, purifying it of its flaws, but destroy a weak mind.41

These quotations illustrate the most evident context in which a necessity of esoteric communication in scientific matters was articulated. Not everybody is capable of knowledge and not everybody is capable of all kinds of knowledge. The “mysterious branches” are useful for only few people; others might be even harmed by them. A hierarchy of knowledge corresponds to a hierarchy of human beings with different abilities. It is very important according to Ibn Hazm to observe this hierarchy and not to cross the borders. Just like in the case of the lovers esoteric communication is meant to protect the messages from the ears of those people whom they could harm.

The sod-passages of Ibn Ezra seem to be built on an idea of ‘textuality’ that follows the structures exemplified in Ibn Hazm’s text. God may wish to communicate esoteric truths to those human beings who are capable of receiving them. At the same time God may wish to conceal the some truths from the rest of the human beings who could be harmed by them.42

“[A]llegory was not a hermeneutic mode; it was a state of mind” writes Frank Talmage in a study that makes a fresh start in the research of medieval Jewish biblical exegesis in my opinion.43 The idea that the Bible might contain esoteric messages was rooted in the everyday-life practice of esoteric communication that was actually present in a wider field than theoretical knowledge. For the modern readers, who live in a culture not so well-versed in the art of esoteric communication (e.g. confessing love through reciting poems) medieval forms of esoteric biblical exegesis may seem strange. Even more strange is the situation that esoteric hermeneutics was paired with a strong emphasis on the literal sense (Ibn Hazm was no less literalist in Koran-exegesis than Ibn Ezra in biblical interpretation).

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However, for the medieval thinkers there was not much to wonder about this. As has been pointed out above, the guarantee of the success of the lovers’ communication was the presence of a common cultural background that secured both the encoding and the decoding of the messages. The poems recited by the lovers could transmit the information as long as they were mastered sufficiently by both partners in their literal sense. A cultured lover was expected to spend many hours with the study of Arabic grammar and poetry in order to use the available texts efficiently. It was the literal sense that guaranteed the common background for securing the success of the encoding and decoding procedures. The literal sense cannot be “abused” unless it is mastered to a sufficient degree.

Nonetheless, an “archeological shift” is clearly observable between peshat-type exegesis and sod-type exegesis. Both of them are required to meet a criterion of ‘textuality.’ However, ‘textuality’ means two different things in each case respectively. In the first case the paradigm of textuality was the normal functioning of written documents. Ibn Ezra referred to the example of private correspondence to elucidate this point in a particular context (the text will be quoted and analyzed in the next section). In the second case the model of textuality is esoteric communication practiced in various situations in the life of the highest social elite (courting, political intrigues, etc.). In the first case the discursive objects constructed are clearly definable and describable. In the second case they are permitted to be of “mysterious” character that defies human attempts at defining and describing.44

Ibn Ezra had no clearly stated theory concerning the relationship between literal sense and the ‘secrets’ of the Torah. Nor did he propose a methodology for identifying the passages or phrases that might be viewed as alluding to a sod. Nonetheless, the discursive practice of combining literal and esoteric interpretation was firm and stable.

The reason for this was a hierarchy and interdependence posited between the two layers. ‘Secrets’ were knowledge of higher truths. The ultimate mysteries of sciences, philosophy and religion belonged to their number. It was for the sake of the “mysteries” one had to study Scripture according to Ibn Ezra. But the “secrets” could not be deciphered without a firm knowledge of the peshat. Just like the lovers first had to learn Arabic literature in order to encode their own messages into poetic quotations, a Jewish exegete had to master Hebrew grammar and literal exegesis (besides “rational” sciences) in order to understand God’s encoded messages.45 Reason as an “angel of God” and peshat together guaranteed the success of decoding.

2. Literal Sense: Definition, Terminology, and Problems

Ibn Ezra calls “peshat” his own method of exegesis. What does this word mean and imply? To answer this question we have to put Ibn Ezra into the broader context of the history of Jewish biblical exegesis.

Peshat: A Medieval Innovation

In his groundbreaking monograph David Weiss Halivni argues that in talmudic times the concept of literal sense is altogether missing from rabbinic literature. Nor were the rabbis practicing any sort of exegesis that could be justly described today as ‘literal.’ The quest for the literal sense is a medieval innovation in Judaism according to Halivni’s opinion. The

44 Thus Ibn Ezra in the Short Commentary on Genesis 1: 26 in the middle of a rather mystical meditation on humans’ being the images of God exclaims “And I am unable to explain it! [ve-lo ukhal le-faresh].”
45 Cf. the first chapter of Ibn Ezra’s Yesod mora that can be read as a programatic statement. Ibn Ezra emphasizes the usefulness of studying Hebrew grammar as a preparation for the study of the “mysteries” of the Bible, but also claims that knowledge of Hebrew grammar is not an end in itself.
Hebrew word *peshat* became a terminus technicus meaning “literal sense” or “literal exegesis” only from the end of the tenth century on. In earlier rabbinic literature the term means “context” rather than “literal sense.”

Halivni’s argument is as convincing as anything can be in present day scholarship. However, Halivni does not offer any explanation for the medieval emergence of literal exegesis in Judaism. This question cannot be solved in the framework of the present paper either. However, I would like to point out an important aspect of the problem that will be further discussed in part three of this work.

**An Etic Definition of Literal Sense**

I propose a distinction between “superficial” and “literal” sense. “Superficial” sense is what one gets immediately after having heard or read a sentence. On the other hand, “literal sense” is a result of deeper analysis. It is constructed in a process that I will call “literal exegesis.” This process attempts to discover a deep structure underlying the superficial sense of a text while preserving the superficial sense to the possible extent. In “non-literal exegesis” the attempt at preserving the superficial sense is deliberately given up.

For example, in Genesis 15: 13 God tells Abraham that his offspring will be servants for 400 years. It is by no ways difficult to get the *prima facie* sense of this sentence. However, to situate it in the framework of biblical chronology is a difficult and complicated task. The interpreter has to collect similar passages indicating chronological information about the biblical past and examine in what way the 400 years of Genesis 15: 13 fits other figures and rethink what is exactly meant by “servitude” and by the “offspring” of Abraham, etc. This complex of exegetical problems definitely belongs to the literal level of understanding in the opinion of medieval exegetes Jewish and Christians alike. Literal exegesis might be targeted at the “simple” or “obvious” sense of Scripture; but it is by no means a simple intellectual task.

What David Weiss Halivni has proved in his *Peshat and Derash* is the absence of literal sense in talmudic exegesis, not the absence of superficial understanding. Halivni himself emphasizes that the talmudic rabbis were able to understand the biblical verses in their plain sense – in other words, they knew Biblical Hebrew. And they were also interested in the deeper meaning of the text: their interpretation went beyond an initial and superficial understanding of words and sentences. What was missing is that type of deep exegesis that tries to save as much of the superficial sense as possible.

**Saadyah’s Statement**

This sort of exegesis appeared in early Abbasid times. The first authoritative statement on literal exegesis comes from Saadyah gaon. In the introduction to his commentary on the Torah the gaon writes:

> An intelligent man will necessarily always take the Torah according to the external sense [*al-zāhīr*], that is to say, according to the meaning that is widespread [*al-mašhūr*] among the people [speaking] that language and that is the most frequent sense [*al-kašīr al-isti‘āl*]. For the basic intention of every book is to transfer its meaning perfectly to the mind [lit. heart] of the hearer. [This rule applies always] except for the cases when sensual or intellectual knowledge contradicts the widespread sense [*al-mašhūr*] of that sentence, or when the widespread sense [*al-mašhūr*] in question

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David Weiss Halivni: *Peshat and Derash*, 52-58. “Indeed, peshat in the sense of plain, simple meaning is entirely the invention of the medieval exegesis. It has no basis in the Talmud” (p. 53).
contradicts an other biblical verse that has a [more] definitive sense [muḥakkaman] or if it contradicts trustworthy tradition.\footnote{Saadyah gaon: Perush Rav Saadya gaon le-Bereshit (Rav Saadyah gaon’s commentary on Genesis), ed. Moshe Zucker (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1984), 17-18; Modern Hebrew translation on p. 191. On the topics discussed below much information with penetrating remarks and rich bibliography can be found in Mordechai Z. Cohen’s Three Approaches to Biblical Metaphor, 33-96.}

The gaon’s point is that the Bible should be read as any written document. The same norms of understanding that we take for granted in everyday life should be applied to Scripture as well.

Literal exegesis was based on the assumption that the Bible is to be interpreted as any other text or in fact, as any other form of linguistic communication. The exceptions enumerated by the gaon, when the “external” or “widespread” or “frequent” meaning of certain words must be replaced by less obvious senses can be seen as logical consequences of the basic principle. Isn’t it true that our everyday speech contain many expressions that we do not mean and do not take “literally”? If I say, “Two plus two is five,” you will think that I am joking or delivering and encoded message. Similarly, when Moses speaks about God’s eye or hand you should not think for a moment that Moses attributed corporeal existence to God. The everyday-life experience of understanding is the basic point of reference for Saadyah in creating the rules of exegesis.\footnote{Further texts illustrating this point are quoted in Wilhelm [Vilmos] Bacher, Die Bibelexegese der jüdischen Religionsphilosophen des Mittelalters vor Maimüni, Jahresbericht der Landes-Rabbinerschule in Budapest 1891/1892 (Budapest: n. p.), 11-12.}

In Chapter 7 of his Book of Opinions and Beliefs Saadyah gave a more detailed account of the four rules of exegesis. This text evidences more clearly the context in which Saadyah came to the conclusion that preference should be given to the literal interpretation. In Chapter 7 Saadyah argues that the resurrection of the dead should not be explained away as a metaphor for afterlife. There are Jews who tend to attribute esoteric meanings to biblical texts and deny their plain sense. The point of Saadyah’s rules of exegesis is to prevent this error:

I declare in the first place that one of the things of which we can be certain is that every statement found in the Scriptures must be taken in its plain sense. Only for one of four reasons it is not permitted to take a statement in its plain sense. These four reasons are the following: (1) If sense perception rejects the plain sense of the passage, as in the statement, ‘And the man called his wife’s name Eve; because she was the mother of all living’ (Gen 3:20), seeing that we witness the fact that ox and lion are not the children of woman so that it is necessary for us to believe that the statement refers only to man; (2) in case Reason repudiates it, as in the statement, ‘For the Lord thy God is a devouring fire, a jealous God’ (Deut 4: 24), seeing that the fire is something created, required for use and extinguishable; it is, therefore, not permitted, from the point of view of Reason, to assume that God should be like it; therefore, follows that we must understand the statement in an elliptical sense, namely, that God’s punishment is like a devouring fire, in the same way it says, ‘For all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of My jealousy’ (Zeph 3: 8); (3) in case there exists some clear text which renders the plain meaning of a passage impossible; it then follows that this clear text should be used to interpret the text which is not clear, as in the statement, ‘Ye shall not try the Lord your God, as ye tried Him in Massah’ (Deut 6: 16), and it is further said, ‘And try Me now herewith – if I will not open you the windows of heaven’ (Mal 3: 10). Both statements agree in this respect, that one should not try our Lord as to whether or not He is able to do a certain thing, after the manner
of those of whom it was said, ‘And they tried God in their hearts by asking food for their craving; yea, they spoke against God, they said: “Can God prepare a table in the wilderness?”’ (Ps 78: 18-19). Of these it is said, ‘As ye tried Him in Massah’. But man may try the power of his Lord as to whether or not He is able to produce a sign and miracle for him, in the same way as Gideon asked, ‘Let me make trial, I pray thee, but this once with the fleece’ (Judges 6: 39), or as Hezekiah asked (2Kings 20: 8), and others besides them, which is permissible; (4) if to the statement of Scripture is attached some tradition which modifies it, we must interpret the passage in conformity with the reliable tradition, as in the case of the tradition that flogging consists of 39 stripes, although it is written ‘Forty stripes he may give him’ (Deut 25: 3). We take this to be a figure of speech [majāz]; the flogging consists of 39 stripes, and the text of Scripture mentions a round figure, in the same way as it says, ‘After the number of the days in which ye spied out the land, even 40 days, for every day a year…’ (Num 14: 34), although in fact it was only 39 (years) because in the first year they had not yet entered into this punishment.49

Saadyah’s rules try to work out a balance between two imperatives that were felt by the exegetes of the time and that were felt to be in contradiction sometimes. The first one we can call ‘imperative of literal sense:’ the Bible should be taken seriously, that is to say, it should be understood and interpreted as any text is understood and interpreted. The second one we can call ‘the imperative of scientific interpretation:’ the Bible is true; therefore it must be interpreted in accordance with (scientific) truth. These two ‘imperatives’ correspond to the two forms of “rationalism” mentioned in the previous section. Saadyah’s solution is based on the insight that the “external” or “plain” senses of words are often in contradiction with the intended message in every-day communication as well. When the external sense is not tolerable it must be a “figure of speech” [majāz]; this is the essence of Saadyah’s rules.50

Judah Ibn Tibbon translated Saadyah’s al-żāhir sometimes as nire (“visible, what is seen”) sometimes as peshat into Hebrew. Thus Saadyah’s “external sense” was interpreted as “l literal sense.” However, what Saadyah calls ṣāhir or mašhūr corresponds better to what we have called “superficial sense.” The four rules regulate the way in which the superficial sense can be put aside in the process of deeper exegesis. Saadyah claims quite explicitly that the “external sense” should be preserved to the possible degree; therefore his exegesis can be described as ‘literal’ according to our definitions. Nonetheless, the Hebrew word peshat in the medieval Hebrew translation of Saadyah’s work does not refer to “literal sense” according to our definition but rather to “superficial sense.”

The Meaning of Peshat in Ibn Ezra

On the other hand, Ibn Ezra’s peshat means “literal sense” according to our definition as well. What he rejects in both midrashic and geonic exegesis is verbalism: interpretation should not be attached to the words but should proceed to the sense. Explaining the apparent contradictions between the two versions of the Decalogue (Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5) Ibn Ezra compares words to the body and the sense to the soul:

50 Saadyah’s distinctions and terminology is rooted in Muslim exegetes’ hermeneutical ideas concerning the Koran. See on this Wolfhart Heinrichs: “On the Genesis of the Haqīqa – Majāz Dichotomy,” Studia Islamica 49 (1984): 112-140.
Know that the words are like bodies and the senses are like souls and the body is an instrument for the soul. Therefore, it is the custom [mishpat] of all the sages in every language that they preserve the meanings but they do not hesitate to change the words if the meaning is the same.51

Consequently, Ibn Ezra argues that the differences between the two versions of the Decalogue are not real contradictions: they pertain only to the wording, not to the sense. In fact, the “sense” of a text can be made of more than one layer. Commenting on certain anthropomorphisms in the Bible Ibn Ezra seems to presuppose a distinction between the poetic imagery and the proper sense of the text:

“And God said” (Gen 6: 7) to his heart. Or he said to the angels; and some people are of the opinion that [God said] to Noah. I think the correct [interpretation] is that the phrase is connected to the “his heart” appearing in the previous verse (Gen 6: 6).52

Ibn Ezra tries to identify the poetic image lying behind the wording of the text (God’s speaking to his heart) and he maintains the interpretation consistently in Genesis 6: 6-7. He rejects to take the word “heart” to refer to Noah as is done in midrashic exegesis. At the same time he makes it clear that the poetic image itself is not to be taken “literally.” God has no heart in the literal sense and He is never in doubt about what to do, thus He does not “speak to his heart” even in the sense of deliberation: “It is well-known that [God] is no man who changes his mind – but the Torah speaks human language.”53

The talmudic adage “the Torah speaks human language” meant for Ibn Ezra a license to point out frankly and openly the anthropomorphic poetic images used in the Bible to depict God and also to take the anthropomorphic expressions to be no more than poetic imagery.54

Both the poetic imagery and the actual message lie beyond the surface of the wording. Grasping the peshat of the text meant for Ibn Ezra both the discovery of the poetic images and the proper or scientific understanding of the realities signified by them. Peshat was not the body but the soul: not the superficial meaning of the words but the decoded sense of the text.

Just like in Saadyah gaon, the route to the true meaning of the text led through apparent contradictions. The sense emerges out of the solution of a series of contradictions between Scripture and common sense or scientific truth or inner contradictions between biblical passages. However, what Ibn Ezra calls peshat is not the starting point that can and should be modified when we solve the contradictions but the result of the solution. Ibn Ezra’s exegesis is obviously based on Saadyah’s tradition; but the terminologies used by the two authors are quite different.

“External Sense” in Maimonides

51 Long Commentary on Exodus 20: 1.
52 Short Commentary on Genesis 6: 7.
54 In his excellent study Mordechai Z. Cohen characterized Ibn Ezra’s position as a “non-semantic approach to metaphor.” Cohen writes, “On this view, the language of a metaphorical statement retains its literal sense, which is its only valid semantic construal, whereas metaphorical ‘meaning’ is a function of the speaker’s meaning or intent, or perhaps an idea that the metaphor – taken literally – calls to mind indirectly.” (Cf. Cohen, Three Approaches to Metaphor, 68-69) He contrasts Ibn Ezra’s approach to that of Saadyah gaon in a very persuasive way and points to the tenth-century Judah Ibn Qurays as the earliest Jewish author holding views similar to Ibn Ezra’s ones about the theological imagery of the Hebrew Bible (ibid., 70-74).
Maimonides was also greatly indebted to Saadyah’s four rules. However, his usage of the Arabic word *zāhir* [“external sense”] in *The Guide of the Perplexed* (hereafter GP) is considerably more complicated than Saadyah’s use of the same term. In the introduction to GP Maimonides contrasts the “external sense” of biblical phrases and passages with their “internal sense” [al-bāṭin]. He claims that the “vulgar” or the “multitude” takes the biblical verses in the “external” sense whereas the elite understands them according to the “internal” sense. Thus the criterion defining the difference between the two senses is *sociological:* “external” is associated with the common people and “internal” with the intellectual elite.

Maimonides also makes it clear that only the “external” sense can contradict scientific truth. The internal sense is in accordance with “truth” in a double sense: it does not contradict scientific truth and it is the true meaning of the text. Thus “external” is associated with “vulgar” and “false” on the one hand, and “internal” is connected to “elite” and “true” on the other hand.

The basic example is of course the anthropomorphic passages. The “vulgar” take them in their “external” senses – that is to say they attribute corporeal existence to God. This is false both because it is refuted by scientific arguments and because it is contrary to the true intentions of the text. On the other hand, the “wise” will discover the “internal sense” of the biblical verses and will interpret them correctly.

Thus, it seems, for Maimonides *zāhir* meant not so much the “superficial sense” of the verses but the vulgar misinterpretation of the text. The sentence “God has a body” does not appear in the Bible. When the vulgar accept this statement on the basis of an “external” reading of the anthropomorphic passages they interpret the text. The *zāhir* is a decoded sense for Maimonides as well; however, it is an incorrectly decoded one.

The idea of mental language is working in the background. For Maimonides understanding a biblical sentence meant to replace it with a statement in the mental language. The introductory chapter of GP starts with the observation that there are “homonymous and amphibolous terms” in the prophetic books. The key problem of biblical exegesis according to Maimonides is the correct identification of the intended senses of these terms in every particular context. Equivocation is a property of the natural language (Biblical Hebrew in this case): through the process of interpretation the equivocal words of the natural language are replaced by unequivocal mental concepts. Interpretation is a sort of translation from the natural to the mental language in Maimonides’ actual practice. The vulgar fail to identify correctly the intended meaning of a homonymous or amphibolous terms, that is to say, they mistranslate the text.

However, Maimonides’ rejection of the *zāhir*, the vulgar reading is definite and unanimous only concerning the anthropomorphic passages. In other cases Maimonides is ready to admit that the *zāhir* has some justification. Vulgar people need different instruction than the wise. It is part of the divine wisdom that many scriptural verses teach both an external and an internal sense: the first is useful to improve the life of the multitude and by this to preserve social order whereas the second reveals the truth to the individuals capable of receiving it. Moreover, Maimonides does not claim that the vulgar always misunderstand Scripture. There are passages, in fact, a great portion of the Bible, where the vulgar people’s and the elite’s interpretations happily agree.

In GP II, 25 Maimonides argues that the biblical statements concerning the creation of the world in time should be taken according to the *zāhir* because there is no clear scientific

demonstration refuting the doctrine of creation. What is the meaning of ḥārīr here? “Vulgar misunderstanding” hardly makes any sense in this context.

The problem is further complicated by the fact that in GP II, 29-30 Maimonides proposes an esoteric interpretation of the creation-story. The opposition between “external” and “internal” senses seems to work in the normal way in GP II, 29-30: the vulgar understand only the ḥārīr whereas the elite will see the bāṭin as well. How can the statement in GP II, 25 about Maimonides’ acceptance of the creation story according to the ḥārīr be consistent with what he is actually doing in GP II, 29-30?

I think in GP II, 25 a further sense should be assigned to the Arabic word ḥārīr. In this context ḥārīr means a regulatory principle of exegesis: one should try to save the superficial sense to the possible extent. In practice that means that Maimonides first tries to identify the basic intention of a scriptural passage. The basic intention is understood first superficially; but as a rule superficial understanding is quickly replaced by a conceptualized statement: in GP II, 30 Maimonides does not deal with a “vulgar” understanding of creation but starts the discussion with a rather technical analysis pointing out the logical and scientific implications of the doctrine of creation out of nothing.

In the continuation Maimonides is ready to sacrifice the plain meaning of a number of Biblical Hebrew word in order to maintain the consistency of his interpretation. For example, Maimonides points out that the idea of creation out of nothing is not tenable unless we suppose that God created the world in one moment. Consequently the traditional image of the “six days of creation” cannot be taken literally: God created the world in one moment not in six days. Maimonides’ overall strategy of exegesis is to save the basic intention of the text even if certain details have to be interpreted in a non-literal way in order to achieve this end.

Thus on the level of local exegesis, in the case of particular sentences and phrases ḥārīr is replaced with “internal” senses even if it would not be absolutely necessary on the basis of Saadyah’s rules – Maimonides was no slavish follower of Saadyah. But the general intention of the text is preserved according to the “external sense” unless there is clear scientific proof refuting it – Saadyah’s legacy is evidently present in Maimonides’ exegesis. For example, Maimonides rejects the idea that the creation of the world was a temporal process taking place for six days; he rejects the ḥārīr of the biblical text in this respect. But he does so in order to save the basic intention of the text according to the ḥārīr: God created everything out of nothing with divine free will a finite time ago.

At the same time the distinction between “external” and “internal” senses is operative in the case of the “basic intention” as well. The vulgar have only a rather vague idea of creation in time; it is the elite who are able to understand the conceptualized form of the statement with all its implications.

Creation out of nothing is in accordance with the ḥārīr of Genesis 1 in one sense of the word and it is not in accordance with the ḥārīr in another sense of the word. It accords with the ḥārīr if you take the term to mean a regulative principle of exegesis concerning the construction of the deeper sense: the “internal” or esoteric or deeper sense should be built up in such a way that the superficial sense is respected as far as possible at least concerning the basic intentions of the biblical passages. However, creation out of nothing is not in accordance with the ḥārīr if you take the term to mean the vulgar misunderstanding of the text. Creation out of nothing is far from being a vulgar misunderstanding of Genesis 1 in Maimonides’ opinion. On the contrary, it is the vulgar who are unable to grasp this doctrine and to interpret the biblical text in accordance with it. Therefore, it is possible to say that creation out of nothing is a conceptualized doctrine is the bāṭin, the “inner sense” of the text.

The following remark in GP III, 41 evidences Maimonides’ awareness of a difference between midrashic exegesis and the biblical text understood in its own terms:
And he, who has deprived someone of a member, shall be deprived of a similar member: *As he hath maimed a man, so shall it be rendered unto him* [Leviticus 24:20]. You should not engage in cogitation concerning the fact that in such a case we punish by imposing a fine. For at present my purpose is to give reasons for the biblical texts and not for the pronouncements of the legal science. Withal I have an opinion concerning this provision of legal science, which should only be expressed by word of mouth. 56

Maimonides alludes to a famous passage of the Talmud (Baba kama 73b-74a) where the biblical formulation of the *lex talionis* ("eye for eye") is interpreted in a non-literal way (‘eye’ means a fine paid in money). The context of the quoted passage shows that the main consideration for Maimonides’ preference for a “literal” reading of Leviticus 24:20 was the fact that the literal sense fitted better the “inner logic” of the laws as reconstructed by Maimonides in GP III, 41 than the traditional talmudic interpretation. The word zāhir does not happen to appear in the text quoted above. Nonetheless, it is quite clear that Maimonides was aware of the tension between midrashic and literalist exegesis.

Samuel Ibn Tibbon decided to translate the Arabic word zāhir in Maimonides’ GP with Hebrew peshat. Consequently, for the post-Maimonidean philosophers the Hebrew word peshat could mean any of the following four senses:

1. Superficial sense, that is to say the non-decoded and often confusing and self-contradicting *prima facie* reading of the text. (From Saadyah gaon’s zāhir.)

2. Literal sense, meaning the sense decoded with the preservation of the superficial sense to the possible extent. (From Ibn Ezra’s usage of peshat.)

3. Vulgar misconstruction of the sense, that is to say, a decoded sense which is incorrect due to the “vulgar” beliefs, convictions, and premises playing role in the interpretation. (From Maimonides’ zāhir in the first sense.)

4. A regulative principle for building esoteric / internal / deeper sense saying that the superficial sense should be respected to the possible extent when the deeper sense is constructed. (From Maimonides’ zāhir in the second sense.)

The Ibn Ezra supercommentators just like other post-Maimonidean philosophers used the term peshat in a rather inconsistent way. It makes no sense to look for further rules of their usage. However, the distinctions and considerations outlined above will have explanatory force in understanding the early Ibn Ezra supercommentaries.

**The Dynamics of Peshat in Ibn Ezra’s Exegesis**

Since Late Antiquity many intellectual traditions admitted the possibility that a text might carry more than one legitimate sense. Some writers claimed that a virtually infinite number of “true” interpretations could be “supplemented” to a single text. 57 Thus, the idea

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that the text always contains something “more” than any of its interpretations, and consequently, that there is a certain “gap” between the text and the interpretation is not a medieval innovation.

Literal sense emerged also in the gap discovered between the text itself and the interpretative traditions. However, the “gap” between text and interpretation does not work in the same way in the case of medieval peshat and in the case of more archaic ways of exegesis. For the medieval Jewish exegetes ‘literal sense’ challenged the practice of overinterpretation. A ‘gap’ was recognized between the text and the interpretative tradition: the text says less than is attributed to it by the traditional commentaries. In other words, ‘literal interpretation’ was not one way of “supplementing” the text with further meanings. It was rather the result of rejecting all sorts of “supplementing.”

The dimension of literal sense emerged when the text was freed from the superimposed senses. The text itself was unfastened from the relations and functions that were ascribed to it in the tradition of previous commentators. It stood alone as an independent existent as an Archimedean point outside of the world of interpretative traditions that used to “supplement” it with ever new interpretations.

Therefore, the very idea of a literal sense had a critical force that could be used in different ways. Literal sense could be evoked in order to refute the “overinterpretation” of a hostile tradition (for example, when Ibn Ezra criticized Christian exegesis). On the other hand, literal sense could be rejected or limited as a simplistic or vulgar misunderstanding of the text when its implications went against one’s own interpretative tradition (for example, Ibn Ezra’s criticism of the Karaites or Maimonides’ rejection of “external” sense). Literal sense could clean the field of exegesis from a host of ancient “supplementary” interpretations in order to make way for a new type of exegetical supplements. This last remark concerns the relationship between peshat and sod in Ibn Ezra’s exegesis.

Ibn Ezra had to confront an already existing and quite prestigious tradition of grouping biblical texts and statements together and forming exegetical topics on the basis of them. This tradition is usually referred to as derash by Ibn Ezra signifying the various ways of midrashic interpretations. The great exegetical themes of this tradition were based on a network of biblical quotations. Certain biblical passages were associated because of some similarity in language or content. The actual midrashim were built on the foundation of these biblical statement-groups.

Any reader of Ibn Ezra’s Torah-commentary will observe that a most frequent exegetical activity practiced in this text is the rejection of derash. Ibn Ezra points out again and again that a certain exegetical solution taken from rabbinic texts is “only” a derash; therefore, it is not to be considered as a serious alternative to his own interpretation. In other cases, Ibn Ezra respectfully accepts the midrashic source with the remark that a profound mystery is lying behind the literal sense of the midrash – implying that it is a very serious mistake to take the midrashic source at its face value. There are further ways of rejecting derash without harming the authority of the talmudic rabbis in the commentaries, we need not enlist all of them in the present context.

Ibn Ezra’s new method, which he called peshat, systematically untied the knots holding together the midrashic network of biblical quotations. Much of the old midrashic material was rejected by the new grammatical approach because it turned out that they were based on badly founded statement-groups. The word-plays, associations, analogies and other ways of establishing a connection between different biblical passages (as a first step of interpretation) in midrashic literature could not but look completely irrelevant and unjustified once the “grid” of Hebrew grammar was imposed on the biblical text. On the other hand Ibn Ezra could propose a new arrangement of texts and topics following the results of
grammatical analysis – and he did so. This new arrangement became the foundation of his own deeper exegesis discovering the mysteries (sodot) of Scripture.

**Literal Sense and Epistemologization**

In other words, the reference to peshat, “literal sense,” served the purposes of an epistemologization of biblical exegesis. Ibn Ezra claimed the competence in biblical interpretation to a new style of exegesis on the expense of other hermeneutic traditions. The function of literal exegesis was to restructure the whole “enunciative field” of biblical exegesis by removing an old network of textual allusions and building up a new one.

A process of “epistemologization” in textual studies that took ‘literal sense’ as its point of attack can be observed in other contemporary Jewish and Christian discourses as well although it is very difficult to extrapolate a uniform model for the changes. Israel M. Ta-Shma pointed to the parallels between the debate of the antiqui and moderni concerning Lombard law that took place among Christian jurists in eleventh-century Northern Italy on the one hand, and the development of the Tosafist school among Jewish intellectuals in Northern France on the other hand. In both cases an older exegetical strategy can be identified that concentrated on glossing the individual terms and phrases appearing in legal texts. The older exegetical approach was slowly replaced by a “modern” one that took the whole corpus of authoritative legal literature as one intellectual unit and tried to unearth its “deep structures” by eliminating contradictions, proposing subtle distinctions, pointing to implications, etc.

Similarly, in the case of biblical exegesis, a group of manuscripts found in the Cairo Genizah attest the works of Byzantine biblical commentators from the ninth and tenth centuries who focused their attempts on glossing individual words and phrases appearing in the biblical texts. This exegetical school can be compared to the antiqui of Lombard legal science. On the other hand, Geonic exegesis from Saadyah gaon on attempted to reconstruct Hebrew grammar and scientific-philosophical-theological ideas as “deep structures” underlying the biblical text corresponding to the practices of the moderni. Ibn Ezra continued the geonic tradition but he had a more refined and mature approach than the geonim themselves as has been pointed out above. Northern French exegetes, such as Rashi, Rashbam, and others also developed a way of literal exegesis different in many respects from Ibn Ezra’s method but sharing the main direction of the development.

Nevertheless, there was a very significant attempt at making a “science of the Torah” during the twelfth century, which cannot be assimilated to this model. Maimonides’ usage of literal exegesis is in striking contrast to Ibn Ezra’s practice. Whereas Ibn Ezra systematically “cleansed” the field of biblical exegesis from aggadic “pollutions” by pointing out repeatedly that midrashim contradicting the literal sense (peshat) of Scripture were not to be taken in their literal senses or were simply wrong, nothing similar was performed or even presupposed in Maimonides’ GP.

The midrashim were there for Maimonides; they provided an initial “grid” imposed on the biblical text, defining a network of connections between certain biblical texts or phrases, and offering a set of “affinities” between both biblical and midrashic statements. As

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Zechariah ha-Cohen of Corfu (d. 1440) wrote: “It is well known that the more tsedeq ['teacher of righteousness,' i.e. Maimonides] is more inclined to the words of the [talmudic] Sages of blessed memory than to the way of peshat.”\(^61\) The Maimonidean way of epistemologization took the doctrinal content of the text as its point of attack instead of the literal sense.

Interpreting the Bible became slowly a scientific enterprise excluding and disqualifying “amateurish” methods both among Christians and Jews and both in Ashkenaz and in Sepharad during the eleventh and twelfth centuries.\(^62\) However, there were more than one ways of building up a ‘science of the Bible.’ Ibn Ezra elaborated one possible strategy by combining literal and esoteric exegesis. He claimed quite explicitly the superiority of his own approach to that of others current in his times, such as the Ashkenazi and Byzantine exegetes compiling midrashic works or the geonim of Iraq using rational sciences in an improper way. His work is an important testimony of the process of ‘epistemologization’ taking place in twelfth-century biblical exegesis.

3. Ibn Ezra and Maimonides in the Post-Maimonidean Research Program

In a work entitled The Gate of Heaven attributed to Ibn Ezra in many manuscripts the author introduces his commentary on the Pentateuch in a way different from both the introduction to the Short Version of Ibn Ezra’s commentary (usually found at the beginning of the printed editions) and the introduction to the Long Version (printed separately by David Rosin). The Gate of Heaven enumerates four incorrect ways of exegesis and then proposes a fifth, correct way, just like Ibn Ezra does in the two other introductions. However, the Ibn Ezra of The Gate of Heaven sees the mistakes on the one hand and his own mission on the other hand in a slightly different light.

The four rejected methods of exegesis in The Gate of Heaven are the following:

1. Those exegetes who concentrate their efforts on understanding the implications of certain orthographic phenomena of the Hebrew text of the Bible. They derive meanings from the plene and defective modes of writing [yetira ve-heser] concerning certain words. Talmudic exegesis often uses this method for deriving legal or ritual rules [halakhot] from the Bible. For example in a talmudic passage (Succah 6b) important rules are derived from the fact that the Hebrew word sukkot meaning “tents” is written a couple of times without the mater lectionis in the biblical text.

2. Those exegetes who concentrate only on the literal sense (!). I will quote the full statement below.

3. Sectarian exegetes, such as the Karaites and the Christians who interpret the Bible in accordance with heretic ideas.

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\(^61\) MS Vat. ebr. 249, fol. 23v. This is not to say that the authority of midrashic exegesis was completely unproblematic for Maimonides. However, the problems did not arise from a comparision with an independent literal sense of Scripture but from a comparision of scientifically, philosophically or theologically cogent statements. Some midrashim seemed to be fatally naive in terms of science or philosophy, and some of them seemed to imply heretic ideas.

\(^62\) Similar trends definitely existed in Islam concerning Koran-exegesis. A school of literalist exegetes called Zahiriyya was especially popular in Spain during the eleventh century. One of the key authorities of this school was the above mentioned Ibn Hazm of Cordova (994-1064) who established a methodology of Koran-exegesis that has many common points with Ibn Ezra. See on this Ignác Goldziher: The Zahiris, Their Doctrine and Their History, tr. Wolfgang Behn (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1971) [originally: Die Zahiriten, ihrLehrsystem und ihre Geschichte (Leipzig: Schulze, 1884)]
4. Talmudic exegesis [*derash*] as is understood by the vulgar – not as was practiced by the talmudic rabbis themselves.

Ibn Ezra in his usual introductions to the commentaries on the Pentateuch enlisted the following errors:

1. The exegesis of the Babylonian geonim who read philosophy and natural sciences into the biblical text without caution.

2. The Karaite heretics who reject the authority of the talmudic tradition.

3. The Christians who are looking for symbols and allegories everywhere and who explain away the commandments as allegories.

4. Those Byzantine, Italian, and Ashkenazi exegetes who copy the midrashim of the talmudic period and sometimes invent new midrashim.

Thus the Ibn Ezra of *The Gate of Heaven* omitted the Babylonian geonim (whose mistake was reading in philosophy and natural sciences into the Bible) from the list completely. He put the Karaites and Christians into one group. He separated the category of midrashic exegesis into two groups: the first of which (1) is identified as the exegetes of the orthographic peculiarities and the second of which (2) is the midrashic exegesis [*derash*] proper. Finally, he added the group of literal exegetes to the list of the erroneous methods.

The modification mentioned lastly is by far the most surprising. In the other two versions of the introduction Ibn Ezra announces his own, correct method of exegesis as concentrating solely on the literal sense. Thus it seems that the Ibn Ezra of *The Gate of Heaven* put the Ibn Ezra of the Pentateuch-commentary on the list of the rejected exegetes!

The description of this error is as follows:

And the second division: they go after the simplistic sense of Scripture [pishshut ha-katuv] where one should not incline to. No doubt that they are lying and sleeping under the beds; for many of the literal meanings of Scripture [peshatei ha-katuv] here and there, such as the [divine] attributes in general, teach the corporeality [of God] and many other [problematic things] besides this one.63

The Ibn Ezra of *The Gate of Heaven* describes his own projects in rhymed prose:

I have admonished my heart about a great principle that comes to my mind: to explain the homonymous words according to their many senses, and also the amphibolous words according to their various meanings; and at every place where I mention their name, I will explain them at their place; and for the sake of their honor, I will discuss the truth of their secret: whether the homonymous word or name pertains to the subject that is called the “mysteries of the Torah” [*sitrei tora*]. But don’t expect me to provide a long explanation, [be content with] a short one. And sometimes I’ll tell you only that this is an amphibolous word, and who is enlightened [ha-maskil] will find out many divided senses; and the subject-matter itself will teach the truth concerning each senses; if you understand it well in the first and last verses. Moreover, if I find

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63 MS Florence, BML, Plut 2. 42, fol. 2 r.
something in the words of those who were before me, I will talk about it according to
my understanding.
And this is a great principle of the principles of our Torah / religion; and it is an
asylum-city where you can find escape from most of the doubts. And a strong tower
that defends you from the farfetched beliefs.
Every time I say “the enlightened will understand [ha-maskilim yavinu]” or “who is
not deaf will hear it” or “the followers of God will understand all of it” and “who is
alive let him pay full attention to it [lit. “let him put it on his whole heart”] and similar
expressions, take it and pay full attention to it for it is not in vain that I say it. And it
is there in order to inspire the mind and to help.\(^6^4\)

The Ibn Ezra of The Gate of Heaven announces an exegetical program inspired by
Maimonides’ GP. The terminology (“homonymous” and “amphibolous” terms; the “secrets
of the Torah”) reflects clearly Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s vocabulary used in his Hebrew translation
of GP. The date of the completion of the Tibbonide translation (1204) is a terminus a quo for
The Gate of the Heaven. In other words, the historical Ibn Ezra (died around 1167 the latest)
cannot be the real author of the text quoted above. This fact has been recognized already by
nineteenth-century scholars.\(^6^5\)

Although the authenticity of The Gate of Heaven cannot be defended it is still an
extremely important document for understanding the development of post-Maimonidean
philosophy. What this pseudonymous text tries to accomplish is no less than assimilating Ibn
Ezra’s exegesis to the Maimonidean research program. Ibn Ezra is depicted in the text as a
champion of the esoteric interpretation of the Torah in Maimonidean terms: one has to
identify the homonymous words appearing in Scripture and to find out the correct sense out
of the possible senses in every single case. Biblical exegesis is a process of translation from a
natural language (biblical Hebrew) to the mental language.

Ibn Ezra’s search for esoteric sense is identified in The Gate of Heaven with
Maimonides’ search for esoteric sense. Pseudo-Ibn Ezra claims that whenever there is some
allusion to a secret meaning that only the wise will understand in Ibn Ezra’s commentary on
the Pentateuch this must be interpreted in Maimonidean terms: a key word of the biblical
verse in question is a homonymous word that means in fact something else than it seems to
mean at first sight. The historical Ibn Ezra certainly remarked at many places in his
commentary that a secret belong to this or that passage. But it is very dubious to say that these
remarks concern primarily the homonymous use of words.

To sum up, The Gate of Heaven evidences an attempt at the radical assimilation of Ibn
Ezra’s exegesis to the Maimonidean thought.\(^6^6\)

**Ibn Ezra in Pseudo-Maimonides’ Ethical Will**

Isadore Twersky has carefully considered in a long study the question whether
Maimonides read Ibn Ezra’s biblical commentaries. Twersky has concluded that the answer is
negative. Similar exegetical themes and solutions in Ibn Ezra and Maimonides can be better

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\(^6^4\) MS Florence, BML, Plut 2.42, fol. 3 r.
\(^6^5\) Cf. Steinschneider, CB, 686 [No. 66 s. v. “Abraham Ibn Esra”] and the literature quoted there.
\(^6^6\) Sarah A. Heller-Wilensky has argued that The Gate of Heaven attributed to Ibn Ezra was originally part of The
Gate of Heaven of Ibn Latif, and consequently must have been actually written by Ibn Latif in the thirteenth
century; cf. her “Le-sheelat mehabbro shel Sefer Shaar ha-Shamayim ha-meyuhas le-Avraham Ibn Ezra” (On the
explained with a reference to their common cultural background than by a hypothetical direct connection between them.  

However, in another document of dubious authenticity, in Maimonides’ supposed “ethical will” to his son, Abraham Maimonides we read that the master recommends Ibn Ezra’s commentaries as a basic reading:

And how magnificent and wonderful is, my son, “Abraham, my beloved one,” how he explained, I mean the perfect scholar, Rabbeinu Abraham Ibn Ezra, the five books of the Torah revealing deep mysteries that are understood only by the eminent scholars who are “the remnants whom God calls in truth.” Especially how he explains the verse “Behold I send an angel in front of you” in the weekly portion ve-ele ha-mishpatim, and no man is able to understand his words there save for the perfect ones. And now, my son, believe me, for I advise you not to brother your intellect with the [study] of other commentaries, for he was like [the biblical] Abraham in his age. Whatever you read of his words, meditate over it with subtle meditation.

This passage displays some characteristics of Ibn Ezra’s reception that we shall encounter in the supercommentaries themselves. First of all, it is not exaggeration to say that Ibn Ezra’s commentary is canonized in this text on the expense of other biblical commentaries. You should read Ibn Ezra; you should not read anyone else – this is what Maimonides supposedly tells his son. We shall see that the anti-Maimonidean camp canonized Rashi’s commentary in a similar way during the controversies in the 1230s. Joseph Caspi juxtaposed Rashi and Ibn Ezra as opposites in the introduction of his supercommentary. It is equally important that Pseudo-Maimonides denies the privilege of understanding Ibn Ezra’s commentary on a certain biblical passage to everybody except for the “perfect ones” [shelemim]. Any reader who reads this text as an authoritative statement from the mouth of the holy sage, Moses Maimonides, will feel irresistible temptation to read Ibn Ezra’s comment on the aforementioned passage in order to see whether he himself already belongs to the “perfect” ones or not. Reading Ibn Ezra’s commentary was a sort of exam for the post-Maimonidean philosophers. Supercommentaries on Ibn Ezra might have easily had a similar function for post-Maimonidean Jewish philosophers as composing commentaries on Peter Lombard’s Sentences for the Latin scholastics – although the Jews obviously lacked the institutional framework in which such requirements could be formalized. If you are a real philosopher, please, write a supercommentary on Ibn Ezra. This is the way you can prove that you are “perfect.”

Eleazar ben Mattityah on Maimonides and Ibn Ezra

68 I quote this passage as is quoted in the introduction of Judah Leon Mosconi’s supercommentary to Ibn Ezra: MS London, Montefiore Library, 49, fol. 3 v [2 v]. This passage was also referred to by Joseph Caspi; cf. Wilhelm [Vilmos] Bacher: “On the Biblical Exegesis of Joseph Ibn Kaspi,” JQR 18 (1906): 170. The text is preserved in a number of mss and was printed at the beginning of the collection of Maimonides’ letters (Iggerot ve-sheelot u-teshuvot, Warsawa: I. Goldman, 1874). Against the authenticity of the document see Steinschneider, HÜ, 931. – Another text attributed to Maimonides as his “ethical will” is edited in Abrahams, Hebrew Ethical Wills, vol. 1, 101-117. This text is not authentic either. The two “wills” are sometimes merged in popular editions, such as in Iggerot ve-teshuvot le—rabbenu Moshe ben Maymon (Jerusalem: Luck-Epstein, n. d.)
A strong affinity between Maimonides’ and Ibn Ezra’s thought was felt by one of the earliest Ibn Ezra supercommentators whose work is extant today. Eleazar ben Mattityah at the end of the thirteenth century writes on Genesis 18: 1:

Eleazar says:
Had I not known the place where this sage [Ibn Ezra] wrote this book of his and the time [of the composition] I would have been of the opinion that he saw the Guide of the Perplexed and drank of its water at part two, chapter forty-two.
Indeed, both of them composed their books in the 260th cycle. In the sixth year of the cycle Ibn Ezra composed [his book] and thus he says in his poem at the end of his book: “and I finished it in the four-thousand-nine-hundred-twenty-seventh year – the sixth of the 260th cycle – in Rome, a year of favor a year of liberation for the prisoners.” And in the Sefer Zemanim [of the Mishneh Torah] in chapter 11 of Qiddush ha-hodesh Rabbi Moses mentions the seventeenth year of the 260th cycle in Fustat / Egypt [Mitsrayim], and the Guide of the Perplexed he composed after the Mishneh Torah. And in fact this sage [Ibn Ezra] started to compose [his commentary] on the Torah in the town of Redos near England [anglitera] which is the end of the earth, and he mentioned it at the parasha ba el par’oh. Therefore, I know that this sage [Ibn Ezra] did not draw from the water of Moses [i.e. did not read GP].

Eleazar ben Mattityah’s interest in the chronological and geographical details is remarkable in itself. There was a debate between modern scholars about the identity of the place R-d-s referred to by Ibn Ezra. Today N. Golb’s opinion is generally accepted according to which the place name refers to Rouen in Northern France. Eleazar’s words seem to agree with this opinion; his supercommentary is a further witness to the correctness of Golb’s solution.

On the other hand, modern scholars believe that the Long Commentary on Exodus was written after the Short Commentary on the Pentateuch. Moreover, the year 1164 is generally preferred to 1167 as Ibn Ezra’s date of death. However, there is no doubt that Eleazar’s basic conclusion is correct: Ibn Ezra could not read Maimonides’ GP due to chronological reasons.

In another place Eleazar claims that Maimonides read Ibn Ezra: “Rabbi Moses [Maimonides] saw the words of this sage [= Ibn Ezra] and built the foundation of his [own explanation] on them in Part Three, Chapter 46 [of GP] and there is no need to add to it.”

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69 By a ‘cycle’ [mahzor] the author means the 19 year cycle of the Jewish calendar. The first year of the 260th cycle is the year 259x19+1= 4922 after the creation of the world according to Jewish computation corresponding to year 1162 of the Common Era.
71 1178 C. E.
72 Vocalized in the manuscript. The reference is to an essay on the calendar incorporated into the Long Commentary at Exodus 12: 2 (cf. for example, MS Vat. ebr. 106, fol. 79 v [83 v]) and Redos is probably identical with Rouen. In some of the printed editions Redos is replaced with Lucca.
73 A word pun that cannot be translated into English: lo moshe mi-me moshe “he did not draw from Moses’ water” alluding to the popular etymology of Moses’ name in Exodus 2: 10. MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 172 v; cf. Ben-Menahem, Mi-ginzey Vatican, 35.
76 MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 186 v. Cf. also fol. 170 r assuming that GP II, 6 is based on Ibn Ezra and fol. 205 r where the similarity between GP III, 27 and Ibn Ezra is pointed out. On the other hand on fol. 194 r Eleazar notices a
Thus Eleazar definitely saw resemblance between Maimonides and Ibn Ezra’s views. Led by correct chronological considerations he concluded that Maimonides must have read Ibn Ezra. Maimonides is the chief authority in matters of philosophy in the whole supercommentary. We shall see that the same is true of the other post-Maimonidean early supercommentators as well.

**Jedaiah ha-Penini on Maimonides and Ibn Ezra**

The most explicit statement comes from Jedaiah ha-Penini. In his *Letter of Apology* Jedaiah ha-Penini (written in Montpellier, 1305 during the so-called third Maimonidean controversy and addressed to Rabbi Shlomo Ibn Aderet of Barcelona, the leader of the Anti-Maimonidean camp) summarizes the information available to him about the history of medieval Jewish philosophy. This passage has not received due attention from modern scholars yet.\(^77\) We encounter here the first outline of the history of medieval Jewish philosophy written by a medieval Jewish philosopher:

We have investigated, our Rabbi, the general benefit of science to everybody, even to those ones who hate it. For it is a well-known thing that the belief in [divine] corporeality was very widespread in the previous generations almost everywhere in the exile of Israel from the day of its beginning. But in every generation geonim and sages emerged in Sepharad, in Babel, and in the towns of Andalusia. For due to their Arabic knowledge they were able to smell the perfume of those sciences to a greater or smaller extent that are translated into that language. And due to this they started to highlight and explain many opinions in the Torah, [such as] the unity of God in general and especially His incorporeality, with speculative arguments taken from books based on [critical] investigation.

And the most famous of all of them among all the ancient Sephardi geonim and sages whose name have reached us is the great gaon Rabbeinu Saadyah the Fayyumi [hpytwmy] who enlightened the eyes of the subsequent generations with his precious compositions. Of which we have his commentary on the *Sefer Yetsira* according to the way of wisdom / science [*al derekh ha-hokhma*], and the *Book of Beliefs* in which he mentions the [various] opinions in notes and many-faceted arguments, persuasive proofs and [he explained] many passages from the Torah and the prophets according to rational / intellectual truth [*muskal*] as far as he was able. And this resulted in non-persuasive arguments as well for he even tried to calculate the date [of redemption] with the mathematicians’ and the astrologers’ calculations, as if – God forbid! – our calamities and salvation would depend on the forces of the stars and on the changes in their positions. Even the great Rav of blessed memory [=Maimonides] criticized him [i.e. Saadyah gaon] for this in his Epistle to Yemen, “covered with precious stones” (Song of Songs 5: 14).

And after him [i.e. Saadyah] many of the later Sephardim of whom we have heard followed in his footsteps. On of them is Rabbi Yitzhak Ibn Ghayat.\(^78\) We have

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\(^77\) Recently Manuel Forcano has devoted a long and careful study to Jedaiah’s *Letter of Apology* that includes the first critical edition of the text together with a Spanish translation. However, the treatment Jedaiah’s sketch of the history of medieval Jewish philosophy is short and disappointing. Cf. Manuel Forcano: *La Lletre Apologètica de Rabí Iedaia ha-Penini: Un Episodi de la Controvèrsia Maimonidiana a Catalunya i Provença* (Barcelona: Publications de la Universitat de Barcelona, 2003), 183-184.

his fine commentary on Ecclesiastes highlighting scientific matters and also poems. And during the days of the repentance many people relate wise sayings in his name.

And Rabbi Moses Ibn Ezra, the author of the penitential prayers [ha-selah],\(^7^9\) we have a short book from him called Arugat ha-bosem in which he follows the philosophers in many issues.

And the sage Rabbi Solomon Ibn Gabirol, we have a short book from him on the virtues of the soul based on natural principles.\(^8^0\)

And Rabbi Judah ha-Levi boasted in scientific matters in his wondrous hymns and poems. And we also have the Book of the Kuzar as we received it. It is excellent in searching and explaining the secrets of the Torah [sitrey tora] and the prophets to achieve an agreement between religion [ha-dat] and the intellectual /rational truth [ha-muskal] with all his force and with more [success] than anyone before him.

And the nasi Abraham also called Hiba al-Shurta also philosophized and went deep into the seven [liberal] arts.\(^8^1\) And we have numerous books from him on arithmetic and geometry and astronomy and concerning the secret of the intercalation and also concerning human wisdom and a book on the secrets of the Torah called Sefer ha-adam.

There are two sages whose time is not clear to us. The first is R. David of Babel also called al-Muqammats: we have a book from him called after his second name. And he attempts in it to bring arguments from [rational] investigation for the well-known principles of faith and to refute the objections of the disbelievers. And the second one is Rabbi Joseph: we have a book called Olam qatan from him [treating] the natural sciences in a brief manner with some explanations concerning some of the secrets of the Torah.\(^8^2\)

And among the great physicians of our people Rabbi Yitzhak Israeli of whom we have works not only about medicine: a fine commentary on the Sefer Yetsira entirely built on natural principles and a treatise on “Let the waters swarm” (Genesis 1: 20) [maamar yishretsu ha-mayim] as a reply to a question asked from him concerning the intention of the Torah in that verse. And his reply is based on the foundations of both Tradition and intellectual truth together [al adney ha-qabbala ve-ha-muskal yahad].

Similar to him is the sage the physician Rabbi Yitzhak Ibn Muqatil. We have from him a short compendium on natural science with chapters covering most of the subjects pertaining to that science in a brief manner.\(^8^3\)

And Rabbi Jonah Ibn Ganah the grammarian at the beginning of his great compendium, the Sefer ha-riqma, discusses many principles taken from the art of logic that he considered necessary for his own subject. And some of them are taken from natural science. Moreover, in his book he proposes many interpretations of many scriptural places making them agree with intellectual truth.

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\(^7^9\) I follow Forcano’s interpretation of the adjective ha-selah: it refers to Moses Ibn Ezra’s famous selihot, poems supplicating for God’s pardon. He renders the adjective as “el suplicant.” Cf. Forcano, La Lletre Apologètica de Rabí Iedaia ha-Peníni, 315

\(^8^0\) Jedaiah apparently does not know that Ibn Gabirol was the author of the much more important Source of Life (Fons Vitae) as well.

\(^8^1\) This is Abraham bar Hiyya of Barcelona, an elder contemporary of Ibn Ezra; see on him: Shlomo Sela, Abraham Ibn Ezra…., 93-103.


After this preparation Jedaiah starts to discuss the two philosophers who are more important for him than anybody else:

And finally the great sage has arrived: Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra who is known in [every] gate. He was greater than all the aforementioned ones in understanding the truths and in knocking on the doors of wisdom and in eliminating the doctrinal confusion [shibbushey ha-emanot] in the texts of the Torah and the prophetic books. Our fathers have told us about the joy of the great men, pious ones and rabbis in this land when he visited them. He started to open their eyes in our Diaspora and composed a commentary on the Torah and the prophets for them. Whenever he feels a secret [in the text] he calls attention to it either by a complete explanation or by a short allusion as is proper. Moreover he composed a short book for them that he called *Yesod ha-mora* on the reasons of the commandments and allusive notes in a brief manner. And also [he wrote] the *Sefer ha-shem* explaining the mystery of the tetragrammaton on the basis of arithmetic and geometric principles with a view on philosophy as well. And also [he wrote] a commentary on Ecclesiastes and Job following the guidelines of rational investigation. And also [he wrote] books on grammar proposing explanations taken from human wisdom concerning many principles of grammar and vocalization and the shape of letters. And also many short books on astronomy and geometry and arithmetic and the mystery of intercalation.

But all his books with all the books of the others were not sufficient for the thirst of the enlightened ones [maskilim] until it pleased God to benefit Israel and to rise – for our sake – the sun of the great Rav, the crown of the geonim, Rabbi Moses, peace be on him. The spirit of truth faltered on him and God placed the words into his mouth: “This is what thou shalt say to the house of Jacob and thus thou shalt instruct them to show them the way. Thou shalt not be scared and fear noone for I have sent thou!”

In the continuation of the passage Jedaiah elaborates further Maimonides’ intellectual virtues; he underlies that Maimonides surpassed all his predecessors in philosophy. After that Jedaiah mentions the fact that he read documents from the time of the previous Maimonidean controversy (in the 1230s) when many conservative rabbis attacked Maimonides for his non-corporeal concept of God and many of his followers defended him. Specifically he refers to Nahmanides’ epistle to the Northern French and Ashkenazi rabbis explaining Maimonides’ position. Finally, Jedaiah remarks that the belief in the corporeal nature of God was quite widespread during the time of the first Maimonidean controversy. However, today (i.e. at the time of the second Maimonidean controversy) nobody holds this erroneous view any longer, Jedaiah claims. This is due to the beneficial efforts of many generations of Jewish philosophers, especially that of Maimonides. Therefore, Jedaiah argues, the addressee, Rabbi Shlomo Ibn Aderet of Barcelona, should admit the usefulness of philosophy and withdraw the ban issued against it.

Jedaiah’s historical sketch starts with Saadyah gaon (and he even has information about an author, Daud al-Muqammis, who lived before Saadyah, although he is uncertain.

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84 All the quoted passages see in Forcano’s critical edition: *La Lletra Apologètica de Rabí Iedaia ha-Peniní*, 394-399 (Hebrew text) and 314-318 (translation). The text is also printed in the collection of Rashba’s response (I, 418) with many mistakes.

85 Jedaiah’s statement corroborates by Dov Schwartz’s conclusions concerning the difference between the two controversies; cf. his *Central Problems of Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2005), 119-132.
about his place in the chronology) and ends with his own times. The text is extremely interesting; just like Eleazar ben Mattityahu’s remark quoted before it evidences the medieval Jewish philosophers’ interest in their own history and their ability to establish a basically correct chronology. Unfortunately, in the framework of this study Jedaiyah’s history of Jewish philosophy cannot be analyzed further.

What is interesting in the present context is Ibn Ezra and Maimonides’ role in Jedaiyah’s account. He passes over in silence the fact that his greatest hero, Moses Maimonides, criticized heavily the kalam (non-Aristotelian theology) on which Saadyah gaon’s works were based. (It is very difficult to imagine that Jedaiyah would not recognize this fact.) The significant differences in Ibn Ezra and Maimonides’ doctrine (for example the later rejected every form of astrology whereas the former based his interpretation of Judaism on astrology) are also left without mention. Jedaiyah obviously wanted to depict medieval Jewish philosophy as a unified intellectual tradition. The crown of the development was doubtlessly Maimonides in Jedaiyah’s eyes. However, it is also without doubt that the second authority after Maimonides was Abraham Ibn Ezra according to Jedaiyah.

Maimonides and Ibn Ezra probably did not know and did not influence each other. However, their receptions in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were closely connected. In the imagination of many post-Maimonidean philosophers the two twelfth-century masters taught the same truth, and their works were interpreted together. On the other hand, opponents of philosophical studies criticized and rejected Maimonides and Ibn Ezra together, although Ibn Ezra was much less disputed in the controversies than Maimonides. Thus Nahmanides’ commentary on the Torah was on attack on both Ibn Ezra and Maimonides’ exegesis. Moses Ibn Hisdai a spokesman of the anti-Maimonidean camp during the first controversy relates a (negative) legend about the death of Ibn Ezra: attacked by mad dogs and violent rabbits on the road the famous exegete met a forceful death signifying divine displeasure with his ideas.86

Judah ben Solomon Ibn Matqah’s Encyclopedia

Judah ben Solomon ha-Cohen Ibn Matqah was a Jewish philosopher serving Frederick II in the 1240s. He wrote a great encyclopedic summary of philosophic sciences entitled Research of Wisdom (Midrash hokhma).87 Judah discusses first logic, continues with a summary of natural sciences and then proceeds to metaphysics. After translating and paraphrasing long extracts from Aristotle’s metaphysics Judah treats briefly the basic topics of Jewish theology in the spirit of Maimonides’ GP: Aristotle’s errors are corrected in accordance with Maimonides. After that Judah proceeds to the philosophical interpretation of selected biblical verses from the creation narrative and other books.

So far Judah ben Solomon’s work stands firm in Maimonidean tradition: the topics selected and the order reflects clearly Maimonides’ ideas about the correct curriculum.

However, the Research of Wisdom does not end here. Having completed the part summarizing Maimonidean theology Judah ben Solomon starts to discuss Euclid’s Elements (!), and then proceeds to astronomy and astrology. Finishing these subjects he meditates on the mystic meaning of the Hebrew alphabet, continues with exegetical remarks on selected verses from the Psalms, and then he proposes an astrological calculation according to which the redemption of the Jewish people should start in the year 1260. Following this Judah

reports some of his debates with Christians and explains two more verses from the Bible. He concludes the work with a commentary on selected haggadot from the Babylonian Talmud.

It is outside of the scope of the present paper to discuss exhaustively the meaning and the significance of the inner structure of Judah ben Solomon’s encyclopedia. However, one thing is clear: there is a rupture in the middle of the structure. Geometry should precede the study of physics and metaphysics according to Maimonides; moreover, astrology should be abandoned completely. When Judah introduces geometry after Maimonidean theology, in fact, he starts a new curriculum different from Maimonides’ one.

Shlomo Sela has argued recently that Ibn Ezra’s scientific treatises build up in fact a scientific encyclopedia organized around three basic topics: geometry, astronomy, and astrology. Ibn Ezra’s theological and exegetical works put man’s scientific knowledge into a broader and religious context: numerological interpretation of divine names, historical events of the biblical past reconstructed as fulfillment of or redemption from astrological fate, meditation on the commandments of the Torah as meaningful devices in achieving salvation all show the relevance of sciences for religion. I think it is quite obvious that the second half of Judah ben Solomon’s encyclopedia was inspired by Ibn Ezra’s scientific program.88

**Ibn Ezra’s Influence on Post-Maimonidean Jewish Philosophy**

An overall evaluation of Ibn Ezra’s role in post-Maimonidean philosophy cannot be carried out here. However, on the basis of some interesting case studies one has the impression that for post-Maimonidean philosophers Ibn Ezra’s legacy was almost as important as Maimonides’ one. Samuel Ibn Tibbon, the founder of the Maimonidean school in Provence preferred Ibn Ezra’s interpretation of Genesis 1: 1-3 to Maimonides’ one in his *Maamar yiqqawu ha-mayim*.89 His son, Moses Ibn Tibbon also used theological formula taken from Ibn Ezra in his commentary on the haggadot. Colette Sirat has already pointed out Moses Ibn Tibbon’s indebtedness to Ibn Ezra’s thought.90 Moreover, Moses Ibn Tibbon is actually the first post-Maimonidean supercommentator of whose works we possess at least some fragments.

Barry Mesch has pointed to Ibn Ezra’s influence on Joseph Caspi in such important matters as the theory of the commandments and the interpretation of divine names.91 Caspi was an eminent commentator of Maimonides but he also wrote a supercommentary on Ibn Ezra. The same is true of Moses Narboni: he is famous for a commentary on GP, but his *Epistle on Shi’ur Qomah* is partly a supercommentary on Ibn Ezra’s Long Commentary to Exodus 33: 21.92

Dov Schwartz has documented the significance of Ibn Ezra in the writings of a neo-Platonic Jewish philosophical circle at the turn of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in Christian Spain. Many of the members of this circle wrote long supercommentaries on Ibn Ezra.93

Moritz Steinschneider has already noticed the connection between the commentaries on Maimonides’ GP and the supercommentaries on Ibn Ezra’s Pentateuch-commentary:

93 Cf. the book and the article referred to in the introduction.

Steinschneider also gives a preliminary explanation of the phenomenon:

Nur wenige und lose Andeutungen darüber können am dieser Stelle Platz finden. Ibn Esra’s Commentar betrifft das wichtigste zur Liturgie gehörende Buch der Bibel. Sein Stil ist knapp, er setzt die Kenntnis verschiedener Wissenschaften voraus, namentlich der Astrologie, worüber er selbst Bücher verfasst, wahrscheinlich auch übersetzt hat; auf diese Afterwissenschaft berieht sich, zum Teil ausdrücklich, die Erklärung des wissenschaftlich gebildeten Denkens, und die von ihm nur angedeuteten “Geheimnisse”, welche auch abgesonderte Erklärungen fanden, sind wohl des Verfassers aufgedeckt worden.  

Auch der More ist an die Stelle eines beabsichtigten Commentars zum Pentateuch getreten; aber die Geheimnisse sind bei Maimuni aristotelische Physik und Metaphysik, welche als Inhalt einer Geheimlehre sich bei den Juden erhalten hätten.

Steinschneider is definitely right in pointing out esotericism as a common characteristic of both Ibn Ezra and Maimonides’ writings. Steinschneider’s remark about the difference between Maimonides and Ibn Ezra’s “secrets” is also a very relevant. However, the commentators of Maimonides and Ibn Ezra did not form two separate groups competing with each other. The legacies of the two twelfth-century masters were combined and often the same persons wrote shorter or longer commentaries on both Maimonides and Ibn Ezra. We have already referred to Caspi and Narboni; Moses Nagari is a further possible example among the early supercommentators, who, besides his long supercommentary on Ibn Ezra, wrote a sort of table of contents to GP.

**Samuel Ibn Tibbon: A Scientific Research Program**

Inspired by Imre Lakatos’ theory of “scientific research programs” Gad Freudenthal has proposed the term “Maimonidean research program” [le programme de recherche maimonidien] to describe the development of post-Maimonidean Jewish philosophy. I find Freudenthal’s idea very suggestive; however, I prefer to speak about “post-Maimonidean research program.” The reason for is the fact that this research program is indebted not only to Maimonides but also to Ibn Ezra. For example, astrology was a standard part of the “hard core” assumptions (Imre Lakatos) of the post-Maimonidean philosophers just like it was for Ibn Ezra. On the other hand, Maimonides consistently rejected astrology in his mature works.

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95 Ibid., 346-347.
There is a very influential Hebrew text from the first half of the thirteenth century in which some of the key assumptions of the “post-Maimonidean research program” come to the fore with a striking lucidity. This text is the *Maamar yiqqavu ha-mayim* (“A Treatise concerning ‘Let the waters be gathered!’ [Gen 1: 9]”) by Samuel Ibn Tibbon, the first Jew to translate Maimonides’ GP from Arabic into Hebrew.\(^\text{97}\)

In the first three chapters of the *Maamar* Samuel summarizes the different views of Averroes and Avicenna about the possibility that water floods the earth completely. Water is a lighter element than earth; therefore natural order would require that water covers completely the surface of earth. What forces keep water away from doing so? This question is intimately connected to the interpretation of Genesis 1: 9: “And God said, ‘Let the waters be gathered into one place under the heaven and let the dry land be visible!’”

Both Averroes and Avicenna accept Aristotle’s basic line of argument: it is due to the movement of the heavenly bodies that the elements leave their natural places. The withdrawal of water from earth must be for this reason as well. In a famous passage of the Meteorology (I, 14) Aristotle claims that dry land can become sea and vice versa: “a place does not remain land or sea throughout all times but where there was dry land there comes to be sea and where there is now sea there one day comes to be dry land.”

Averroes imagines this process as a gradual one. The borders of the sea and the dry land are continuously changing. However none of them ever disappears completely. Samuel reports an argument of Averroes apparently not attested in Averroes’ surviving works.\(^\text{98}\) Interestingly enough the argument follows the pattern of Avicenna’s famous cosmological proof for the existence of God. If it ever happened that the sea completely flooded the dry land then no terrestrial animal (including humans) would survive this event. Now animals are generated out of animals; therefore if all the terrestrial animals died at a certain moment of time no animal could live today on the surface of earth – which is obviously false. Therefore this event did not happen in the past.

Averroes accepts the pre-eternity of the world; thence he concludes that the great flood did not happen for an infinite amount of time. Referring to a famous passage of Aristotle’s *De Coelo* (I, 10) – exposing what is called “principle of plenitude” by modern scholars – Averroes claims that whatever does not happen for an infinite amount of time is impossible. Therefore it is impossible that the sea ever floods the earth completely.

Samuel explains that Avicenna accepted the possibility of proto-genesis; therefore Averroes’ argument had no demonstrative force for him. Avicenna saw nothing impossible in the hypothesis that from time to time water covers completely earth, and all the terrestrial animals and humans die consequently. After the disappearance of the water life can start again on the dry land by a series of proto-genesis.

Avicenna mentions this only as a possibility. However, for Samuel Ibn Tibbon this passage of Avicenna was one of the greatest discoveries of his life. This passage provided him the keys for understanding chapter 3 of the Ecclesiastes – a chapter the meaning of which no commentator had any idea before according to our author:

This is what comes out of the words of Avicenna. And this is the belief of the creation of [many] words and their destructions mentioned by the [talmudic] rabbis, and it seems that this is to what Solomon alluded concerning the “times” saying: “There is time for everything and time for all business.” The meaning of ‘there is time for everything’ is that there is a time for the whole universe […] and this is what he [Solomon] said: “Time for birth and time for death, time for planting and time for

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98 Cf. Georges Vajda: „An Analysis of the Ma’amar Yiqqawu Ha-Mayim,” 137-149
uprooting the planted, time for killing and time for curing, time for destruction and time for building.”

Samuel explains that the pairs of opposites in King Solomon’s sentence allude to different kind of beings that pass away at the time of the flood and regenerate when water withdraws from the surface of the earth. Thus “birth and death” refers to humans, “planting and uprooting” to vegetations etc. Samuel continues:

We have already said what seemed likely to us at its place in the commentary on Ecclesiastes [another work by Samuel]99 […] and at its place I gave a detailed explanation. In my eyes it seems that I invented [this explanation] and it was as if it came to me through the holy spirit, and the [holy spirit] made me feel that they are allusions to the secrets of the work of creation [maase bereshit] and its mysteries that I have not found [anybody] among the commentators who would say the same, I mean, concerning the “times” [of Ecclesiastes 3], except for vanities or figurative interpretations. And one of my innovations in the explanation [of these verses] is the saying about the pair “time for silence and time for speech” that possibly alludes to the creation of the worlds and their destruction. And for three months from today I was investigating the Bereshit rabba to see whether the [talmudic] rabbis also alluded to [the same thing] at the verses of the creation narrative [maase bereshit], so finally I have decided to compose a book in which I shall allude to all the secrets of the Torah and all its mysteries. I will go through all its verses one after the other, and at the verses where I feel that there is some secret in it, that is to say, there is both obvious and hidden [sense] I will write about it, “this verse has a secret in its chamber” and sometimes I will not write more, and sometimes I will allude to the matter of the secret, and sometimes I will write that its secret is to be found in the verse before or after. And I have called [this book] Ner ha-hofes [“The searching lamp”], for my intention is to search with it through all the interior chambers be it the interior chamber of an individual or the interior chamber of the Torah. […] and I have already started it [i.e. to write the book].100

In the continuation of the quotation Samuel relates that a certain passage of the Bereshit rabba might contain an allusion to the fact that King Solomon indeed spoke about the periodic destruction and reconstruction of the world in Ecclesiastes 3.

I think the quoted passage reveals a lot about the élan of medieval Jewish philosophy. What makes Samuel Ibn Tibbon so much exited that he even ventures to say that he received a revelation from the holy spirit is not the fact that he managed to understand the arguments of two philosophers – Avicenna and Averroes – but that he discovered the original meaning of a certain chapter of the Bible. He does not proceed to discuss whether proto-genesis is possible or not, whether Avicenna or Averroes was right in the debate. He proceeds to identify the philosophers’ position as the original meaning of certain biblical or rabbinic texts.

Furthermore, Samuel announces a plan that can be described as a “scientific research program.” As we shall see, virtually all post-Maimonidean Jewish philosophers shared interest in a version of this research-program. What they wanted to discover was the philosophic and scientific message of ancient Jewish texts, the Bible and talmudic literature. It was more important to know what Moses’ or King Solomon’s or Rabbi Akiva’s position was

100 Samuel Ibn Tibbon, Maamar, 9-10.
in a certain philosophical debate than to determine the true solution on purely theoretical grounds.

Ibn Ezra’s commentary on the Pentateuch was read and interpreted in the context of this scientific research program. Ibn Ezra’s commentary was partly used as a key for revealing the esoteric / scientific intentions of certain biblical passages and partly as a sacred text in its own right teaching esoteric truth under the garb of grammatical and exegetical comments. More details of these phenomena will be described in the subsequent chapters.

“The whole history of Jewish medieval thought revolves about the personality of Maimonides,” writes Colette Sirat at the beginning of the chapter on Maimonides in her famous book.101 Perhaps, the image of the circle should be replaced by that of an ellipse with two focal points: Maimonides and Ibn Ezra. Needless to say, this image has relevance only for post-Maimonidean philosophy; it would be a great mistake to see in Saadyah gaon, Solomon Ibn Gabirol, Judah ha-Levi, Ibrahim Ibn Daud and other twelfth-century Jewish thinkers nothing more than predecessors of Maimonides and Ibn Ezra.

Flashes of Illumination

Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s exclamation concerning his discovery recalls a famous passage in the introductory chapter of Maimonides’ GP about the nature of esoteric knowledge:

You should not think that these great secrets are fully and completely known to anyone among us. They are not. But sometimes truth flashes out to us so that we think that it is a day, and then matter and habit in their various forms conceal it so that we find ourselves again in an obscure night, almost as we were at first. We are like someone in a very dark night over whom lightning flashes time and time again. Among us there is one for whom the lightning flashes time and time again, so that he is always, as it were, in unceasing light. Thus night appears to him as day. […] Among them there is one to whom the lightning flashes only once in the whole of his night […] Thereafter comes he who does not attain a degree in which his darkness is illumined by any lightning flash. It is illumined, however, by a polished body or something of that kind, stones or something else that give light in the darkness of the night. And even this small night that shines over us is not always there, but flashes and is hidden again, as if it were the flaming sword which turned every way [Genesis 3:24]. It is in accord with these states that the degrees of the perfect vary.102

Although Samuel does not allude to this passage of GP in the text quoted above, it is obvious enough that his great discovery came to him in a “flash of illumination” – or, at least, this is the impression made by the text.

How are these “flashes of illumination” to be interpreted? A remarkable account of a similar phenomenon can be found in a book by a twentieth-century philosopher. I mean Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s unfinished masterpiece, Le Visible et l’Invisible. Analyzing a celebrated passage from Proust’s À la recherche du temps perdu, in which Swann experiences a sort of illumination while listening to the “petite phrase” from the Vinteuil-sonata, Merleau-Ponty writes:

Avec la première vision le premier contact, le premier plaisir, il y a initiation, c’est-à-dire, non pas position d’un contenu, mais ouverture d’une dimension qui ne pourra

plus être refermée, établissement d’un niveau par rapport auquel désormais toute autre expérience sera repérée. L’idée est ce niveau, cette dimension, non pas donc un invisible de fait, comme un objet caché derrière un autre, et non pas un invisible absolu, qui n’aurait rien à faire avec le visible, mais l’invisible de ce monde, celui qui l’habite, le soutient et le rend visible, sa possibilité intérieure et propre, l’Être de cet étant. À l’instant où l’on dit “lumière,” à l’instant où les musiciens arrivent à la “petite phrase,” il n’y a nulle lacune en moi; ce que je vis est aussi “consistant,” aussi “explicite,” que pourrait l’être une pensée positive – beaucoup plus même: une pensée positive est ce qu’elle est, mais, précisément, n’est que cela, et dans cette mesure elle ne peut nous fixer. Déjà la volubilité de l’esprit le mène ailleurs. Les idées musicales ou sensibles, précisément parce qu’elles sont négativité ou absence circonscrite, nous ne les possédons pas, elles nous possèdent. Ce n’est plus l’exécutant qui produit ou reproduit la sonate: il se sent, et les autres le sentent, au service de la sonate, c’est elle qui chante à travers lui, ou qui crie si brusquement qu’il doit “se précipiter sur son archet” pour la suivre. Et ces tourbillons ouverts dans le monde sonore n’en font enfin qu’un seul où les idées s’ajustent l’une à l’autre. “Jamais le langage parlé ne fut si inflexiblement nécessaire, ne connut à ce point la pertinence des questions, l’évidence des réponses.” L’être invisible et, pour ainsi dire, faible est seul capable de cette texture serrée. Il y a une idéalité rigoureuse dans des expériences qui sont expériences de la chair: les moments de la sonate, les fragments du champ lumineux, adhèrent l’un à l’autre par une cohésion sans concept, qui est du même type que le cohésion des parties de mon corps, ou celle de mon corps et du monde. 103

What Samuel Ibn Tibbon describes in the passages quoted above is not understanding a proposition but experiencing the presence of an idea under the veil of words, namely the words of King Solomon in Ecclesiastes. A “cohésion sans concept” is identified between the theoretical position expounded by Avicenna and the biblical text. This non-conceptual cohesion is the basis of knowledge, or rather the basis of the ‘knowable,’ that is to say, of the things that may become objects of knowledge. It opens up a “new dimension to be closed never more” pregnant with possibilities, new directions to be explored, new facts to be discovered. Samuel’s decision to compose a book on the esoteric senses of biblical and rabbinic texts, his decision to launch a “scientific research program” is inspired by the new “dimension” that was opened up to him not through argumentation but through “initiation.”

Samuel describes a state of possession at the moment of discovery (“as if it came to me through the holy spirit”). These words accord with Proust’s description of Swann’s experience and with Merleau-Ponty’s analysis (“Les idées musicales ou sensibles, [...] nous ne les possédons pas, elles nous possèdent”). According to Merleau-Ponty the receiver of the illumination finds himself enclosed in a system of non-conceptual cohesion. In other words, the receiver in the experience does not function as an abstract ‘subject’ that observes the extra-mental reality around him, but rather as a ‘participant’ in an event that takes place independently of him and which, nonetheless, integrates him into its own structure. 104 Hence the feeling of being possessed and hence the feeling of encountering an idea “in flesh” which amounts to encountering a truth that cannot be denied or questioned. 105

104 Cf. the whole chapter “L’entrelacs – Le chiasme” which focuses on this issue; Merleau-Ponty, Le Visible et l’Invisible, 170-201.
105 For example, to prove God’s existence is not the same thing as to realize the divine presence, that is to say, to realize the fact that God is present right here and now. The first case can be described as an activity of a subject that observes, describes, analyzes, and by this, controls and judges a world of extra-mental objects. In the second case the subject finds itself enrolled in a situation (God’s presence) that is not dependent on the subject’s own activities and that cannot be avoided or eliminated. Needless to say, argumentative proofs for God’s existence do
The experience of ‘reality,’ the experience of ‘truth,’ the experience that renders a certain kind of knowledge credible and relevant is situated at the level of such non-conceptual cohesions between philosophical-scientific statements and biblical statements. What is at stake here is “l’expérience nue de l’ordre” which is “plus solide, plus archaïque, moins douteuse, toujours plus «vraie» que les théories qui essaient de leur donner une forme explicite, une application exhaustive, ou un fondement philosophique.” The actual theories, for example, the theory that certain biblical verses have ‘secret’ senses, or that Aristotle learnt philosophy from the biblical prophets, etc., are built on the foundation of these non-conceptual cohesions that support them and render them relevant and credible.

Why Not Leo Strauss

As soon as these non-conceptual cohesions cease to exist, the theories themselves lose their relevance and credibility. Modern readers from Spinoza’s time on wonder how anyone could ever think seriously that “King Solomon’s opinion” was the same as “Avicenna’s opinion,” how anybody could ever compare such things having obviously nothing to do with each other. In the opinion of many modern readers philosophical exegesis of the Bible practiced so widely in the Middle Ages is on the wrong track; it is hardly exegesis at all. It rather seems to be a ruthless distortion of the original sense of the biblical verses. We can understand it as a manipulation serving ideological purposes, but not as a serious attempt at discovering the original intentions of the biblical writers. Whereas argumentative philosophy as practiced by Maimonides and his followers can still be appreciated by modern readers their biblical exegesis is almost as alien to us as Borges’ famous Chinese encyclopedia that divides animals into categories such as “those animals that have just broken a flower vase” or “those drawn with a very fine camelhair brush.”

One reason for the popularity of Leo Strauss’ ideas of “esotericism” among contemporary scholars is the same embarrassment with medieval exegesis. If Strauss is right, then the chief Maimonidean thesis, namely, that the Torah has a philosophical sense, was meant to be only a noble lie; in other words, the medieval philosophers did not mean it seriously. Thus the honor of Maimonides and his school is saved: it is only a misunderstanding on the part of the naive readers that Maimonides really attributed such strange senses to biblical verses. In fact, Maimonides (or Ibn Ezra) never thought that their esoteric exegesis hit the real intentions of the biblical texts. They distorted the meaning of the

not guarantee the experience of divine presence and vice versa. As long as someone has a share in the experience of divine presence, logical faults in the proofs or other theoretical problems will hardly undermine his or her belief in God.

The distinction between propositional knowledge and ‘realization of facts’ will play an important role in our analysis of Maimonidean spirituality, in the context of which the theme of the “flashes of illumination” finds its proper place.


Cf. the penetrating remarks on the modern reception of Maimonides’ biblical exegesis in Davidson, Moses Maimonides, 352. According to Davidson’s summary “[t]oday, the exegesis in which Maimonides took such pride fails to speak to a single reader and is something of an embarrassment to Maimonides’ admirers.” A recent study on Leo Strauss’ esotericism: Micheal Zank: “Arousing Suspicion Against a Prejudice: Leo Strauss and the Study of Maimonides’ Guide of the Perplexed,” in Moses Maimonides (1138-1204), ed. Görge K. Hasselhoff and Otfried Fraisse (Würzburg: ERGON Verlag, 2004), 549-571; esp. 567-570.

text in order “to bridge the gap between [Jewish] tradition and the Arabic-Aristotelian cultural environment” by “smuggling” philosophical lore into biblical exegesis.\(^{109}\) As Moshe Halbertal writes: “For Ibn Ezra and for Maimonides the ‘secret’ [ha-sod] is a means of broad cultural integration by smuggling a mystic-scientific worldview and identifying it as the esoteric sense of the Torah.”\(^{110}\)

Many scholars, including Moshe Halbertal, refrain from attributing such an overtly Machiavellist attitude to Maimonides.\(^{111}\) Nonetheless, the pattern outlined above does function as the basic theoretical framework for treating Maimonidean exegesis, perhaps on the provision that the process of “cultural integration” or “smuggling” did not cross the threshold of consciousness neither in Maimonides nor in Ibn Ezra’s case. In other words, it was not deliberate on Maimonides and Ibn Ezra’s part to distort the sense of the Bible. They just did it unconsciously or, perhaps, subconsciously. But the key motivation, whether conscious or not, was definitely to integrate Jewish culture into the dominant trend of the non-Jewish culture.

Halbertal’s idea seems to be self-evident to such a degree that the truth of a key premise is not examined at all. There was an “Arabic-Aristotelian cultural environment,” the theory says. The Jews lived in it. Ibn Ezra and Maimonides lived in it. And they had to accommodate their own culture to it. They hardly had any other choices.

But is this right? Ibn Ezra wrote his biblical commentaries in Italy, France, and England. Was there anything we can identify as “Arabic-Aristotelian cultural environment” in twelfth-century Italy, France, and England? Perhaps Ibn Ezra hanged on the culture of his homeland, namely, Muslim Spain. But the culture of twelfth-century Muslim Spain was far more complex than the phrase ‘Arabic-Aristotelian culture’ suggests. And in any case, we can speak only of a virtual “Sephardi cultural environment” that emerged and was sustained by the free will of Abraham Ibn Ezra as a human person during his wanderings in Christian Europe. It was definitely not an inevitable necessity for Ibn Ezra “to bridge the gap” between Jewish tradition and Aristotelianism in the years he wrote the biblical commentaries. One should rather speak about a deliberately chosen cultural identity that Ibn Ezra consistently maintained in a foreign environment.

The same is true mutatis mutandis of Maimonides. Around the year 1190, when he wrote GP not many Arabic-Aristotelian philosophers walked on the streets of Fustat. Saladin did not like philosophers. Suhrawardi, the only significant philosopher in his empire besides Maimonides was actually executed on Saladin’s order in 1191, when the troops of Richard the Lionhearted and Philip August were already approaching Saladin’s empire and when Maimonides already finished the first draft of GP.\(^{112}\)


\(^{110}\) Cf. Moshe Halbertal: Seter ve-gilluy, 40.

\(^{111}\) Maurice-Ruben Hayoun has devoted a monograph to medieval Jewish philosophical exegesis following the Straussian paradigm. In the introductory chapter of the book Hayoun quotes long passages from Ibn Tufayl’s twelfth-century philosophical novel (Hayy Ibn Yaqzan) to the effect that the basic function ascribed to prophetic writings was the popularization of philosophic truth according to Muslim and Jewish philosophers. “La méthode d’interprétation consiste à extraire du texte à commenter toutes les vérités que la raison de l’homme peut y découvrir. Le fonction de l’exégète est de retrouver, non de créer.” (Hayoun, L’exégèse philosophique dans le judaïsme médiéval (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1992), 27). I find this formula much luckier than Halbertal’s one. Nonetheless, Hayoun fails to appreciate the specific productivity of post-Maimonidean biblical exegesis and its spiritual aspects. As a matter of fact, Ibn Tufayl’s text cannot be properly interpreted without taking into account the notion of ‘spirituality’ either (see below).

There was hardly any cultural pressure on Maimonides or on anyone else in late twelfth-century Egypt to accommodate Jewish tradition to an ‘Arabic-Aristotelian cultural environment’ – for the simple reason that there was no Arabic-Aristotelian cultural environment at that place at that time. This is not to deny the existence of intellectual or spiritual compulsions to harmonize Aristotle with the Bible experienced by Maimonides and perhaps by other Jews and non-Jews as well. And again, no one can deny the role of Maimonides’ heritage from youth, his Sephardi cultural identity deliberately maintained in a foreign land. This might have given birth to a virtual presence of Andalusian cultural environment in Saladin’s Egypt for Maimonides, similarly to Ibn Ezra’s case.

However, the complexity of these mechanisms can hardly be explained within a general model of ‘cultural integration.’ The role of ‘Arabic-Aristotelian culture’ within the majority’s culture, that is to say, within Islamic-Arabic civilization, was never so secure and self-evident that Jews living in Muslim lands would ever be left with no choice but to accommodate their tradition to it. In other words, an element of free choice by human persons, such as Ibn Ezra and Maimonides, cannot be ignored in the birth of Jewish Aristotelianism. Aristotle was a chosen authority from among many other possibilities.

We can even consider the possibility that Aristotle was preferred to other available options because his philosophy was found compatible with the “secrets” of the Bible. Not the Bible was distorted in order to bring closer Jewish tradition to a prevailing Aristotelian cultural environment, but, on the contrary, an Aristotelian cultural environment came finally into being within Jewish tradition because of the congruence recognized between Aristotle’s teachings and the esoteric sense of certain biblical passages. This was the reason for the interest in Aristotle’s work and the motivation for intensive study of Aristotelian texts by Jewish intellectual circles. And these activities formed ultimately an ‘Arabic-Aristotelian culture’ within the tenets of Judaism. The process started in the twelfth century and reached its zenith in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, at a time, when ‘Arabic-Aristotelian philosophy’ had declined for a long time within the Muslim world itself.

To sum up, in my opinion, it is better to get used to the idea that medieval Jewish philosophers actually meant what they said concerning the philosophical sense of the Bible – no matter how absurd their ideas might seem according to our standard of exegesis. Attempts at explaining them away in terms of deliberate or unconscious strategies to assimilate Judaism to a supposedly dominant Aristotelian culture are not convincing.

Michel Foucault’s various studies offer a number of similar cases for “shifts” and “mutations” in the history of sciences and knowledge. A whole universe of problems, theories, paradoxes, and methods, which used to be meaningful and were hotly debated by generations of absolutely serious scholars, may loose their significance and meaning due to a series of transformations in the savoir of a science or a more comprehensive discursive formation. As a consequence, people living on the other side of the shift (not necessarily posterior in a pure temporal sequence) may be unable even to take seriously any of the fields, subjects, and problems on which so much energy was spent before.

There is no prima facie reason to assume that medieval Jewish biblical exegesis would have been an exception to the rule. In other words, there is absolutely no need to explain away the “embarrassing” nature of Maimonidean and post-Maimonidean exegesis by a recourse to Straussian esotericism or otherwise. The reason for the embarrassment felt today about Maimonidean (and post-Maimonidean) biblical exegesis is the fact that the “historical a priori” of this discourse ceased to exist long time ago. The task is to describe the “historical a priori” in question; its emergence, its transformations, and its disappearance. However,

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113 On the concept of ‘historical a priori’ see Foucault, *Les mots et les choses*, 11-14; and *The Archeology of Knowledge*, 118-131.
Straussian scholarship does not deal with this field of problems. It concentrates its efforts on decoding the esoteric messages of medieval texts instead.\(^{114}\)

In my opinion Straussian methodology does not address the most relevant questions of the history of medieval Jewish philosophy at all. On the other hand, applying a Foucault-styled “archeological” methodology to medieval Jewish philosophy may lead to more relevant questions, more interesting paradoxes and, perhaps, more reliable answers. An archeological research will not focus on questions like ‘whether Maimonides really believed in creation or rather the eternity of the world was his secret preference.’ It will rather focus on another set of questions. For example:

What kind of gaps or shifts or mutations separate medieval Jewish philosophy from the rabbinic discourse of Late Antiquity on the one hand and from Spinoza’s Bible-criticism on the other hand? How can the differences between the Maimonidean schools, Kabbalah, Tosafist-movement, or the German pietists (hasidei Ashkenaz) be explained in terms of discursive practices? Did all of them share the same ‘historical a priori’ and did they represent various strategic choices within the framework of the same game? Or the gaps between them were rather as deep as the one separating Maimonides from Spinoza?

Moreover, what sort of non-conceptual cohesions made up the “historical a priori” of medieval Jewish philosophy and what discursive practices grounded them? What kind of discursive sub-groups can be identified within ‘medieval Jewish philosophy’? Is ‘medieval Jewish philosophy’ a well-founded discursive unity at all? How did these sub-groups relate to contemporary Christian and Muslim discourses and discursive practices? Were there any great events restructuring Jewish, Christian, and Muslim discourses alike? How did the discursive practices of medieval Jewish philosophers relate to other concerns of contemporary Jewish society, such as ideology, power-struggles between elites, institutions, and charismatic leaders, symbiosis with non-Jewish society, and reactions to persecutions?

These questions define the overall horizon of the present attempt. Needless to say the reader should not expect to find an answer to all these questions in this book. I would like to emphasize once more that from the perspective of the research taken here the usual problems of Straussian scholarship (“what was Maimonides’ true opinion concerning creation,” etc.) is a set of rather marginal issues. The reader should not be disappointed by the absence of discussions about the “esoteric positions” of the Ibn Ezra supercommentators and should not take it as a sign of naivety but as a result of deliberate methodological exclusion.

These remarks already prepare the discussion of methodological questions. I will argue that Foucault’s concept of spirituality can account better for such texts concerning “flashes of illumination” and “esoteric knowledge” than the Straussian theories. However, before treating the methodological problems a short comment is needed about the earliest Ibn Ezra supercommentaries.

4. The Earliest Supercommentaries

Most of the early Ibn Ezra supercommentaries emerged in the context of the post-Maimonidean research program. However, there is an exception to the rule: we have scanty fragments of pre-Maimonidean supercommentaries written by the disciples of Ibn Ezra.

S. L. Rapoport in an article published in 1839 called attention to the fact that in the colophon of a manuscript of Ibn Ezra’s commentary on the twelve prophets (MS Parma, De

\(^{114}\) Cf. Dov Schwartz: *Setira ve-hastara be-hagut ha-yehudit bimey ha-benayim* (Contradiction and concealment in medieval Jewish thought) (Ramat-Gan: Bar-Ilan, 2002) which nicely summarizes the common assumptions of this approach on pp. 12-17.
Rossi 393) a certain Joseph ben Jacob of Moudeville (“aus Modapi” in Rapoport’s text)\(^{115}\) claims that he added several explanations to Ibn Ezra’s text that he heard “from the mouth of the sage” in London.\(^{116}\) Joseph ben Jacob distinguished his additions from Ibn Ezra’s original text with a colon; however, this practice was apparently not continued by later copyists: the colons are missing from the manuscript containing the colophon as well. A version of this colophon is also cited by the supercommentator Joseph Bonfils in the second half of the fourteenth century.\(^{117}\) There are further remarks in Ibn Ezra’s commentaries indicating that certain explanations are reportaciones of Ibn Ezra’s oral teachings added to the text by his students (Long Commentary on Exodus 12: 9; Commentary on Psalms 69: 19; 80: 16; 116: 16). According to Rapoport’s emendation the text on Psalms 80: 16 names Joseph ben Jacob as the man who inserted a reportatio of Ibn Ezra’s oral explanation into the text of the commentary.

Abraham Berliner found a further textual variant of the Long Commentary on Exodus 12: 9 in the supercommentary of Judah Leon Mosconi (second half of the fourteenth century) according to which this comment was added by Yitzhak ben Judah, another beloved student of Ibn Ezra to whom he dedicated the Sefer ha-shem.\(^{118}\) One can wonder whether these reports of Ibn Ezra’s oral lectures can really count as supercommentaries. However, Naftali Ben-Menahem has discovered a text ascribed to the same Joseph ben Jacob of Moudeville about which there can be no doubt that it belongs to the genre “supercommentary.”

The text is attested by MS Vatican, ebr. 239, fol. 7 v and contains short explanations on Ibn Ezra’s Short Commentary on Exodus 3: 13.\(^{119}\) At the end of the text we read:

> And I Joseph ben Jacob of Moudeville have copied it from the handwriting of the author [mi-mikhtav yad ha-mehabber] and I have also added some further explanations [qetsat pe{rush}] to his text [leshono] according to his own explanation that he delivered to me when he composed it. Nonetheless, since this is the text of his explanation I have signed the additional lines with two dots in between the words. [What is signed in this way] is an additional explanation from his mouth. But I, the copyist did not find these signs in the copy from which I copied. As I found it I copied it: only the text [but not the punctuation].\(^{120}\)

This short text highlights the genesis and early reception of Ibn Ezra’s exegetical works. According to the plain meaning of the quoted words Joseph ben Jacob of Moudeville was already a disciple of Ibn Ezra when the latter wrote the Short Commentary on Exodus. That means he accompanied Ibn Ezra in the 1140s in Northern Italy. However, it is also possible that Joseph ben Jacob refers to the time when Ibn Ezra wrote that particular copy of the Short Commentary from which he copied the text and added his remarks. This scenario could take place in Normandy or in England in the late 1150s and as a consequence it sounds more probable.

\(^{115}\) “Maudeville” according to Friedlaender, Essays, 166. According to Ben-Menahem it is to be identified with Moudeville near Caen in Normandy (Mi-ginzey Vatican, 82). Further information on Joseph ben Jacob’s role in the transmission of Ibn Ezra’s works: Mondschein, “Shita sheshish le-perusho…” 169-170.


\(^{117}\) Joseph Bonfils: Tsafniat Paneah, ed. David Herzog, 183.


\(^{119}\) Edited by Ben-Menahem, Mi-ginzey Vatican, 77-81.

\(^{120}\) Ben-Menahem, Mi-ginzey Vatican, 81.
In any case, Joseph ben Jacob had access to autograph Ibn Ezra manuscripts and also to the oral teachings of the master. He felt free to add further explanations that he heard “from the mouth” of Ibn Ezra to the latter’s biblical commentaries. He carefully distinguished the additions from the original text, but later copyist did not pay attention to these extra signs. Therefore the border between commentary and supercommentary became blurred in the textual transmission.

In a fifteenth-century Byzantine manuscript of the textus receptus of Ibn Ezra’s commentary on the Pentateuch (MS Cambridge, UL, Add. 1014.1), that Schiller-Szinessy considered the most important witness of this text, we find a long supercommentary on the arithmetical excursus at Exodus 3: 15 of the Long Commentary. This supercommentary is inserted between Ibn Ezra’s commentaries on Exodus and Leviticus. Two more essays are also inserted at the same place: they were written apparently by Ibn Ezra himself.\textsuperscript{121}

All the three texts are also incorporated into Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara’s supercommentary on Ibn Ezra. In the shorter version of this supercommentary all the three texts appear in their entirety. In the longer version only the first half is preserved in the case of the first two texts.

Schiller-Szinessy was of the opinion that the supercommentary on Exodus 3: 15 was written by Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara and the two essays by Ibn Ezra were also preserved by him for he copied them from an autograph manuscript of Ibn Ezra. Schiller-Szinessy believed that Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara had an important role in composing the aforementioned Cambridge manuscript of Ibn Ezra’s original text. He added the two essays and his own supercommentary on Exodus 3: 15 into a codex of the Torah-commentary that was copied together with the additions by the subsequent generations of copyists.

However, on the basis of Rapoport and Ben-Menahem’s results it is much more probable to ascribe the supercommentary on Exodus 3: 15 to Joseph ben Jacob of Moudeville (or perhaps to some other pupil of Ibn Ezra) and to suspect him of the editorial activity as well. In the supercommentary on Exodus 3: 15 we read:

\textit{And now I will tell you an example from the mouth of the sage concerning what he said, “all the numbers are one in potentia [be-koah] and [one] is in all the numbers in actu [be-maase].” There are things in the world that are in potentia: they are going to come into being but now they do not exist. They will be generated only in the future. For example the young man who does not have a beard in his youth has it in potentia, for a beard will grow for him in the future for this is the natural potency [koah hatoledet]. And when he gets old it will be in actu [be-maase] for it has already grown and become long. And as long the beard is black it is in potentia that it might become white when he grows old.}\textsuperscript{122}

The author of this text must have been a disciple of Ibn Ezra for he refers to the teachings he heard “from the mouth of the sage” – an expression we have already encountered a couple of times in Joseph ben Jacob’s texts.

The author consequently uses Ibn Ezra’s terminology and avoids the Tibbonide terms that were created at the beginning of the thirteenth century and dominated the subsequent Hebrew philosophical literature. Thus the author uses toledet for ‘nature’ instead of Tibbonide teva, and be-maase for ‘in actu’ instead of Tibbonide be-foal.

Moreover, the topic itself – explaining the meaning of ‘in potentia’ and ‘in actu’ with simple examples taken from everyday-life – fits better the intellectual needs of Ibn Ezra’s


\textsuperscript{122} MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 15 r. In the continuation of the text similar examples are constructed.
Ashkenazi disciples who probably never heard Aristotle’s name before Ibn Ezra started to instructing them than the late fourteenth-century Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara who could expect his readers to be familiar with these concepts. In fact, for Tibbonide philosophers ‘in potentia’ versus ‘in actu’ must have been a rather elementary conceptual distinction: we shall see in Part One that Eleazar ben Mattityah (second half of the thirteenth century) actually complained about earlier supercommentators who explained those things that need no comment but skipped those passages that they did not understand. I will argue that Eleazar ben Mattityah read and referred to the supercommentary discussed presently.

On the basis of these arguments we can safely conclude that the author of this text was not a Tibbonide philosopher but a twelfth-century disciple of Abraham Ibn Ezra. Consequently, the text must have been transmitted together with Ibn Ezra’s biblical commentaries – as we see in MS Cambridge, UL, Add. 1014.1 – and must have been incorporated into Shlomo Ibn Yaish’s supercommentary later – contrary to Schiller-Szinessy’s opinion.

It is possible that all of the three essays were taken over by Moses Ibn Tibbon when he wrote his supercommentary. He probably inherited the famous library of the Tibbonide dynasty where a copy of Joseph ben Jacob’s edition of the Long Commentary on Exodus might have easily been found. Moses Ibn Tibbon was certainly an important source for Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara. On the other hand, nothing prohibits us to suppose that the latter had direct access to a manuscript similar to Add. 1014.1.

Schiller-Szinessy was not familiar with a Paris manuscript the importance of which definitely surpasses that of the Cambridge manuscript. This codex (MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 177) is dated to 1308, written by a scribe called Elijah ben Joseph for his personal use and is of Byzantine provenance just like Cambridge, UL, Add. 1014.1. However, the Paris manuscript is at least a century older than the Cambridge codex; moreover, it is the earliest dated witness to the Long Commentary on Exodus as far as I know.¹²³

This manuscript closely resembles the aforementioned Cambridge manuscript. It has the three essays described by Schiller-Szinessy on fols. 72 v – 75 v between Exodus and Leviticus. At the end of the supercommentary on Exodus 3: 15 there is a multiplication table (fol. 75 v) just like in the Cambridge manuscript. These features suggest a close relationship between the two codices. Perhaps many other Byzantine codices had these texts incorporated into the textus receptus of Ibn Ezra’s commentary. We shall see that a Byzantine supercommentator, Eleazar ben Mattityah referred to and explained the “earliest” (Joseph ben Jacob of Moudeville’s ?) supercommentary on Exodus 3: 15.

On the other hand, there is another manuscript of the Long Commentary on Exodus, MS Vat. ebr. 38, that was probably copied in the vicinity of Perpignan and might be slightly earlier than the Paris manuscript does not contain the three essays. Not all the manuscripts had the additions of the supercommentators.¹²⁴

The three documents added to the textus receptus will not receive systematic treatment in the present paper. They do not allow us to draw strong conclusions concerning Joseph ben Jacob and Yitzhak ben Judah’s interpretation of creation or about their general approach to biblical interpretation. Moreover, since these texts predate the appearance of Maimonides’ GP in Europe their analysis can easily be divorced from the main focus of the present investigations.

¹²³ See the description of the manuscript in Malachi Beit-Arié and Colette Sirat: Manuscrits médiévaux en caractères hébraïques: Tom 2: Notices Bibliothèques de France et d’Isräel: Manuscrits de petit format jusqu’à 1470 (Jerusalem and Paris: CNRS and ANSLI, 1979), 15 [= “Manuscrits datées, II, 15”].
¹²⁴ Cf. Cassuto, Cat. Vat. Hebr., 51. The codex was written by Shlomo ben Rafael whom Cassuto suspects to be identical with Shlomo ben Rafael who is the scribe of MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 7 written in Perpignan in 1299.
5. Reflections on Methodology

Modern embarrassment about Maimonidean and post-Maimonidean biblical exegesis turns out to be a surface effect of the fundamental dispersion of human knowledge; it is one instance among many other similar cases. It is a central assumption, perhaps a metaphysical assumption of Foucault’s *The Archeology of Knowledge* that human knowledge is dispersed and fragmented into various different discursive formations and no higher concept (such as ‘Reason,’ ‘Truth,’ ‘Humanity,’ ‘Subject,’ ‘Personality,’ ‘Author,’ ‘Spirit,’ or ‘History’) can integrate them into a meaningful unity. To quote his famous words:

In this sense, the diagnosis does not establish the fact of our identity by the play of distinctions. It establishes that we are difference, that our reason is the difference of discourses, our history the difference of times, our selves the difference of masks. That difference [...] is this dispersion that we are and make.125

The embarrassment is not to be eliminated but to be acknowledged with cold mind. The purpose of an archeological analysis is not to revive the voices of the past by making ancient texts “understandable” to modern readers but to describe the dispersion. Foucault’s thesis is that the fundamental dispersion of human knowledge is situated *not* at the level of ideas, texts, propositions, oeuvres or human consciousness but at the level of anonymous discursive practices that delimitate and regulate the ways in which statements can be made. Consequently, an archeological analysis is not conceived in terms of ‘author,’ ‘oeuvre,’ ‘the spirit of the time,’ but in terms of statements produced at certain sites by certain subjective positions about objects, themes and concepts constructed according to anonymous rules.

Therefore, the reader will not find in this book a “reconstruction” of, let’s say, Eleazar ben Mattityah’s “metaphysical system” or a general evaluation of his thought in terms of neo-Platonic versus Aristotelian tradition or original versus conventional ideas. I do not deny the legitimacy of such approaches but this is not the main concern here. What the reader will find in this book is limited and regional comparisons of particular texts that produce statements (not necessarily new and original ones) at a particular site, namely, Ibn Ezra’s commentary on the Pentateuch.

Sentence, proposition, statement

“A statement [énoncé] belongs to a discursive formation as a sentence [phrase] belongs to a text, and a proposition to a deductive whole.”126 A statement is neither a sentence nor a proposition. The same sentences and even the same arguments with the same logical structure can make different statements in different discursive formations. An example that will be briefly analyzed in Part Two is Aristotle’s definition of time that was accepted by a number of medieval philosopher, Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike; however, it did not mean the same thing for them. And the difference did not concern either the wording or the logical structure of the definition. It concerned something else. This ‘something else’ is called “enunciative function” (la fonction énonciative) by Foucault.

The enunciative function is not simply the sense of the statement in terms of logic, philology, or epistemology. It is neither its “psychic effect” on the subject or the community

pronouncing or receiving it. It is rather a specific activity that the statement exercises on an enunciative field populated by other statements. Foucault’s assumption (perhaps metaphysical assumption) is that there is a sphere in between the ‘object’ and the ‘subject,’ which is, strictly speaking, neither objective nor subjective. The enunciative function is located there. Both the objectivist interpretation (in terms of logic, scientific-value, truth, etc.) and the subjectivist interpretation (in terms of psychology, ideology, social interests, etc.) of texts fails to address the specific level of the statement which is neither subjective nor objective.

Unlike a sentence or a proposition, a statement is not an atomic unit of a discourse. A statement is always “bordered” by other statements, and, as a matter of fact, the exact borders are often impossible to determine. As a rule, a statement always reactivates and transforms other statements. Making an efficient statement means restructuring a whole enunciative field. If Avicenna makes the statement X, he may reactivate by this the statements x, y, z of Aristotle and transform them into x₁, y₁, z₁. And the same statement X may transform the statements p, q, r of the Koran into p₁, q₁, and r₁. Furthermore, the statement X may imply that x₁=p₁; y₁=q₁ and z₁=r₁, in other words, that Aristotle and the Koran are in agreement.

Similarly, if Ghazzali rejects X and states Y instead, he may transform by this both the x, y, z and the p, q, r series into x₂, y₂, etc. respectively, and construct a sharp contradiction between them (x₂≠p₂; y₂≠q₂; etc.) pointing out that Aristotle’s philosophy and the teachings revealed in the Koran mutually exclude each other. Thus the single statement X or Y may restructure a whole enunciative field in various ways by reactivating and transforming other statements.127

A statement is not necessarily a linguistic sign, and not necessarily a sentence. Traffic signs, for example, make up a discursive formation, and a traffic sign displayed at a proper place is a statement. A single word, or a personal name, such as ‘Papageno’ can become a statement if it is “colored” by emotions or allusions when it is pronounced in a particular situation (cf. ‘Papageno!’ or ‘Papageno...’). If it is sung and accompanied by music, as is the case in a famous scene of Mozart’s Die Zauberflöte, a single proper name can make a number of surprisingly complex statements (“Pa-Pa-Pa-Pa-Pa-Papageno...”). In the same scene of the opera the phrase “so liebe, kleine Kinderlein” is very strongly ‘colored’ by repetition, melody, and music; thus, it turns the whole sentence into a statement about endless happiness. This development can hardly be derived simply from the linguistic or propositional content of the text sung. Only the emotional coloring achieved by the means of repetition, melody and music gives the ‘active force’ to the sentence that makes the statement in this case.

Anybody who considers the comments above irrelevant should meditate on the following paragraph by one of the early Ibn Ezra supercommentators, Joseph Caspi:

The first rule [of biblical hermeneutics] is to know that the sentences written in the books have to be tasted and sensed slowly and carefully. Just like the great physicians command us to chew the food properly in the mouth in order that the stomach may digest it well, each of the intelligent ones [maskil] has to keep and turn over and shake the sentences in his mouth in order that the understanding of all the things related may be completed in the mind [lit. ‘heart’]. For in this way one can feel what [Scripture] speaks about and can divide it according to grammatical and logical distinctions after

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127 To give a less abstract example, when Maimonides claimed that Aristotle did not accept the eternity of the world on the basis of conclusive proof but on the basis of dialectical arguments, his point was obviously to bring closer Aristotle’s standpoint in this question to the biblical/Jewish one without denying the difference between them. This was the whole “point” of making that statement. It is this force of reactivizing and restructuring an enunciative field what is at stake when the analysis is targeted at the level of the statement, and not at the level of the sentence or at the level of the proposition.
having studied these two arts that are necessary for anyone who wants to understand a
text as has been explained in the previous tractate.\textsuperscript{128}

The metaphors of ‘chewing,’ ‘digesting,’ and ‘ruminating’ were often used in Latin
monastic texts as well to characterize reading (usually not completely silent reading, but
murmuring) as an intellectual activity.\textsuperscript{129} As Mary Carruthers points out, such reading
practices aimed at ‘memorizing’ the text by both emotional and intellectual ‘coloring.’ It has
to be remarked that ‘memorization’ in this context does not mean simply the ability of
mechanical reproduction but turning the text into one’s own experience. “Chewing” a text,
“digesting” a text meant reading it again and again with different emphases, accents,
tonations and emotional coloring in order to get familiar with the possibilities inherent in
the text, or, in other words, to map out the possible ways of turning the text into a
statement.\textsuperscript{130} In this way a text could function as a site for making statements.

Writing a commentary on the Bible or on Ibn Ezra is analogous to the “coloring” of
texts in recitation. The apparently smooth surface of the text is disturbed by a series of
operations that divide it into smaller units, identifies cross-references and allusions within the
text, or posit cross-references, real or imagined, between the text and other written documents
(Moshe Idel calls this phenomenon ‘intercorporeal hermeneutics’ as opposed to ‘intertextual
hermeneutics’) or relate the text to non-written statements and things (e.g. by adding glosses
to words).\textsuperscript{131} Finally, the smaller units into which the text is fragmented are loaded with
senses, sometimes including complicated philosophical arguments, and thus the sentences of
the text are made to state something, to activate a field of statements. In this way an
‘enunciative function’ is put into operation by the commentator. The text becomes a
statement; it starts to say something.

Analyzing Statements and Discursive Formations

According to Foucault the enunciative function of a statement can be analyzed in
terms of [1] a referent, about which it is made (not simply an object in the extra-mental
world), [2] a subjective position taken while making it (not the transcendental or
psychological subject of an author), [3] an enunciative field that it shares with other
statements (something less definite than a theme or topic), and [4] a “repeatable materiality”
that regulates the ways it can be repeated, re-used, re-activated, and transformed (something
less definite than a literary genre and includes also material support as institution).\textsuperscript{132} These
four points should not be taken as atomic parts that build up a statement but rather as

\textsuperscript{128} Joseph Caspi: \textit{Sefer ha-sod [Tirat kesef]} in idem: \textit{Mishneh kesef}, ed. I. L. Last (Pressburg: Alkalai és fia,
1905), 48.

\textsuperscript{129} Cf. Jean Leclerq: \textit{The Love of Learning and the Desire for God}, tr. C. Misrahi (New York: Fordham
University Press, 1961), 73.

\textsuperscript{130} Cf. Mary Carruthers: \textit{The Book of Memory} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 164-174.

\textsuperscript{131} Cf. Moshe Idel: \textit{Absolving Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretations} (New Haven and London: Yale
University Press, 2002), 251.

\textsuperscript{132} For example, when an early Ibn Ezra supercommentator considers the possibility of textual corruption at a
particular passage of Ibn Ezra’s commentary and proposes a textual emendation, he is dealing with the
“repeatable materiality” of Ibn Ezra’s statement. The “repeatable materiality” is not simply the fact that Ibn
Ezra’s text is transmitted through manuscripts (a manuscript is a material support, not repeated materiality), but a
principle of transforming statements by reflecting on their material supports – the usual ways manuscripts are
copied, transmitted, and likely to be corrupted – in other words, by reflecting on the manuscript as an institution.
Similarly, when an early Ibn Ezra supercommentator points out that a passage in the Bible is a philosophical
allegory, he deals with the “repeatable materiality” of the biblical statement. If the statement has been
transmitted to us in the form of allegory, then a specific form of transformation (i.e. decoding the allegory) is
permitted.
principles regulating its activity. A statement \( X \), for example can transform the statements \( x \) and \( y \) by claiming that they are about the same referent but with different “repeatable materiality”: \( x \) is a well-formalized scientific sentence whereas \( y \) is an enigmatic revelation intended for the multitudes in its external sense.

Foucault associates these four principles of making statements with four groups of ‘rules of formation’ that define a ‘discursive formation.’\(^{133}\) These four groups are (1) rules of constructing objects for a discourse, (2) rules for constructing subjective positions, (3) rules for constructing concepts, and (4) rules for making strategic choices. Foucault emphasizes that the identity of a discursive formation does not depend on the identity of objects or concepts, etc. but on the relative stability of the rules for constructing objects, concepts, etc.

An apparent object of discourse, for example, “\( \text{peshat} \)” may turn out to be a superficial unity that hides divergent and heterogeneous objects: in rabbinic literature, \( \text{peshat} \) is not “literal sense” and there is hardly any object corresponding to our idea of ‘literal sense’ at all; in the works of Saadyah gaon, Ibn Ezra, and Maimonides there is “literal sense” and it is called \( \text{peshat} \) sometimes, but there are great divergences in the actual functioning of the object and the term between the various authors, and even within the same works (see above).

Nonetheless, a relatively stable matrix of relations can be clearly identified in Saadyah, Ibn Ezra, and Maimonides: any variant of the object “literal sense of the Hebrew Bible” is determined by a relation to Hebrew grammar, a relation to the “wide-spread” meaning of words, sentences and other forms of communication, a relation to the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible, a relation to theological problems, such as anthropomorphism, a relation to vulgar misunderstanding of religion, and a relation to esoteric-philosophical exegesis. No matter how divergent is the usage of the term \( \text{peshat} \), and the functions ascribed to “literal sense” in Saadyah, Ibn Ezra, and Maimonides, all the variants emerge within the same matrix of relations. Moreover, the same matrix of relations simply did not exist in the rabbinic discourse of Late Antiquity; no wonder that tannaic and amoraic sources do not evidence a discourse on the literal sense of the Bible. On the other hand, for Philo of Alexandria did exist a similar, though not identical matrix (a difference is, for example, that the relations to \( \text{Hebrew} \) text and language worked in a rather intricate way, since Philo’s Bible was the Septuagint); therefore, a discourse on “literal sense” is not missing from his works. This example suggests that rabbinic literature, Hellenistic Jewish philosophy, and medieval Jewish philosophy formed three different discursive formations.

Foucault clearly distinguishes the analysis of statements (in terms of their enunciative functions) from the description of discursive formations (in terms of discursive practices that produce objects, subjective positions, concepts, and strategic choices). However, he points out the structural similarity between the two approaches and does not posit a hierarchy between them. A particular analysis is permitted to oscillate between the two approaches.\(^{134}\)

**The Historical A Priori**

The analysis of statements and discursive formations deliberately excludes the model of treating texts as ‘self-expressions’ of an author or a community or a “spirit of the age.” It addresses the statements in their *exteriority*, that is to say, as something produced at external “sites” according to anonymous rules. *Subjective positions*, such as “commentator,” “spiritual master,” “observer of natural phenomena,” “collector and systematizer of traditions” etc., are taken by the human beings who produce the actual statements at the external sites. But these subjective positions themselves are discursive practices regulated by anonymous rules. They cannot be deduced directly from the psychology of the author or from political, economic,


\(^{134}\) Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, 116-117.
social etc. interests of a community, or from a teleological vision of history positing such entities as “the spirit of an age.”

Similarly, recourse to the “plethora” of ideas lying under the surface of the texts that imperfectly express a supposedly perfect content is prohibited in archeological analysis. The statements are analyzed in their rarity instead, without referring to a hidden plenitude of sense supplementing the holes and gaps between them. The task is not to eliminate the rarity of statements but to find the principles of rarification: why something was said rather than something else. We will see that the reasons are sometimes almost banal; for example, the phrase *nose keli taam* in Ibn Ezra’s comment on Genesis 1: 1 received much attention from the early supercommentators because it recalls the phrase *bet ha-keli* in a difficult passage of Maimonides GP II, 30 – not because of its significance in the original context. In this case Maimonides’ text was the ‘principle of rarification’ for the Ibn Ezra supercommentators.

Moreover, archeological analysis replaces the idea of “progress” or the “inner dynamics of an intellectual development” with the idea of *accumulation* of statements. Accumulation is not an evolution unfolding what is hidden in the arcane of an original thought or problem or act, but collecting statements constructed at external sites according to various models and practices. We will see that Ibn Ezra’s text functioned as a place for the accumulation of statements; this is, after all, what the Ibn Ezra supercommentaries are all about. Still, nonetheless, it is important to emphasize that statements derived from Ibn Ezra’s text are not necessarily ideas that ‘evolved’ out of Ibn Ezra’s ‘original’ thought, nor are they necessarily results of a ‘dialogue’ or ‘encounter’ with Ibn Ezra’s mind. They can very well be completely unrelated to Ibn Ezra’s original ideas. “Reading in” is not an exceptional, but a quite regular intellectual procedure that characterize many genres of medieval exegetical literature. It can be condemned for “distorting the original ideas” of an author or a text; but, perhaps, it is wiser not to take it as a sin but rather as a regular way of accumulating statements.

Regularities of the rarity, exteriority, and accumulation of statements make up what Foucault calls the *positivity of a discourse.* “The positivity of a discourse [...] characterizes its unity throughout time and well beyond individual oeuvres, books, and texts.” It also serves as the *historical a priori* for the discourse, because it determines the conditions of the existence of statements, it determines in advance what can be and what cannot be said. On the other hand, the “positivity” of a discourse is subject to change and it is a product of history.

The most obvious historical a priori for medieval biblical exegesis was the text of the Bible itself. The biblical text determined *a priori* the possibilities of the exegetes, although this ‘determination’ functioned in diverse ways in diverse contexts (it was not the same for, e.g., the Kabbalists and for the Maimonideans). On the other hand the Bible has nothing to do with Kantian a priori: it is a product of history, it has its own history, and it went through historical changes during the Middle Ages. Philo of Alexandria read the Bible in Greek; the *Septuagint* was his a priori. The rabbis during Late Antiquity read a non-vocalized text that permitted many more interpretations than the vocalized, Masoretic text did later in the Middle Ages. Ibn Ezra, Maimonides, and the early Ibn Ezra supercommentaries read and commented on the Masoretic Bible with Targum Onkelos, an authoritative Aramaic translation. Thus their historical a priori was different from both Philo’s a priori and the talmudic rabbis’ one. In the ninth and tenth centuries, when the Masoretes vocalized the biblical text, the *a priori* of biblical exegesis changed dramatically. Not to mention the manifold changes the biblical text went through in various versions of Christianity – where the biblical text was no less an *a priori* of exegesis and other religious activities than in Judaism.

135 Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge,* 126.
The Bible worked as a principle of rarification. It assigned greater value, or importance to certain type of statements for the sole reason that they were relevant for interpreting this or that biblical passages (again, this ‘relevance’ worked differently in different contexts; it was not the same for the Kabbalists, for the Maimonideans, or for the hassidey Ashkenaz, not to mention Christians). Other themes or topics that failed to be relevant for the Bible were often simply ignored. The Bible was also an exterior site for making statements. No need to emphasize the importance of biblical commentaries and biblical exegesis in medieval Jewish philosophy. And a commentary, analyzed at the level of statements (not sentences or propositions) is neither a spontaneous self-expressions of a subject nor a ‘dialogue between the reader and the text’ but a mechanism of re-activating, transforming and producing statements at an external site, which is the text itself. The Bible was also a principle of accumulation. Medieval knowledge grew in the form of textual commentaries and the Bible had certainly the most distinguished place among the authoritative texts.

In archeological analysis ‘Bible’ should not be taken as a catchword for a system of monotheistic ideas or as an expression of a common religious tradition or mentality (which is not to deny that such things may exist). Consequently, medieval Jewish philosophy or theology should not be viewed as the result of the inner dynamics of the evolution of monotheistic thought disturbed, influenced, or fertilized by another great tradition, Greco-Arabic philosophy. The existence of the genre biblical commentaries does not guarantee in itself that the thought of medieval Jewish philosophers developed from biblical ideas in a continuous line, that the Bible was a “source” for their thought in this sense. The same is true mutatis mutandis of Aristotle.

The Bible should be taken rather as an instrument and as an institution constructed again and again at several external sites in various forms for diverse purposes – the Bible as copied by scribes, the Bible as read in the synagogues, the Bible as taught in schools, the Bible as a source of law, the Bible as a model for Hebrew poetry, the Bible as a proof-text in religious debates, the Bible as an evidence of Hebrew language and grammar, the Bible as an instrument for spiritual training or for predicting future. I will argue at the end of this book that the Bible was in fact a “thinking machine” – not a “source of thought” – for the early Ibn Ezra supercommentators.

Reconstructing the historical a priori of the early Ibn Ezra supercommentaries means positioning the Bible as a text (and as a matter of fact, Ibn Ezra’s Torah-commentary as well) in the network of relationships that made up altogether what the Bible indeed was. The Masoretic, vocalized text, and the generally accepted authority of Targum Onkelos were part of this network as has been pointed out above. Further possible relations to be analyzed later in the course of this book are the role of the Bible (and Ibn Ezra) in education, in articulating cultural and social identities, in grounding the carrier of an individual, in making philosophical theories, in ascetic or spiritual exercises, and last but not least, in normalizing scientific practices.

The Archive

Describing discursive formations, positivities and historical a prioris leads to the description of interdiscursive configurations, that is to say, systems of relations between several discursive units. The “general horizon” of the research is called “the archive” by Foucault. It is defined in the following way:

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Between the language (langue) that defines the system of constructing possible sentences, and the corpus that passively collects the words that are spoken, the archive defines a particular level: that of a practice that causes a multiplicity of statements to emerge as so many regular events, as so many things to be dealt with and manipulated. It does not have the weight of tradition; and it does not constitute the library of all libraries, outside time and place; nor is it the welcoming oblivion that opens up to all new speech the operational field of its freedom; between tradition and oblivion, it reveals the rules of a practice that enables statements both to survive and to undergo regular modification. It is the general system of the formation and transformation of statements.  

It is outside of the scope of the present work to unearth the “archive” of medieval Jewish philosophy. Nonetheless, I have an initial candidate for this role. It is “spirituality” – not as a particular concept of religious history but as a general strategy of using statements and transforming them into specific directions.

**Spirituality: Michel Foucault’s Definition**

In a series of lectures delivered at the Collège de France in 1981/82 and published recently in a separate volume Michel Foucault analyzed in details the concepts of truth, spiritual transformation and veridical self (i.e. a trained self that is able to perceive truth and formulate it in meaningful statements) on the basis of Greek and Latin sources written in the first two centuries of our era.

By ‘spirituality’ Foucault means a way of acquiring knowledge inspired by three core assumptions:

1. Truth is not accessible immediately by human mind.
2. Human beings have to transform themselves in order to access truth.
3. Truth itself, once achieved, changes the human being. This change is often described in soteriological terms: truth bestows ultimate felicity or salvation or eternal life on the human recipient.

Spirituality concerns both knowledge and self-fashioning; it posits a relationship between acquiring knowledge and forming the self. The two things are mutually dependent on each other in the model. A spiritual transformation is required first to be able to access knowledge. And knowledge implements further spiritual changes in the recipient; it forms the self of the knower.

Thus spirituality defines a broad strategy for using statements. The human being is constructed as a “repeatable materiality” of statements: just like words, or books, the ethos of

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137 Foucault, *The Archeology of Knowledge*, 130.
a person (or a whole religious community) can serve as a material into which statements can be inscribed. Spirituality is about transforming statements from one “repeatable materiality” to another.

To quote one famous topos of such literature: sentences read in a text must be perceived as “mirrors” through which the reader should be able to recognize himself or herself, that is to say, to evaluate his or her present status in order to change for the better. In other words, the statements of the text have to be transformed from a mere object of understanding into a living force of human life. It has to be transcribed from the materiality of verbal or written sign into the materiality of the self. On the other hand, the spiritual superiority of a master guarantees that his or her words or texts are true as well. The truth of the self and the truth of the text are two possible ‘places’ for the materialization of true statements.

The notorious authoritarianism of medieval philosophy rested on these premises, not on a blind “preference of authority to reason.” One should not be surprised that such supposedly rational thinkers, as Ibn Ezra, or Maimonides, apparently accepted many statements on the basis of “authority” rather than “reason.” The contradiction between the two things did not function in the same way for them, as for the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century.

Reason is an equivocal term. From the time of Descartes and Spinoza on by reason a pragmatic and ethical approach to reality is meant: Reason can define what sort of ethical behavior we should follow and what sort of statements we can believe about the world we experience. It does not concern any transcendent reality. However, in the Middle Ages reason was a road to a transcendent reality that could not be experienced unless a spiritual transformation was performed. We can recall at this point Ibn Ezra’s formula from the introduction to the Short Commentary: reason is an “angel” intermediating between God and human beings. In order to use one’s reason correctly it was not enough to apply correct methods of thinking: one was also expected to defeat his carnal instincts by prayer, fast, spiritual exercises, and strict observance of religious law. Avicenna among the Muslims and Aquinas among the Christians spoke about prayer as an integral part of their philosophical methodology; we shall see soon Maimonides’ statements on the same topic.

When a medieval author claims that reading Scripture is not a necessary precondition of attaining truth in its entirety he does not necessarily mean by this that truth can be known without visions, mystic revelations and prophecy. For example, in the famous opening scene of Judah ha-Levi’s Cuzari the philosopher, who rejects all the three revealed religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) and claims that philosophy alone is sufficient to attain the ultimate perfection and felicity, promises the Khazarian king that diligent study of philosophy will lead to “true” visions and other prophetic experiences. Prophecy was included in the “reason alone” program of the Cuzari’s philosopher.

In this study the main conceptual axis of the analysis will not be ‘reason versus authority’ or ‘science versus religion’ or ‘philosophy versus revelation.’ The key formula will be rather ‘knowledge versus self-fashioning.’ These are the two main poles that “attract” statements, the two general directions of transformations. This initial formula will be further specified later.

Nonetheless, the “rationalism” of medieval thinkers will find its place in the analysis. I will treat ‘reason’ not as a fundamental property of human mind or of Being itself but as the key term of an ideology supporting certain types of medieval discourses. “Rationalism” will be treated neither as a trend in thinking nor as a stream of philosophy or theology, but as an ideology that emerged as common byproduct of several processes of epistemologization.

Rational knowledge was spiritual knowledge for medieval thinkers; but it was no longer spiritual knowledge for Descartes, Spinoza, and subsequent philosophers. This statement I accept as a working hypothesis for the purpose of the present study. I will not depict medieval Jewish philosophers as predecessors of Descartes or Spinoza even if some of their statements are surprisingly similar to Spinoza’s ones. I will always suppose that ‘spirituality’ as defined by Foucault was the general framework of knowledge for medieval Jewish philosophers, and therefore, their way of thinking was fundamentally different from that of Spinoza, unless there is clear and unambiguous evidence to the opposite effect.

**Spirituality: Maimonides’ Statement**

Spirituality is the central topic of the concluding chapters of Maimonides’ *The Guide of the Perplexed* (III, 51-54). In chapter 51 Maimonides instructs his favorite student, Judah ben Joseph about how to achieve spiritual experience:

A call to attention. We have already made it clear to you that that intellect which overflowed from Him, may He be exalted, toward us is the bond between us and Him. You have the choice: if you wish to strengthen and to fortify this bond [i.e. the intellect], you can do so; if, however, you wish gradually to make it weaker and feebler until you cut it, you can also do that. […] Know that even if you were the man who knew most the true reality of the divine science, you would cut that bond existing between you and God if you would empty your thought of God and busy yourself totally in eating the necessary or in occupying yourselves with the necessary. You would not be with Him then, nor He with you. […] Know that all the practices of the worship, such as reading the Torah, prayer, and the performance of the other commandments, have only the end of training you to occupy yourself with His commandments, may He be exalted, rather than with matters pertaining to this world […] From here on I will begin to give you guidance with regard to the form of this training so that you should achieve this great end. The first thing that you should cause your soul to hold fast onto is that, while reciting the Shema’ prayer, you should empty your mind of everything and pray thus. […] When this has been carried out correctly and has been practiced consistently for years, cause your soul, whenever you read or listen to the Torah, to be constantly directed – the whole of you and your thought – toward reflection on what you are listening to or reading. When this too has been practiced consistently for a certain time, cause your soul to be in such a way that your thought is always quite free of distraction and gives heed to all that you are reading of the other discourses of the prophets and even when you read all the benedictions, so that you aim at meditating on what you are uttering and at considering its meaning. […] When, however, you are alone with yourself and noone else is there and while you lie awake upon your bed, you should take great care during these precious times not to set your thought to work on anything other than that intellectual worship consisting in nearness to God and being in His presence in that true reality that I have made known to you and not by way of affections of the imagination. In my opinion this end can be

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140 The absence of such specificiations is what I often miss in the application of the term “rationalism” to medieval intellectual trends by many contemporary scholars. Modern categories, like “free and critical thinking” are too easily retrojected to the medieval stuff (e.g. Schwarz, *Setira ve-hastara*, 12) and few can resist the temptation to see the prefiguration of the Enlightenment in Maimonides and his followers despite the obvious differences. It is not a mistake to say that Maimonides was a “rationalist.” But extra care is required in using this term in order to avoid anachronism. See on this more in the conclusion to Part Three.
achieved by those of the men of knowledge who have rendered their souls worthy of it by training of this kind.\footnote{GP III, 51; tr. Pines, 621-623. Isadore Twersky’s *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides (Mishneh Torah)* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), 356-364 and 509 contains further relevant points concerning the “central vision of Maimonideanism.” The concept of spirituality and the spiritual aspects of Maimonides’ thought are systematically ignored in present day scholarship. One of the few exceptions is David R. Blumenthal who – following the footsteps of Georges Vajda – proposes the concept of “philosophical mysticism” to describe what Maimonides is doing in the last chapters of the *Guide*. Cf. his “Maimonides: Prayer, Worship and Mysticism,” in *Approaches in Judaism in Medieval Times*, vol. 3, ed. David R. Blumenthal (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 1-16. Still, I think, Foucault’s notion of “spirituality” is more to the point than Blumenthal’s concept of “philosophic mysticism.”}

Later, within the same chapter, Maimonides adds further explanation:

The philosophers have already explained that the bodily faculties impede in youth the attainment of most of the moral virtues, and all the more that of pure thought, which is achieved through the perfection of the intelligibles that lead to passionate love of Him, may He be exalted. For it is impossible that it should be achieved while the bodily humors are in effervescence. Yet in the measure in which the faculties of the body are weakened and the fire of the desires is quenched, the intellect is strengthened, its light achieve a wider extension, its apprehension is purified, and it rejoices in what it apprehends

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After having reached this condition of enduring permanence, that intellect remains in one and the same state, the impediment that sometimes screened him off having been removed. And he will remain permanently in that state of intense pleasure, which does not belong to the genus of bodily pleasures, as we have explained in our compilations and as others have explained before us.\footnote{GP III, 51; tr. Pines, 627-628.}

This text served as the basic definition of spirituality in post-Maimonidean philosophy. It exhibits the most important characteristics of the concept. Maimonides emphasizes that a purely theoretical knowledge of God is not enough. Theoretical knowledge does establish a “bond” between God and the human person. But this bond is threatened by the corporeal activities of everyday-life. Consequently Maimonides advises a strategy of purifying one’s thought from such corporeal thoughts. The annihilation of such thoughts is pointed out as a *pre-requisite* of apprehending God. Prescriptions of Jewish religious life are interpreted as building up a series of recipes of mental purification in order to enable the human mind to think of God. And this “intellectual perfection” does not result only in propositional knowledge of theology but “in nearness to God and being in His presence.”

Maimonides points out that in young age one can hardly achieve this “perfection” because of the “effervescence” of the bodily humors. The initial state of human beings excludes the possibility of the apprehension of truth. This claim corresponds to the first point in Foucault’s definition of spirituality. In other passages of GP Maimonides points out that a restriction of corporeal concerns is required before studying theoretical sciences.\footnote{Cf. GP I, 33-35 (tr. Pines, 70-81); see especially I, 34 (tr. Pines, 77) about the “natural flame” of human body that has to be “extinguished” before studying the “divine science.”} This corresponds to the second point in Foucault’s definition. Maimonides mentions that achieving intellectual perfection has beneficial by-effects: one’s share in divine providence is proportional to his or her intellectual perfection and the actualization of the intellect is the
only available route to immortality. To sum up, all three points of Foucault’s definition of spirituality are represented in Maimonides’ text.

Biblical exegesis was conceived in the context of spiritual training: “cause your soul, whenever you read or listen to the Torah, to be constantly directed – the whole of you and your thought – toward reflection on what you are listening to or reading.” In the continuation of the quotation Maimonides emphasizes that one should aim at “considering its meaning,” i.e. the meaning of the text. Deciphering the sense (the “soul” in Ibn Ezra’s metaphor) out of the words (“the body”) was part of a spiritual process. I will argue that the Ibn Ezra supercommentators approached both the Bible and Ibn Ezra’s commentary with these assumptions.

**Technical Knowledge versus Spiritual Illumination**

At the beginning of the quoted passage Maimonides makes an interesting difference between technical and spiritual knowledge:

Know that even if you were the man who knew most the true reality of the divine science, you would cut that bond existing between you and God if you would empty your thought of God and busy yourself totally in eating the necessary or in occupying yourselves with the necessary. You would not be with Him then, nor He with you.

In other words, it is not enough to know that God exists or to be able to prove God’s existence by one of the well known arguments according to Maimonides. Such knowledge of technical philosophy is useless in itself unless it is complemented by an awareness of God’s presence. You have to realize that you are in the presence of God. Prayer, worship, performing religious commandments, and reading the Torah and other sacred texts are essential parts of philosophical training for they are instrumental in the realization of God’s presence. It is by no means a Platonic noble lie when Maimonides and many post-Maimonidean thinkers claim that the philosophers have to observe the Torah no less than the simple people.

The “flashes” of illumination mentioned in the introductory chapter of GP can also be interpreted as spiritual experiences. At this point we can recall Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of Swann’s experience. Meeting an idea “in flesh” means participating in an event where the “invisible’s” presence behind the “visible” becomes obvious with unusual strength. We have interpreted Maimonides’ statement on the “flashes” according to Merleau-Ponty’s outline. In the present context, when Maimonides clearly distinguishes a merely theoretical, or propositional, knowledge of God from experiencing the “nearness to God” and “being in His presence,” the possibility to connect the “flashes” of illumination to the experience of the divine presence, rather than to propositional knowledge, recommends itself.

However, there is certain ambiguity concerning the relationship between spiritual transformation and technical knowledge. Maimonides seems to imply that an amount of technical knowledge of theology is a precondition for the spiritual experience. You have to possess demonstrative knowledge concerning the basic principles of Maimonidean negative theology in order to keep away the “way of affections of the imaginations” in realizing God’s presence. When you realize God’s presence you should not imagine him as an old man with a long white beard sitting on a throne somewhere in the sky etc. There are demonstrative proofs for God’s not being a body or a force in a body – Maimonides devotes a considerable part of

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144 Cf. GP III, 51; tr. Pines, 624-625 about intellectual perfection and divine providence. This passage attributes an almost magical protective power to spiritual meditation about God – and there is no reason to doubt that Maimonides meant it seriously and quite literally.
GP to establish these points. When he turns to the subject of spiritual training at the end of his treatise he apparently presupposes that the reader has already understood and learnt enough of the technical-argumentative philosophy that was treated in the previous chapters.

On the other hand, spiritual training seems to be a pre-requisite of receiving instruction in technical philosophy according to other passages in GP. Citing rabbinical texts Maimonides emphasizes that whoever wants to be initiated into the mysteries of “the work of the creation” (maase bereshit – identified with physics by Maimonides) or “the work of the chariot” (“maase merkava” – identified with metaphysics) has to have firm belief and spiritually rich life besides keen intellect and good morals.145

The reason for this is the difficulty of the subject which might threaten the belief of the young and inexperienced students. When you try to prove the basic tenets of Jewish faith you will encounter considerable logical, exegetical and theological problems. Moreover, since no mortal is infallible your reasoning might lead you to erroneous conclusions during the process of learning. Serious doubts might arise in you concerning the truth of Judaism or the worth of philosophy. A student who lacks the due spiritual preparation might become an apostate or an intolerant opponent of human reason and philosophy due to the difficulties encountered through learning technical philosophy. No doubt, Maimonides wanted to save his readers from both extremes.

**Esotericism: Beyond Leo Strauss**

Technical philosophy can be learnt without spiritual preparation but it should not be learnt so. This was, I think, the basic problem of Maimonidean education. Esotericism was a response to this situation: Maimonides’ main purpose was not to avoid persecution but to reserve philosophical instruction to those students who can receive it without being harmed by it. The rather chaotic inner structure of GP is meant to make the readers’ task difficult – the underlying assumption is that only those readers will have the patience to reconstruct and understand Maimonides’ reasoning who do possess the necessary intellectual, moral, and spiritual virtues for doing so. For the rest of the readers GP will be simply unintelligible. Admonitions to the competent readers not to interpret GP to anybody were not intended to prevent possible persecutions but to prevent the disclosure of technical philosophy to those who might understand it but should not understand it.

Moreover, the difference between technical philosophy and spiritual experience leads to even deeper contradictions. Spiritual transformation can be a source of propositional knowledge as well. Spiritual experiences might play a role in our acceptance or rejection of certain doctrines. Those propositions that are implied in one way or other in the spiritual experiences are corroborated by them. Once you manage to realize the presence of God according to Maimonides’ instructions you will not be willing to reject the idea of divine providence, free will, or the very existence of God. In the moments of the spiritual transformation you will experience the presence of a divine being who is not unable to interfere with the affairs of the lower world.

However, the results of technical philosophy and knowledge gained through spiritual experience are not necessarily in harmony. For example, Maimonides harshly criticizes “the philosophers” for their restricting divine providence to the species in the sublunary world.146 For Maimonides it was absurd to deny that God’s providence reaches human individuals, not only humanity as a species. This conviction is probably derived from the spiritual experience. Once you manage to perform the spiritual transformation and you realize that you are in

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145 Cf. GP I, 33-34; tr. Pines, 70-79.
146 Cf. GP III, 16; tr. Pines, 461. Maimonides’ tone is unusually harsh in criticizing the philosopher’s doctrine of providence.
God’s presence it will be obvious to you that God knows you and cares for you. At the same
time, from the point of view of technical philosophy it is difficult to maintain this position.
Maimonides makes painstaking efforts to define a doctrine of individual providence and to
show that its truth is at least not impossible. Nonetheless, for a student who has never
experienced the spiritual transformation “the philosophers” account might be more
persuasive.

The notorious “seventh cause” of the self-contradictions mentioned in the introductory
chapter of the *Guide* addresses exactly this problem, in my opinion. Self-contradictions are
simply unavoidable in speculation about “profound matters.” Consequently, the philosopher
has to conceal the fact of self-contradiction from the sight of the vulgar and unprepared
students whose faith in God or trust in reason might be harmed by them. Yair Lorberbaum has
argued convincingly that Leo Strauss fundamentally misunderstood the very text of the
“seventh cause.” Self-contradictions were not a means for Maimonides to hide his “true,
esoteric” opinions but the very things to be concealed.\footnote{Yair Lorberbaum: “Ha-sibba ha-sheviit: al ha-setir ot be-'More ha-nevukhim' – iyyun mehuddash” (The

A good example, and probably the most important one, is the problem of the logical
relation between the creation of the world and the proofs for God’s existence. Maimonides
apparently held that the only “perfect” argument for God’s existence, eternity, incorporeality
and unity was based on the premise of the eternity of circular motion implying the eternity of
the world. As he wrote:

> Thus it has become manifest to you that the proofs for the existence and the oneness of
> the deity and of His not being a body ought to be produced from the starting point
> afforded by the supposition of the eternity of the world, for in this way the
demonstration will be perfect, both if the world is eternal and if it is created in time.
> For this reason you will always find that whenever, in what I have written in the books
> of jurisprudence, I happen to mention the foundations and start upon establishing the
> existence of the deity, I establish it by discourses that adopt the way of the doctrine of
> the eternity of the world. The reason is not that I believe in the eternity of the world,
> but that I wish to establish in our belief the existence of God, may He be exalted,
> through a demonstrative method as to which there is no disagreement in any
> respect.\footnote{GP I, 71; tr. Pines, 181-182.}

On the other hand, the eternity of the world is unacceptable because of religious
reasons: the doctrine of eternity excludes the possibility of divine intervention into the natural
order, that is to say, it excludes the possibility of miracles and providence and thus questions
religion as such (cf. GP II, 25). No wonder that Maimonides does his best to refute the
doctrine of eternity. However, by doing so, he also undermines his “demonstrative method as
to which there is no disagreement in any respect,” namely, his proof for the existence of God
on the basis of the eternity of the world.

To prove the existence of God and to argue for the creation of the world were both
important enterprises for Maimonides due to obvious spiritual reasons. But to establish these
claims Maimonides had to base the two discourses on apparently inconsistent premises. This
fact recalls the famous lines about the “seventh cause” of self-contradictions:

> In speaking about very obscure matters it is necessary to conceal some parts and to
disclose others. Sometimes, in the case of certain dicta this necessity requires that the
discussion proceed on the basis of a certain premise, whereas in another place
necessity requires that the discussion proceed on the basis of another premise contradicting the first one. In such cases the vulgar must in no way be aware of the contradiction; the author accordingly uses some device to conceal it by all means.\footnote{GP, intr. to Part One; tr. Pines, 18.}

The obvious example for the procedure described in these lines is Maimonides’ treatment of eternity of the world: he accepts it at least as a hypothesis in the discourse about the existence of God but does his best to refute it in the discourse about creation. Perhaps there is a way to construct a consistent deductive unit out of the two discourses. But the vulgar should not be disturbed by the apparent contradiction in any case. That is why Maimonides omits the whole problematics in his “popular” writings and does not point it out explicitly in GP either. This is all that the “seventh cause” is about.\footnote{I elaborated these points in my M.A. thesis: \textit{The Guide of the Perplexed as an Encoded Text} (Central European University, Budapest, 2002). A shortened version: “Maimonides’ Proof for the Existence of God: A Concealed Inconsistency,” in \textit{Annual of Medieval Studies at CEU}, vol. 9, ed. Katalin Szende, Judith A. Rasson, and Marcell Sebők (Budapest:Central European University, 2003), 29-50.}

In my opinion, the widespread Straussian perception of Maimonides’ esotericism\footnote{Cf. Leo Strauss’ famous essay: “The Literary Character of the \textit{Guide for the Perplexed},” in \textit{Persecution and the Art of Writing} (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1980 [1952]), 38-94. I prefer to speak about “widespread Straussian approach” instead of “Leo Strauss’ approach” because Strauss’ original contribution is far more complex than its usual application in more specific secondary literature on Maimonides and medieval Jewish philosophy. For example, in a paper that I was privileged to hear at a colloquium in Oxford organized by EAJS (\textit{The Cultures of Maimonideanism}, 16-19 July, 2007) Benjamin Wurgaft showed that Strauss’ approach to Maimonides was motivated and inspired by his criticism of Martin Heidegger’s thought and political action. Micheal Zank argues that Strauss’ interpretation of Maimonidean esotericism was meant to be a criticism of modern historical consciousness (cf. his “Arousing Suspicion Against a Prejudice: Leo Strauss and the Study of Maimonides’ \textit{Guide of the Perplexed}” quoted above). Such considerations usually play very little, if any, role in the widespread “Straussism” of historians of medieval Jewish philosophy today. Therefore, the criticism presented above concerns only the simplified versions of Strauss’ thought and I admit that it does not do justice to Strauss’ more complex, original ideas.} is far too narrow and misleading in many respects. The point for Maimonides was not so much to avoid persecution or to reveal his secret heresy (!), but to save the unprepared reader from the difficulties emerging from the difference between spiritual and technical knowledge.\footnote{There is a further point to be remembered. Esotericism was a way of monopolizing knowledge and making difference between aristocratic and popular cultures from immemorable times on. This is the most obvious context of elitism in the case of Maimonides and other medieval Jewish philosophers as well. See on this more in the introduction to the first part.}

The notion of “persecution and the art of writing” has explanatory force only concerning Maimonides’ criticism of Islam. For example, in GP II, 40 he alludes to Aristotle’s verdict concerning the disgraceful nature of the sense of touch (quoted already in a complicated sentence in GP II, 36); he points out that sexuality is based on the sense of touch, and he emphasizes that no true prophet can have a sexual life as long as he receives prophecy from God. The last words of the chapter admonish the reader that something more is implied in this line of argument.\footnote{Cf. GP II, 40; tr. Pines, 384-385.} The solution is easy: Muhammad had many wives and daughters even after receiving the supposed revelation from heaven; consequently, he could not have been a true prophet. Writing down this sentence explicitly would have been a violation of the Treaty of Omar, deserving capital punishment in Saladin’s state. In this case esotericism was indeed about avoiding persecution.

Nonetheless, esotericism is an undeniable feature of Maimonidean and post-Maimonidean Jewish philosophy and biblical exegesis and it requires a description in “archeological” terms as a discursive practice. In very general terms we can say outline a possible strategy for archeological description in the following way.
First of all, “esotericism,” that is to say, statements about the necessity and purpose of esoteric communication, is a remarkably stable and widespread topos of post-Maimonidean philosophy and biblical exegesis. Although there might be variations in the particular texts a ‘matrix of relations’ determining virtually every account of esotericism in the Tibbonide-Maimonidean tradition can be identified and provisionally described.

Esotericism is formulated in an elitist context. A difference between the ‘multitude’ and the ‘elite’ is assumed and esotericism is justified by the necessity of communicating certain things only to the ‘elite’ excluding the “multitude.” Elitism is often reformulated in anthropological terms: the ‘carnal’ people are contrasted to the few ‘spiritual’ individuals. An account of esotericism is related to few passages in rabbinc literature about the transmission of maase bereshit and maase merkava (Mishnah, Hagiga 2: 1). The famous story about “the four who entered Paradise” is also often referred to taking Rabbi Akiva as a positive example and Aher (Elisha ben Abuya) as a negative one. Furthermore, esotericism is related to the interpretation of biblical and rabbinc passages and also to an apologetical discourse justifying biblical and rabbinc texts against the criticism of the philosophers. A reference to esotericism justifies innovations in exegesis and in explaining away the problematic aspects of a text or a doctrine. Sometimes esotericism is justified by the incapacity of human language or thought to give a clear and systematic account about a complicated matter. Esotericism may be related to a general vision of the history of revelation as a gradual unfolding of Truth. In this context esotericism may be the justification for both revealing and concealing “secrets.” Finally, esotericism is related to political wisdom exemplified by the heroes of Jewish tradition: Moses, the prophets, and the talmudic rabbis are depicted as wise statement who were aware of the necessity of esoteric communication and who instituted its most important genres in Judaism.

Secondly, we can point to a number of related discursive practices that lend credibility and relevance to the topos of esotericism. Most of these practices are connected to courtly culture – a privilege of the highest stratum of the society. We have pointed to the role of encoded messages in courtly love-culture above. Similarly, in politics, encoded messages always played an important role. It has been mentioned above that Ibn Ezra composed riddles for his students; thus encoded messages played some role in education as well. The usage of parables, metaphors, riddles and allegories in poetry, a quite popular genre in medieval Spain and Provence, also supported the idea of esotericism.

Thirdly we can consider at least some of the evidences about the actual functioning of esotericism in the practice of post-Maimonidean philosophers. It cannot be assumed a priori that the topos of esotericism was a mirror-image of reality. We have to consider the actual mechanisms of exclusion that attempted to restrict the “publicity” of the discourses we call medieval Jewish philosophy and exegesis. Some of these practices had long history before and were known in much wider circles than the post-Maimonidean philosophers.

For example, to use a difficult writing-system and a sacred language, not spoken as mother tongue practically by anybody, was a very ancient strategy of monopolizing discourses. It was a time and money-consuming process to master the very basic knowledge necessary to access post-Maimonidean Jewish philosophy and biblical exegeses. A candidate had to learn not only Biblical and Rabbinic Hebrew, but also Tibbonide Hebrew, that is to say, a philosophical dialect invented by the members of the Tibbonide family, most

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notably, by Samuel Ibn Tibbon. His Hebrew translation of GP was an inevitable reading for anybody who wanted to contribute a single sentence to post-Maimonidean discourses in Hebrew. Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s “Explanation of foreign words” appended to the translation of GP contains polemics against another translator, the poet Judah al-Harizi, whose incompetence in philosophy was pointed out again and again by Samuel. Poetry was a much more popular discourse than philosophy; Samuel did his best to keep away the poets, their knowledge and competences from the study of Maimonidean texts. His apparent success is testified by Jedaiyah ha-Penini from the first half of the fourteenth century, who – being excellent both in poetry and philosophy – pointed out quite explicitly the deficit of theoretical studies as opposed to poetry in terms of publicity: “If you wish to make a point, put it in a poem; if you put it in a book, it will not be publicized.”\(^{155}\)

Other mechanisms of exclusion coincided with various ways of epistemologization redefining the competences of the speakers and the methods acceptable in a discourse. Such a process has already been pointed out above concerning Ibn Ezra’s exegesis and a closer look will follow soon. Here it is sufficient to remark that insistence on “scientific” competences served obviously the purposes of excluding incompetent people from the discourse. Particular examples will be provided in Part One. “Art of writing” and “art of reading,” that is to say, encoding and decoding messages, emerged in the context of epistemologization.

Social relations also played their role in regulating access to the body of knowledge. Although there were no Jewish institutions for philosophical education at those times, a network of family relations and ‘master-disciple’ relations did limit the circle of possible “philosophers.” We will reflect the role of “dynasties,” such as the Tibbonide dynasty in Part one. Outsiders, such as Levi ben Abraham of Villefranche or Josef Caspi were likely to meet more serious criticism and resistance, if they proposed original ideas, than scholars with strong family background, such as Jedaiyah ha-Penini, whose father was a famous poet, and whose grandfather might have been identical with the author of a significant commentary on haggadot.\(^{156}\)

Some fifteenth-century sources shed light on everyday-life situations in which “esotericism” functioned. In a manuscript of an anonymous supercommentary on Ibn Ezra (Long Commentary ad Exodus 20:1) a scribe added the following remark:

> And I, Sh[lo]mo the s[cribe], wanted to add an explanation of “it has a partial resemblance” [yesh mi-qetsato dimayon – the lemma in Ibn Ezra’s commentary] and to reveal it [i.e. the ‘secret’ alluded to by Ibn Ezra] in order to reveal the secrets of the Torah and to leave a trace for those who come after me. However, my teacher, the great rabbi has discouraged me from putting it into writing [u-mori ha-rav ha-gadol mena'ani mi-li-khtov].\(^{157}\)

The author of this note does not say that he has concealed his opinion out of a fear of persecution. He reports that his master practically prohibited him to put his opinion into writing. This is certainly a case of censorship; however, it works within the framework of personal relations, more precisely, personal hierarchies between scholars, not in the framework of ‘scholars versus persecuting authorities.’ A master denied his disciple the ius

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\(^{155}\) Jedaiyah ha-Penini: Sefer ha-Pardes, 28 as quoted by Cyril P. Hershon: Faith and Controversy: The Jews of Medieval Languedoc (Birmingham: University of Birmingham, 1999), 233.

\(^{156}\) On Levi ben Abraham’s being a “scapegoat” of the controversy in 1305 because of the lack of influential supporters see Hershon, Faith and Controversy, 348-361. Caspi and Jedaiyah’s case will be discussed briefly in Part One.

\(^{157}\) MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 74 v. The manuscript is from the Byzantine zone (Crete?) and can be dated to the 1450s (see in Part one). On the abbreviation sh’h meaning shlomo ha-sofer see Umberto Cassuto: Codices Vaticani Hebraici (Città del Vaticano: Bibliotheca Apostolica Vaticana., 1956), 79.
loquendi (or rather scribendi) in a particular context. The motivations of the master are not clear.

Another remarkable example is a notice at the end of a manuscript of Zechariah ha-Cohen of Corfu’s objections against Nahmanides’ criticism of Maimonides and Ibn Ezra. Zechariah died around 1440; the manuscript was copied in the Byzantine zone some 18 years later.

Tuesday, 5217 [=1457/8 CE] in the 11th year of the mahzor I asked my beloved brother, Jacob, the son of the wise Abraham, the man of God, to give me [a copy] of the objections made with the help of divine emanation by the great philosopher, who apprehended and excelled in divine wisdom, the sage R. Zechariah ha-Cohen, the servant of God, to strengthen and to explain some of the points that were raised against “The Prince of Writers in All Places” [=Maimonides] “the golden tongue”, in order to copy it. And I promised [him] in front of God that I will not authorize anyone [else?] to copy it.

And I have found a support for this in the sayings of the [talmudic] Sages of blessed memory at many places, namely, “who writes the Megilla with [proper] intention fulfills his duty” – for the wish of the owner concerned only copying.

And I engraved these lines on this table as a reminder that I don’t forget it, since forgetting is part of human nature. I, Jeremiah Nomiqo, who commissioned this copy [lit. “who ordered to write”].

This remark is followed by the colophon of the scribe, Elijah ben Shabbtay, mentioning that Jeremiah Nomiqo ordered the copy.

If I understand the text correctly, Jacob ben Abraham lent his copy of Zechariah ha-Cohen’s book to Jeremiah Nomiqo on the condition that the latter would not copy it. However, Jeremiah interpreted the prohibition in a lenient way; he ordered a copy for himself from a professional scribe but he decided that he will not let anyone else to copy his exemplar of the text. The whole note inscribed at the end of the text was to remind Jeremiah Nomiqo about his promise not to let anyone else to copy the text.

If this interpretation is correct, we have here a fifteenth-century example of controlling the circulation of texts. Friends belonging to a circle sharing the same intellectual interests circulated books among themselves excluding outsiders. Although I am not aware of evidence dating back to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, it is possible that such cases of censorship and restrictions about circulating texts occurred earlier than the fifteenth century as well.

On the other hand, there is no evidence for an “initiation rite” in post-Maimonidean philosophy as is the case with the “transmission of the Name” in a text possibly by Eleazar of Worms.

There might have been restrictions concerning public places where one should not have revealed the ‘mysteries,’ but, as a matter of fact, the surviving evidence concerning Provence and Italy suggests the opposite. Jacob Anatoli preached his philosophical ideas in a synagogue in thirteenth-century Sicily. According to the documents of the Maimonidean controversy around 1305 philosophical ideas were expounded quite openly in synagogues, at marriage ceremonies and other public events. This fact provoked the opponents of philosophy; nonetheless, the Maimonideans did not refrain from publicizing their views in

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158 A word-pun: rosh medabrim be-khol maqom; the initials (marked in the manuscript) give RaMBaM, i.e. Rabbi Moshe ben Maymun, a widespread acronym for Maimonides.

159 MS Vat. ebr. 249, fol. 33 v.

order to avoid “persecution.” There were hostile reactions to philosophy from certain segments of the society during the Maimonidean controversies; however, the adherents of philosophy did not conceal their opinion as a result. On the contrary, they vigorously stated them in face of the criticism. And if they were persecuted, they combated persecution with persecution, for example by issuing herem (‘curse,’ i.e. excommunication) against their opponents.  

This fact does not really contradict the picture of “esotericism” that we have reconstructed so far. Publishing a view is not the same thing as sharing a competency. Most mechanisms of exclusion that we have encountered so far concerned scientific competences. They regulated access to texts, education, teachers, bodies of knowledge, personal network of scholars and other factors required to partake in the discourse. Post-Maimonidean Jewish philosophers were probably happier to publish their views to the public than to share their resources with others.

To sum up, “esotericism” as actually practiced by post-Maimonidean philosophers only marginally concerned the possible hostile reactions to philosophy. Esotericism formed an important part of medieval Jewish discursive practices. But it was not about hiding one’s opinion from the public. It was about regulating the access to scientific discourses.

**Epistemologization**

The tension between technical knowledge and spiritual illumination adds a further dimension to the main conceptual axis chosen to this study, namely, ‘knowledge versus self-fashioning.’ Treating the corporeal “impediments” that hinder the mastering of “divine science” Maimonides writes:

> For this science, as you know, is not like the science of medicine or the science of geometry, and not everyone has the disposition required for it in the various respects we have mentioned. It is accordingly indubitable that preparatory moral training should be carried out before beginning with this science, so that man should be in a state of extreme uprightness and perfection.  

Maimonides clearly distinguishes “normal” sciences from “divine science.” The first group apparently can be studied in a young age without “preparatory moral training” in spite of the flame of bodily humors. They are not spiritual.

Moreover, their very existence challenges the basic model of spiritual science, namely, the equilibrium between ‘knowledge’ and ‘self.’ By this equilibrium I mean the principle that the perfect self will acquire the perfect knowledge, and, vice versa, true knowledge will perfect the self of its holder. Maimonides clearly presupposes these rules concerning “divine science” but not concerning medicine and geometry.

Non-spiritual sciences open up the possibility to re-establish theology as a “normal” science that can be learnt without spiritual transformation and without spiritual consequences. The “divine science” can be practiced as a form of technical knowledge in complete separation from “realizing the divine presence” and “flashes of illumination” and changing one’s lifestyle for the better in terms of religious values. The more technical theological knowledge becomes the more chance is given to the “wicked” to equal or even surpass the “good” in theological competence. Esotericism as a discursive practice is required to restitute

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162 GP I, 34; tr. Pines, 77.
the equilibrium between ‘knowledge’ and ‘self’ in the spiritual model: only the “good” will know the “truth” because the “secrets” of divine science will be transmitted only to them.

The problem was caused by a process of “epistemologization” which concerned theology and biblical exegesis. We have already used this term; it is time to give some substance to it.

In *The Archeology of Knowledge* Foucault relations enumerates four “thresholds” that a discursive formation has to pass in order to become a ‘science’ in the full sense of the word:

The moment at which a discursive practice achieves individuality and autonomy, the moment therefore at which a single system for the formation of statements is put into operation, or the moment at which this system is transformed, might be called the *threshold of positivity*. When in the operation of a discursive formation, a group of statements is articulated, claims to validate (even unsuccessfully) norms of verification and coherence, and when it exercises a dominant function (as a model, a critique, or a verification) over knowledge, we will say that the discursive formation crosses a *threshold of epistemologization*. When the epistemological figure thus outlined obeys a number of formal criteria, when its statements comply not only with archeological rules of formation, but also with certain laws for the construction of propositions, we will say that it has crossed a *threshold of scientificity*. And when this scientific discourse is able, in turn, to define the axioms necessary to it, the elements that it uses, the propositional structures that are legitimate to it, and the transformations that it accepts, when it is thus able, taking itself as starting point, to deploy the formal edifice that it constitutes, we will say that it has crossed the *threshold of formalization*.163

An episteme is defined *neither* as a worldview nor as an ideal type of rationality. It is rather:

...the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possibly formalized system; the way in which, in each of these discursive formations, the transitions to epistemologization, scientificity, and formalization are situated and operate, the distribution of these thresholds, which may coincide, be subordinated to one another, or be separated by shifts in time; the lateral relations that may exist between epistemological figures and sciences in so far as they belong to neighboring, but distinct, discursive practices.164

Foucault emphasizes that most discursive formations do not cross all the thresholds at once; moreover, many of them never go through all the thresholds. Mathematics is an “enigmatic exception” that crossed the four thresholds all at once. A science like theology is a much more complicated case; we are used to speak about “biblical theology,” “rabbinic theology,” and “Maimonidean theology,” although it is obvious that the word ‘theology’ refers to quite different discourses with different degrees of scientificity in each case. Another illuminating idea is that ‘crossing a threshold’ can be a “moment” dispersed in time and space. Discontinuity is not necessarily a sudden moment of change: it can be fragmented and distributed over many small and apparently chaotic mutations.165


165 Foucault writes about a specific “temporality” that belongs to any discursive formation. This temporality is not a mere “calendar” of events. Time or temporal succession may have diverse functions in the life of a discursive formation; ‘temporality’ is a complex structure built up by these functions. Certain types of transformations may require or involve temporal succession (something must be accomplished first in order that something else take place); other types might be neutral to temporal succession. Moreover, historical events (natural catastrophes, political, social, economic changes) may also restructure discursive formations; for
A medieval example for an “epistemological figure” that passed the threshold of epistemologization but not that of scientificity is textual criticism. Medieval scholars, including Ibn Ezra supercommentators, did reflect on the quality of the text they received and commented on. They compared manuscripts. They carefully considered the possibility of textual corruptions and proposed emendations. These practices followed anonymous rules and it was believed that they led to ‘knowledge,’ i.e. more precise, more reliable, more authentic readings than the text of a corrupted manuscript copied by incompetent scribes. Thus, textual criticism did exercise a “dominant function” over a type of knowledge. Nonetheless, textual criticism did not become an independent science with explicit rules, nor was it developed into that direction within the framework of an other science. It was not a science but an epistemological figure.

Science and Ideology

Foucault also posits a relationship between science and ideology. However, in his opinion, ideology is not an alien element disturbing science in its “purity;” it is rather a positive condition of the existence of a science. A process of epistemologization is likely to coincide with the emergence of a new intellectual elite that has a more or less clear vision about why to do things differently and how to do them better than other competing elites (and discursive formations) propose to do.

An ‘epistemological figure’ that redefines its subject matter, its concepts, its methods, and the required competences is aggressive in a way; it establishes itself on the expense of other discourses. Concepts like ‘truth,’ ‘knowledge,’ ‘reason,’ ‘science,’ ‘revelation,’ ‘reliable tradition’ or ‘mystical illumination’ are likely to appear in the context of epistemologization. They can turn into solid points of references to formulate the “we know it better than you” type messages. And an ‘ideology’ is usually a “we know it better than you” message.

At the same time, ‘truth,’ ‘knowledge,’ ‘science’ and other similar terms are backed by the actual discursive practices, by the episteme of the discourse in question. It is the episteme that gives substance to the claims about the possession of ‘truth,’ ‘science’ or even ‘mystical illumination.’ Thus, Foucault points out, ideology concerns sciences at the level of their episteme:

The hold of ideology over scientific discourse and the ideological functioning of the sciences are not articulated at the level of their ideal structure (even if they can be expressed in it in a more or less visible way), nor at the level of their technical use in a society (although that society may obtain results from it), nor at the level of the consciousness of the subjects that built it up; they are articulated where science is articulated upon knowledge. [...] In short the question of ideology that is asked from science is not the question of situations or practices that it reflects more or less consciously; nor is it the question of the possible use or misuse to which it could be put; it is the question of its existence as a discursive practice and of its functioning among other practices.\(^\text{166}\)

\(^\text{166}\) Foucault, The Archeology of Knowledge, 185.
As has been mentioned above I will address the topic “medieval forms of rationalism” in this context. References to ‘reason’ in medieval Jewish philosophical or exegetical texts should not be hailed and celebrated as the appearance of Reason, the secret king of the universe or, at least, of the human mind, reclaiming his throne from usurpers, such as ‘religion,’ or ‘superstition’ or ‘tradition,’ or ‘prejudice’ even if some of the medieval texts may speak about Reason in this way. They are rather to be taken as the encoding of an ideological message justifying the appropriation of a body of knowledge, tradition, or religious savoir by new intellectual elite on the expense of older elites and discourses: “we know how to do it better than other people, because we follow reason, an angel of God sent to men.” The task, which will certainly not be accomplished in this study, is to map out the historical circumstances in which such a message could emerge on the one hand, and the actual episteme standing behind the battle cry “reason” on the other hand.

**On the Present Experiment**

These ideas can help to determine more precisely the limits of the present investigation. I will take the concept of epistemologization as the “point of attack,” since this concept stands at the crossroad of many other topics mentioned above. Epistemologization means appropriation of discourses and redefinition of discursive practices. It can coincide with changes in the historical a priori and in the archive. It is associated with emerging new intellectual elites. It is connected to the relationship between science and ideology. And a specific form of epistemologization may challenge ‘spirituality,’ a general system of forming and transforming statements.

Medieval Jewish philosophy can be interpreted as one genre of the various attempts at the epistemologization of Judaism as a religion in general, including the exegesis of sacred texts, the ideal of piety, practices of spirituality including some aspects of liturgy and halakhic observance, and last but not least, the ideal of leadership. “Cabbala” is another possible genre, and perhaps the Tosafist-movement and various forms of Jewish piety in Christian and Muslim countries will also be once described as different ways of epistemologization.

The basic research question of this study can be reformulated in the following way: What role was played by the early Ibn Ezra supercommentaries in the epistemologization of medieval Jewish discourses? An answer to this question may explain the medieval interest in Ibn Ezra’s commentaries on the Pentateuch.

The present study will not describe the subject in terms of ‘system of thought’ belonging to an author or to a movement or school. It will rather analyze short texts concerning a locus in Ibn Ezra or a topic or a problem on a local and limited level. By comparing the texts of the early Ibn Ezra supercommentators we will try to map out at least partly the enunciative fields put into operation by these texts. We will try to identify discursive groups and subgroups and investigate the ways and degrees they were epistemologized. Finally, a general answer to the basic research question will be outlined.
Part I: The Supercommentators

Constructing the Corpus of Early Ibn Ezra Supercommentaries

Some of the supercommentaries can be ascribed to certain authors with sufficient degree of probability. On the other hand many supercommentaries are transmitted anonymously or attributed in the manuscript tradition to persons whose authorship is not very probable.

This investigation will focus on texts the authors of which can be identified securely and can be dated to the period preceding the Black Death (1348/49). Anonymous or spurious texts will be disregarded as a rule, because they are difficult to date and any attempts at determining the time of their composition can be made only on the basis of those supercommentaries that can safely be dated. Consequently, the non-anonymous group has to be studied first.

The bibliographical essays mentioned in the introduction have enumerated the known and surviving supercommentaries and summarized the information about their authors. On the basis of Uriel Simon’s article – the latest overall survey of the evidence – the following list emerges for the “early” (pre- 1348) supercommentaries:

**Moses Ibn Tibbon** (d. 1283) – lost supercommentary; surviving fragments in Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara’s supercommentary (written shortly before 1375). Title: unknown. Date of composition cc. 1250-1283. Place: Provence

**Eleazar ben Mattityah** (second half of thirteenth century) – largely extant supercommentary. Title: unknown. Date of composition: cc. 1268-1290. Place: Crete.

**Joseph Caspi** (cc. 1280-1340) – (1) extant supercommentary. Title: Parashat kesef. Date of composition: 1297 (with possible additions up to 1300; introduction perhaps finished even later). Place: Provence.

________ (2) lost supercommentary. Title: Keforey kesef. Date of composition: before 1331. Place: Unknown.

**Moses Nagari** (first half of fourteenth century) – extant supercommentary. Title: unknown. Date of composition: after 1325. Place: Italy (Rome?).

**Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Seville** (d. 1345) – lost supercommentary; surviving fragments in Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Hunt. 293 (Neubauer 232). Title: unknown. Date of composition: before 1345. Place: Spain, probably Seville.

There are three more or less extant supercommentaries that can be safely dated to the pre-1348 period: they were written by Eleazar ben Mattityah, Joseph Caspi, and Moses Nagari. Fragments from Moses Ibn Tibbon’s supercommentary are attested in a later work and fragments from Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Seville’s lost supercommentary are preserved in one particular manuscript.

A fourth supercommentary is attributed to Joseph Caspi in the manuscript tradition. However, its authenticity has been questioned already by J. L. Last, Bruno Finkelscherer, Yehuda L. Fleischer, and recently by Hanna Kasher.\(^{167}\) Caspi’s authorship can be excluded on the basis of the arguments brought forth by these scholars. Nonetheless, both Fleischer and

Kasher are convinced of the antiquity of this text; Kasher claims that it was written by a contemporary of Caspi. I will refer occasionally to the author of this text as Pseudo-Caspi. However, since the date and the authorship of this supercommentary are not firmly established it will not receive systematic treatment within the framework of this paper.

In the Encyclopedia Judaica article on Jedaiah ha-Penini there is a further reference to “a supercommentary on Ibn Ezra’s commentary on Genesis” written by him. This information goes back ultimately to a manuscript kept today in the Bibliothèque nationale de France (MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 184, formerly Oratoire, 23). This codex belonged originally to the library of the Oratoire monastery in Paris. Richard Simon, the famous seventeenth-century Christian Hebraist, described its contents in his hand-written catalogue under the subtitle “miscellanea” as an anonymous explanation of Ibn Ezra’s commentary on Genesis. A similar note appears on fol. 0r (that is to say, on the page preceding fol. 1r) of the manuscript itself (Elucidatio in Comment aben Esra super genesim). A later hand added auctore R. Jedaiah ben abraham. The same hand included the manuscript among the works of Jedaiah ha-Penini in a second handwritten catalogue from the year 1702.

Michel Garel and Francis Richard kindly informed me that the first hand on fol. 0v belongs to Jean Morin, another famous Christian Hebraist from the seventeenth century, whereas the second hand is that of P. Lelouf, a librarian of the Oratoire at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Therefore, it seems, P. Lelouf bears the ultimate responsibility – as far as it can be traced back – for attributing an “Ibn Ezra supercommentary on Genesis” to Jedaiah ha-Penini.

It is difficult to say on what basis P. Lelouf came to this conclusion. The first one hundred folios of the manuscript contain Joseph Caspi’s supercommentary on Ibn Ezra (the name of the author is stated clearly both on fol. 1r and fol. 2v by two different medieval Jewish hands). From fol. 102 to 113 a fragment from the well-known Ibn Ezra supercommentary Hinneh shakhu (attributed to Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara by modern scholars) can be found covering Genesis (except for the beginning of the creation story) and the first two chapters of Exodus. This part of the codex fits the description “a supercommentary on Ibn Ezra on Genesis” the best. Moreover, this text is not ascribed to anybody in the manuscript. The last text is a commentary on Proverbs by Joseph Caspi (116-163; the name of the author is stated again on fol. 116v).

From a codicological point of view the manuscript in question is a very complicated entity. It is composed of many quires with different sizes and papers bearing watermarks that might indicate diverse dates and provenances. The texts were written by at least six different hands. A reconstruction of the history and composition of the codex cannot be carried out here. Thus, the proper evaluation of its evidence must be postponed.

Nevertheless, it is quite obvious that to describe MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 184 in the state we have it today as containing an Ibn Ezra supercommentary “on Genesis” by Jedaiah ha-Penini is erroneous. There is no reason for considering Jedaiah to be the author of any of the

168 At the same time neither Fleischer nor Kasher claims definitely that the text must be dated before 1348/1349, nor do they have any explicit argument for such an early date.


170 MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 1295, p. 47 (the last item in the whole catalogue): “+ Elucidatio in Comment. R. Ben Esra Super Genesim.”

171 Paris, BnF, MS hebr. 1295, fol. 7r (No 151; under the subtitle “R. Jedahaia ben Abraham [:] floruit 1298”): “Elucidacio commentarii Aben Esrae in <lege> Genesim hebr. ms. in 4r”. The phrase “lege” is crossed out in the manuscript.

172 William Gärtig ("The Attribution of the Ibn Ezra Supercommentary...." 247) quotes a printed work by Jacques LeLong (Bibliotheca sacra in binos syllabos distincta, Paris: F. Montalant, 1723 [1709], page 793) that mentions an Ibn Ezra supercommentary among Jedaiah’s works referring to Bartolocius’ catalogue of the Vatican library (referring certainly to MS Vat. ebr. 104, see chapter four in this part) and to Paris-Oratoire manuscript.
aforementioned texts contained in the manuscript. The information in the Encyclopedia Judaica about Jedaiah’s supercommentary on Genesis is probably based on a misunderstanding of an early eighteenth-century Christian librarian.

A widely circulated supercommentary is entitled Avvat Nefesh in the manuscript tradition after its incipit though there is no sign that the author wanted his book to be called so. Avvat Nefesh is usually attributed to Asher Crescas and dated to the fifteenth century in present day articles and manuscript catalogues. However, William G. Gärtig has shown that Crescas could not be the author.

Gärtig dates the text to the second half of the fourteenth century; I will argue below that Avvat Nefesh influenced Moses Nagari and must be dated to the first part of the fourteenth century. Moreover, I will bring evidence that he author was called Sen Bonet de Lunel, who was probably connected to Jedaiah ha-Penini. Therefore a fourth text can be added to the corpus of the early Ibn Ezra supercommentaries:

**Sen Bonet de Lunel** (first half of the fourteenth century) – extant supercommentary. Title: Avvat Nefesh (given by later copyists after the incipit). Date of composition: 1300-1320 (intuitive estimation). Place: Provence.

In Neubauer’s description of an Oxford manuscript of Ibn Ezra’s Torah-commentary (Bodl. or. 597; Neubauer 222), written probably in Italy, dated to 1311 we can read the following sentence: “On the margins a few notes containing a commentary on Ibn Ezra’s commentary.” This “commentary” can be dated to the pre-1348 period with some probability. Although at least two different hands – beside the scribe’s hand who wrote Ibn Ezra’s text – can be distinguished in the marginal notes, nothing makes us believe that they are much later than the date of the original document, 1311.

However, Neubauer’s calling these notes “a commentary” is certainly an exaggeration. Most of the notes are in fact textual corrections not unusual in other Hebrew manuscripts.
either. Only a few notes contain some explanatory material. But as a rule, these explanations do not concern philosophical or scientific aspects of Ibn Ezra’s text, except for one case that will be mentioned below. Moreover, these scattered notes hardly form anything that could be called a supercommentary.178

Although anonymous texts will not be used systematically in the present investigation, I will point out two supercommentaries that might easily have been written before 1348. The first is attested in a number of manuscripts (for example, MS London, BL, Add. 27561) and parts of it were incorporated into the long version of Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara’s supercommentary.179 The second is entitled Ben Porat in MS London, BL, Add. 26900 and also attested in MS Munich, BS, Cod. hebr. 61. The author mentions certain Shlomo de-Adrsh as his master. Steinschneider corrects this to mi-Bedersh “from Béziers;” Friedlaender corrects this to Aderet, meaning Rabbi Shlomo Ibn Aderet, the Rashba. If Friedlaender is right then Ben Porat is a supercommentary by a student of a chief opponent of philosophy at the beginning of the fourteenth century! Surprising, but far from being impossible as will be argued below.180

To sum up, this study will investigate the Ibn Ezra supercommentaries written by Eleazar ben Mattityah, Joseph Caspi, Sen Bonet de Lunel, and Moses Nagari together with the fragments of Moses Ibn Tibbon’s lost supercommentary attested in Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara’s supercommentary.

Lost Supercommentaries: Mosconi’s List

The corpus constructed above certainly does not cover all the Ibn Ezra supercommentaries that were written before 1348. It is difficult to estimate the amount of the lost material. The early supercommentators refer sometimes to other supercommentaries that they consulted before writing their own; in most cases these references cannot be identified with passages in existing texts. Moreover, Judah Leon Mosconi of Bulgaria writing around 1363, when he was 35 years old, enumerates the supercommentaries he has consulted: many items in his list might have been written before 1348 but it is difficult to decide which of them.181

Mosconi claims that he has seen around thirty supercommentaries on Ibn Ezra during his journeys in the Mediterranean basin. The value of this testimony is decreased by the fact that Mosconi starts his list with Nahmanides’ commentary on the Pentateuch that cannot be called an ‘Ibn Ezra supercommentary’ according to our definition.182 He has a reason for incorporating Nahmanides in the corpus: at the beginning of the introduction Mosconi explains that many people consider Ibn Ezra a spurious author because of Nahmanides’ attacks against him. In Mosconi’s opinion there is no real conflict between Nahmanides and Ibn Ezra. On the contrary, Nahmanides often explains the secret intentions of Ibn Ezra’s commentary. Thus Nahmanides’ inclusion is a logical outcome of Mosconi’s apologetical argument in defense of Ibn Ezra. Nevertheless, one wonders how many other texts were

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178 Comments can be found on fol. 2 r; 6 v; 10 r; 28 v; 31 r; 41 r; 42 v; 87 r; 131 r; 145 v; 189 r; 211r. Of special interest is the marginal note on fol. 41 r starting with the phrase ani ha-maatiq shamati ze ha-taam “I, the copyist heard the following explanation.” A notaricon follows explaining the name given to Joseph by the Pharaoh (Tsofnat Paaneah). On fol. 87 r a marginal note explains that God permitted the physicians to heal. The most interesting comments are on fol. 131 r, at the beginning of Leviticus. They offer a spiritual interpretation of circumcision and sacrifices.

179 See on this more in Part Two, section I, chapter 6.


182 MS London, Montefiore Library, 49, fol. 3 r.
perceived by Mosconi as Ibn Ezra supercommentaries that would not belong to the genre according to our definition.

A further claim of Mosconi is that Abishay of Sagora (Bulgaria) wrote a supercommentary on Ibn Ezra around 1170, that is to say, just a couple of years after Ibn Ezra’s death. Berliner was skeptical about the value of this information, Fleischer did not see reason to doubt it, and recently Uriel Simon argued against the correctness of Mosconi’s date in a persuasive way.183

Abishay’s work was highly evaluated by Mosconi concerning grammatical matters but not in other aspects of Ibn Ezra’s work.184 One would like to know whether Abishay’s work was influenced by Tibbonide philosophy or was closer to the spirit of the “earliest” supercommentaries. In any case, Abishay of Sagora’s supercommentary was probably much earlier than Mosconi’s age otherwise he could hardly make such assertions about its age. If not to the twelfth century, Abishay’s supercommentary can be safely dated to the pre-1348/1349 period. Abishay’s supercommentary is an important indication of the penetration of Ibn Ezra-studies into Southern-Eastern Europe before the second half of the fourteenth century.

On the island of Khios Mosconi saw a supercommentary by Kaleb Korsino of Constantinople in the possession of “the enlightened R. Elijah” [ha-maskil], the grandson of the excellent physician, R. Binyamin.” Mosconi’s evaluation was similar to the previous one: Kaleb’s supercommentary is excellent in grammatical matters but he did not understand the “mysteries” of Ibn Ezra at all. This supercommentary was copied by Yeshayah of Trani according to Mosconi’s statement (see infra). Since Yeshaya of Trani is to be dated to the first half of the fourteenth century the latest, a pre-1348 date for Kaleb Korsino’s supercommentary seems to be probable.

Both Abishay of Sagora and Kaleb Korsino are mentioned in the second (still unpublished) recension of Elnatan ben Moshe Kalkish’s great compendium Even sapir composed in Constantinoples around 1367-1370.

In Cyprus Mosconi saw David Pardeleon’s supercommentary. He grasped something of the mysteries according to Mosconi but he was far from perfection. This lost supercommentary is difficult to date; it was surely not earlier than the beginning of the fourteenth century and it obviously cannot be later than 1363, that is to say, the year in which Mosconi composed his supercommentary.185 The period from 1330 to 1350 seems to me a fair estimation taking into account that Pardoleone was the master of a Jewish philosopher from the second half of the fourteenth century (Joseph ben Moses Qitli) and that Mosconi was still in the Byzantine zone when he met this text. There is some probability that it was written still before the Black Death.

A supercommentary ascribed to Yeshayah of Trani copied Kaleb Korsino’s work according to Mosconi’s testimony. He charges Yeshayah of Trani with plagiarism. Yeshayah also speculated about the mysteries without any success according to Mosconi’s judgment.

Who was this “Yeshaya of Trani”? There are two famous persons of this name in the history of Italian Jews: Yeshaya di Trani the Elder (“the Rid,” cc. 1180-1250) the author of very important tosafot and hiddushim on the Talmud and an important commentary on the Pentateuch, which is in fact a collection of tosafot on Rashi’s Torah-commentary. His

184 MS London, Montefiore Library, 49, fol. 3 r.
185 Not much is known about David Pardoleon. As far as I know, none of his works are extant today. He was the master of Joseph ben Moses Qitli, the author of a fourteenth-century logical treatise and also a commentary on Ibn Ezra’s Yesod mora. Both texts survive in MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 707. Cf. Nicolas de Lange: “Ibn Ezra and Byzantium,” in Abraham Ibn Ezra y su tiempo / Abraham Ibn Ezra and his Age, ed. Fernando Díaz Esteban (Madrid: Asociación Española de Orientalistas, 1990), 187.
grandson, Yeshaya di Trani the Younger (late thirteenth and early fourteenth century) was also an important commentator of the Bible. Moreover, he was quite familiar with Ibn Ezra’s exegesis. Therefore, the younger Yeshaya di Trani seems to be the more convenient candidate for Mosconi’s “Yeshaya of Trani.” Nonetheless, the possibility that Mosconi had in mind a third person of the same name cannot be excluded, although it is not very probable in my opinion.

A certain R. Elihu of Serres (Macedonia) composed a supercommentary of no value according to Mosconi, although he admits that the author was an expert in mathematics. He saw it in Ladocea. I have no further information about this person.

Finally, Mosconi evaluates very positively two supercommentaries that were written by his personal tutors: R. Shemaryah of Crete (Ikriti) and R. Obadiah of Egypt / Fustat [ha-mitsri]. Shemaryah of Crete was a famous and influential scholar in the middle of the fourteenth century. Born in Rome around 1275 he moved to Crete as a child when his father was appointed as a rabbi on the island. By 1330 Shemaryah was an accomplished scholar; he wrote important exegetical and theological works. He was invited to the court of Robert of Anjou in Naples. Shemaryah’s authority was also recognized by the Karaites of the Byzantine region: he hoped to bring about a reunion of the two branches of Judaism. He went to Castille and Andalusia in 1352 but his mission was not successful. He was put into prison and charged of having made messianistic claims. His ultimate fate is not known.

Mosconi uses only superlatives about Shemaryah’s person and knowledge. He studied with him on the island of Negroponte. He emphasizes that unlike the scholars enumerated so far Shemaryah completely understood the “mysteries” of Ibn Ezra. The implication is that Mosconi’s own work follows closely Shemaryah’s interpretation.

However, one might wonder to what degree this account can be trusted and to what degree it is to be explained as Mosconi’s strategy of establishing his own authority in Ibn Ezra exegesis. Mosconi was 35 years old when he wrote the supercommentary (1363); therefore he must have been born around 1328. He claimed that he was seventeen when he started to study with Shemaryah on the island of Crete (1345).186 Shemaryah by this time was a widely known scholar who had important duties at the royal court in Naples and he was soon to move to Spain. Mosconni certainly could meet him, learn from him and admire him, but he hardly could spend much time in the company of the master on Negroponte in the late 1340s. Actually, at one place Mosconi writes that he learnt the most from Obadiah ha-Mitsri.187 This statement probably reflects the truth. Mosconi’s emphasizing his relationship to Shemaryah of Crete seems to be tactical: he wanted to establish his own authority by connecting himself to a famous scholar of Byzantine origin.

There is no information independent of Mosconi’s account about Shemaryah’s lost supercommentary. It is also possible that Mosconi had in mind Shemaryah’s exegetical works, just like in the case of Nahmanides.

Berliner identifies Mosconi’s Obadiah of Egypt with Obadiah ha-Mitsri, the author of a commentary on Maimonides’ Hilhot qiddush ha-hodesh. According to Azulay he was born in 1325; Steinschneider corrects this to 1341.188 If Steinschneider is right, then Mosconi’s Obadiah can hardly be identical with this Obadiah. In any case Obadiah’s lost supercommentary is more probable to belong to the post-1348 period.

When Mosconi left the Byzantine region he saw three more supercommentaries. On Mallorca he saw Joseph Caspi and Moses Ibn Tibbon’s supercommentary. Caspi’s work does not treat the “mysteries” at all, says Mosconi, and Moses Ibn Tibbon does not devote too much of his work to them either. As we shall see Mosconi’s judgment concerning Caspi’s

186 Cf. also Simon, “Interpreting the Interpreter…” 101.
187 MS London, Montefiore Library, 49, fol. 305 v.
188 Cf. Azulay, Shem ha-gedolim, vol. 1, 76 and Steinschneider, CB, 2075 [No. 6687].
surviving work is completely justified and on the basis of the surviving fragments of Ibn Tibbon’s work there is no reason to question his second statement either.

In Perpignan Mosconi saw a supercommentary by Shimshon Qino of Marseilles that was possessed by David ben Yom Tov Bongaron. Nothing more is known about this supercommentary.

Family Traditions

The supercommentators sometimes refer to oral traditions that they received from their masters, to whom their fathers often belonged. In Jewish religious tradition fathers were expected to teach their sons religious knowledge. Transmission of philosophic and scientific knowledge from father to son was probably perceived as forming part of fulfilling the duty of religious education. When such knowledge was connected to biblical exegesis, as was the case with Ibn Ezra’s biblical commentaries, the religious nature of the instruction was obvious.

Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara (referred to as a living person in 1375), an author who certainly lived after the Black Death often quotes explanations from a certain Meir ben David, and from another master, called Rabbi Levi ha-Cohen. He calls both men “my father” occasionally – it is difficult to decide whether this designation is to be understood literally. According to Steinschneider’s hypothesis Meir ben David is identical with the author of an early-fourteenth-century ethical work, and Levi ha-Cohen must have been the grandfather of Gersonides.

Steinschneider’s hypothesis might seem far-fetched at first sight. In my opinion, he was probably right in both assumptions. As a matter of fact, the philosophers and other intellectuals were few in number even in Provence. Moreover, they were often related to each other. It was an imperative according to talmudic literature to find an educated man to marry one’s daughter. We have no reason to doubt that medieval people did their best to observe this rule. Ibn Ezra’s son, Yitzhak Ibn Ezra married Judah ha-Levi’s daughter. Maimonides’ in-law was also a significant scholar. Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s favorite disciple, Jacob Anatoli, married Samuel’s daughter. These are instances for marriages between philosophers’ families; however, there is evidence that intermarriages were not unusual between people of different intellectual traditions either.

Steinschneider has proved that Moses Nahmanides, a leader of the anti-Maimonidean camp during the first Maimonidean controversy and one of the first representatives of Kabbalah in Spain was closely related to Levi Gersonides, a radical philosopher who openly declared the pre-eternity of the first matter, and held provocative rationalistic views.  

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190 The work is entitled _Tokahot_ (‘Admonitions’) and was printed in Venice, at Daniel Bomberg’s printing office in 1519 together with _Liqqutey ha-pardes_ attributed to Rashi and the works of Abraham Hisdaia. Cf. Steinschneider, _CB_, 508 [No. 3335] and 2355-2356.
191 Steinschneider, _CB_, 1969 [No. 6297]: “…neque dubito quin idem sit Meir b. David, cujus nomine nonnulla citat Supercomm. _anon_ in arcanum Abraham Ibn Ezra, cujus auctor… magistrum laudat Levi Kohen (ut vid. avum Levi b. Gerson)…” At this time Steinschneider was apparently unaware of MS Oxford, Bodleian, MS Hunt. 293 (Neubauer 232) that attributes the text to Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara.
194 Cf. Steinschneider, _CB_, 2305-2310; and especially the quotation from Simon ben Tsemah Duran’s _Responsa_ [=“Tashbets”], I, 134 on cc. 2307-2308, where Gersonides’ grandfather is indeed referred to as “R. Levi ha-Cohen” exactly as in the supercommentary.
Reading the documents of the 1303-1306 controversy one has the impression that intellectual life including philosophy, Kabbalah, and even halakha was the business of a dozen of families in Provence. Perhaps the history of the controversies over philosophy and secular sciences once will be written in terms of family-conflicts with the application of microsociological models.

Therefore, I see no reason to object to Steinschneider’s identifications. It is not realistic to assume the existence of another Meir ben David or Levi ha-Cohen different from the ones referred to as authorities in Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara’s supercommentary.

Meir ben David and Levi ha-Cohen probably lived before the Black Death; the opinions reported in their names by Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara will be occasionally analyzed in the present study.

An Ibn Ezra School?

The history of the medieval reception of Ibn Ezra’s biblical commentaries is still to be written. However, a brief overview of some of the basic facts will be attempted in the present context.

As has been mentioned in the Prolegomena two disciples of Ibn Ezra are known by name: Joseph ben Jacob of Moudeville and Yitzhak ben Judah. Both of them studied under Ibn Ezra in London, and the first was probably born in Normandy. They had probably some editorial role in elaborating the final text of the Long Commentary on Exodus and other commentaries on the Psalms and the Twelve Prophets. The earliest surviving explanatory material comes from their pens as well (such as a supercommentary on the Short Commentary on Exodus 3: 13 and a commentary on the long arithmetical excursus incorporated into the Long Commentary on Exodus at 3: 15). Therefore, it is possible that a “school” of Ibn Ezra – that is to say a rather informal association of Ibn Ezra’s former disciples and perhaps few other individuals who were interested in his writings – survived the death of the master and functioned in London or in towns in Normandy in the last decades of the twelfth century.

It is possible that this “school” influenced some of the “German pietists” (hasidey Ashkenaz) of the thirteenth century. An English representative of the movement, Elhanan Yitzhak ben Yaqar of London wrote several commentaries on the Sefer Yetsira – a text of unquestionable authority for Ibn Ezra as well – that seems to be influenced by twelfth-century Sephardi neo-Platonic ideas. Georges Vajda, the editor of Elhanan’s first commentary on the Sefer Yetsira believes that Elhanan had access to Abraham bar Hiyya’s Megillat ha-megallel. It is possible that Elhanan’s source is to be searched among the members of the Ibn Ezra-circle in late twelfth-century London.

Joseph Dan has demonstrated in several studies Ibn Ezra’s influence on the German pietists, especially, Eleazar of Worms.

Ibn Ezra’s “school” might have influenced another very significant Ashkenazi spiritual movement as well. The master, Abraham Ibn Ezra, himself was a personal friend of Rabbenu Tam of Dampierre, a grandson of Rashi, and a founder of the so-called Tosafist-movement. Ibn Ezra taught Rabbenu Tam Hebrew poetry: the two friends wrote a Hebrew poem together. Discussions between Ibn Ezra and Rabbenu Tam about the meaning of

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certain biblical verses are reported in the Tosafot-commentary printed in the traditional editions of the Talmud.

An interesting document of Jewish-Christian polemics from the beginning of the fourteenth century, Joseph Official’s book entitled Yosef ha-meqanne quotes Ibn Ezra together with other medieval Jewish authorities to refute Christian exegetical claims.\(^{199}\)

In the Prolegomena we have quoted Jedaiah ha-Penini’s statement about the joy of Provencal scholars at the arrival of Ibn Ezra. There is no reason to question the historicity of this event. A Latin source that was written before 1145 quotes an exegetical opinion from a “hebreus quidem hispanus diversarum linguarum litteris eruditus.” Gilbert Dahan points out that the reference is probably to Abraham Ibn Ezra who stayed in Rome at that time.\(^{200}\) Ibn Ezra’s fame reached his Christian contemporaries quite quickly. \textit{A fortiori} the same must have been true of his Jewish fellows.

It is quite probable that Provence had an eminent role in the reception of Ibn Ezra’s works. In 1148 the Almohads conquered Cordoba and expelled many Christians and Jews from the town. Many Andalusian refugees moved to Provence – among them Judah Ibn Tibbon, the father of Samuel Ibn Tibbon. It is possible that the young Maimonides with his family also spent some time in Provence.

The Sephardi refugee-community had nostalgia for the lost glory of Andalusian Jewry and tried to save as much as possible from the rich cultural heritage. This attempt was manifested in Judah Ibn Tibbon’s Hebrew translations. Judah realized that Arabic would no longer be understood by the future generations in Provence. Therefore he started to translate the classics of Andalusian Judeo-Arabic literature into Hebrew.\(^ {201}\)

Ibn Ezra’s works were written in Hebrew and pleased the intellectual taste of the Andalusian refugees in Provence. It is quite probable that Ibn Ezra’s writings could fill the hiatus created by the discontinuation of the Judeo-Arabic literary, scientific and exegetical tradition. Sephardi refugees in Provence might have advised their sons to learn mathematics, astronomy, astrology, Hebrew grammar, poetry, philosophy, and biblical exegesis from Ibn Ezra’s books already in the master’s life. Ibn Ezra’s authority was probably firmly established in Provence decades before the publication of Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s Hebrew translation of \textit{The Guide of the Perplexed}. Maimonides’ influence reached a substrate penetrated by Ibn Ezra’s thought.

\section*{In Maimonides’ Camp}

Already in his life Maimonides became an emblematic figure, a symbol of a new mentality, and an idol for many Jews. He was also a target of criticism and a scapegoat to be blamed for new sins and heresies in the eyes of many others. In the controversies about the role of philosophy and secular studies in Judaism Maimonides’ – not Ibn Ezra’s – person and ideas were fiercely attacked by the traditionalist party and emphatically defended by the philosophers’ camp.

Nevertheless, Ibn Ezra’s works were probably never abandoned by Provencal Jews. \textit{The Guide of the Perplexed} did not challenge the role Ibn Ezra’s works had acquired in Jewish education. Grammar, geometry, arithmetics, and astronomy were very important subjects to be studied according to Maimonides as well. These subjects were pre-requisites of studying natural philosophy and metaphysics. For those Jews who could not read Arabic any

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item^{200} Gilbert Dahan: \textit{L’exégèse chrétienne de la Bible en Occident médiévale: XIIe – XIVe siècle} (Paris: Cerf, 1999), 173 quoting Nicolas of Maniacoria.
\item^{201} On the transformation of Jewish culture in Provence see: Silver, \textit{Maimonidean Criticism}..., 84-100.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
longer but wanted to learn philosophy – there were more and more such students in Provence and Christian Spain – Ibn Ezra’s Hebrew compendiums remained a convenient starting point.

More than that, Maimonides did not write an ongoing commentary on the Pentateuch or on other biblical books. Such commentaries were needed for the purpose of both elementary education and advanced research. *The Guide of the Perplexed* emphasized the importance of biblical exegesis in acquiring philosophical knowledge; in fact, Maimonides starts the introductory chapter of GP with outlining a project of biblical studies “according to the truth.” Since Maimonides did not provide his followers with a systematic exposition of the biblical text Ibn Ezra’s commentaries retained their role of being the most important interpretation of the Pentateuch for the philosophically oriented readers. *The Guide of the Perplexed* and Ibn Ezra’s Torah-commentary were in a way for the post-Maimonidean Jewish philosophers what Petrus Lombardus’ *Sentences* and the *Glossa ordinaria* was for the Latin scholastics: the first served as a handbook of theology, the second was an ongoing commentary on Scripture.

Once Maimonides’ shadow was projected on Ibn Ezra both the opponents and the supporters of Maimonides read his commentaries in a new way.

During the Maimonidean controversy in the 1230s conservative rabbis from Northern France issued an ordinance according to which Rashi’s commentary was to be considered as the most important authority in talmudic exegesis and his direction was to be followed.202 This piece of information is derived from the following statement of Samuel ben Abraham Saporta, a supporter of the Maimonidean camp replying to the traditionalists in Northern France: “The most extraordinary of all your utterances is that ye accus[e] all who expound the words of the [talmudic] masters otherwise than did Rashi.”203 Joseph Shatzmiller published another document, a letter by Asher ben Gershom from the Maimonidean camp to the Northern French rabbis, from which it is evident that the ordinance included Rashi’s biblical commentaries as well:

Moreover, you admonished [us] in your decree to read the Torah, the Prophets, the Hagiographa and the Talmud only with Rabbenu Shlomo [=Rashi] commentary […] But isn’t it true that he himself [Rashi] writes that midrashic exegesis goes on its own way [ha-derasha tidrash] and Scripture stands according to its literal sense [al pshuto]?204

The reader should note that Asher ben Gershom as a member of the Maimonidean camp defends literal exegesis against the conservative criticism of the Ashkenazi rabbis.

LITERAL EXEGESIS WAS ASSOCIATED TO THE PHILOSOPHERS’ REALM: ITS CHAMPION WAS ABRAHAM IBN

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202 The “numbering” of the Maimonidean controversies in secondary literature became instable in the recent decades. In 1997 Joseph Shatzmiller, in accordance with earlier practice, still called “first Maimonidean controversy” the conflict in the 1230s (cf. the title of his article quoted below). Since the publication of Sarah Stroumsa’s groundbreaking studies on the Eastern controversies (Reshito shel pulmus ha-Rambam ba-mizrah [Beginnings of the Maimonidean controversies in the East], Jerusalem: Ben Zvi Institute, 1999) many scholars count them differently; thus the Radak-Nahmanides conflict becomes the “second” or even the “third” in the series of events, whereas the Rashba-conflict around 1305 becomes the “fourth” or “fifth” Maimonidean controversy. A sociological interpretation of the conflict: Shmuel Trigano: “La controverse maïmonidienne: deux figures de l’intellectuel juif,” in *La Société juive à travers l’histoire*, vol. 1, ed. Shmuel Trigano (Paris: Libraire Arthème Fayard, 1992), 225-239.


Ezra. Rashi was no less an authority on midrashic exegesis than on *peshat*. The conflict between the philosophers and the traditionalists was not a conflict of allegorical and literal exegesis. It was rather a conflict of literal and allegorical *versus* midrashic exegesis. Shatzmiller speaks about the “canonisation” of Rashi’s exegetical direction in the traditionalist camp.\(^{205}\) The French rabbis’ interdiction on studying any other commentators than Rashi indeed parallels Pseudo-Maimonides’ statement that only Ibn Ezra’s commentary is worthy of reading (cf. Prolegomena).\(^{206}\) Approximately sixty years later Joseph Caspi juxta posed Rashi and Ibn Ezra as two commentators who are usually of the opposite opinion. Caspi makes it clear that his preference is given to Ibn Ezra (see chapter 3 in the present part).

It is possible that the conflict between the Maimonidean and anti-Maimonidean camps was sometimes articulated in the form of confronting Rashi and Ibn Ezra’s biblical commentaries. Nahmanides, who criticizes Maimonides and Ibn Ezra in his Torah-commentary, often starts his own interpretation with quoting and analyzing Rashi’s comments. We have already mentioned in the Prolegomena the legend about Ibn Ezra’s violent death recorded by Moses Ibn Hisdai, a decided anti-Maimonidean.\(^{207}\)

On the other hand, Sheshet ben Isaac Beneviste, a champion of the philosophers’ party, is reported to have spoken irreverently of Rashi.\(^{208}\) The philosophers could criticize Rashi’s and his followers’ interpretation from a double perspective: (1) Rashi fails to understand the literal sense of the Scripture; (2) Rashi fails to understand the philosophic sense as well. Ibn Ezra’s commentary was a perfect sourcebook for criticizing the traditionalists’ interpretation from the first perspective, whereas Maimonides’ GP was the main source for the second type of criticism. The two aspects of polemics against the anti-Maimonidean camp might have been a further reason for combining Maimonides’ and Ibn Ezra’s thought. We shall discuss the deeper reasons for the symbiosis of literal and philosophical exegesis in the third part.

At the same time, Rashi was quoted as a respectable authority by Samuel Ibn Tibbon and by Joseph Caspi himself as well. On the other hand, Nahmanides spoke about his “open criticism but secret love” for Ibn Ezra in the introduction of the commentary. Ibn Ezra was certainly attacked by the anti-Maimonidean camp (see on this Caspi’s statements below), but he was of secondary importance in the debate; moreover, some traditionalists, such as Nahmanides, felt that Ibn Ezra was closer to their position than Maimonides. Nahmanides’ interest in astral magic might have been a reason for his “secret love” for Ibn Ezra.\(^{209}\)

The “Maimonidean controversies” had another facet as well. There are reports of philosopher-groups in early fourteenth-century Provence who migrated from town to town and delivered provocative speeches in the synagogues. They professed much more radical views than the “official” Tibbonide philosophers and probably they had a much lower social status within the Jewish society. The “official” philosophers tried to disassociate themselves from these groups and often accused those “who show of as philosophers without understanding philosophy” for spoiling the reputation of philosophy.

For example, Moses Narboni in his commentary on GP I, 50 describes an episode that occurred in Narbone when he was young (that is to say, during the first part of the fourteenth

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\(^{205}\) Toutati considers the phrase “canonization” exaggeration but basically agrees with Shatzmiller; cf. Charles Toutati: “Les deux conflits atour de Maimoine et des études philosophiques” in *Juifs et judaïsme de Languedoc*, Cahiers de Fanjeaux 12, ed. Édouard Privat (Toulouse and Fanjeux: Centre d’Études historiques de Fanjeux, 1977), 177.

\(^{206}\) Perhaps, Pseudo-Maimonides’ “ethical will” was meant to be a reply to the “canonization” of Rashi: after forbidding his son to read any other commentator than Ibn Ezra the “Maimonides” of the text starts to criticize all the sages who live “in Tsarfat, that is to say, Francia” in a very harsh tone. See on this Steinschneider, HÜ, 931.

\(^{207}\) Cf. Silver, *Maimonidean Criticism...,* 145.


century). A group of “aliens” calling themselves “philosophers” lead by a “master” entered the synagogue and disturbed the preacher with objections and tried to make his sermon ridiculous. Their leader showed off as a great philosopher who knows everything better than the preacher.

Narboni remarks that his relationship to the preacher was by no means good; nonetheless, he had to interfere on his side because the “philosophers” were not true philosophers at all in Narboni’s opinion.

Here we have the three protagonists of the drama: the traditional leader of the service, who is the spokesman of traditional religiosity, the educated Tibbonide philosopher (Moses Narboni), who is not on good terms with the traditional leader, and the “wandering philosophers” who reject the traditional values but their philosophical education does not meet the standards of the Tibbonide elite.

The “true” philosopher defined himself in contrast with both the traditionalists and the “pretentious” philosophers. Joseph Caspi in Valencia, 1332 wrote the following:

“There are, my son! two dispositions among contemporary Jews which must be firmly avoided by thee. The first class consists of sciolists [ha-mitpalsefim] whose studies have not gone far enough. They are destroyers and rebels; scoff at the words of the Rabbis of blessed memory [of the talmudic period], treat the practical precepts as of little account, and accept unseemingly interpretations of biblical narratives [osim tsiiyum le-sippurim bilti reuyim – lit. they make improper allegories out of the stories].

[…]

The second class referred to above includes those of our people who hold in contempt genuine philosophy as presented in the works of Aristotle and his like.210

The “sciolists” were probably more inclined to radical ideas and provoking behavior than their “professional” colleagues. Judah Romano (Rome, circa 1325) probably refers to such groups in his commentary on the creation-story:

Some of the later sages of Israel whose names are not worthy of mention incline to the opinion of eternity [of the world] and they explain in their commentaries the entire chapter on creation [seder ha-beria] with an explanation that inclines toward the eternity. [fol. 2 v] And they follow the arguments of the philosophers [for the eternity of the world].211

It is possible that these philosophers “worthy of no mention” composed supercommentaries on Ibn Ezra attributing “radical” doctrines to him. On the other hand, other supercommentaries refused these claims and tried to protect Ibn Ezra’s name from heresies associated with him.

We encounter an important phenomenon that will be called ‘competition for Ibn Ezra’ in this book. By this I mean the fact that several supercommentators compete in understanding Ibn Ezra and each of one claims the correct interpretation to be his own. Those philosophers who denied creation out of nothing might easily wanted to vindicate Ibn Ezra’s authority for themselves.

On the other hand, the “official” – and as a rule rich and influential – philosophers of the Jewish community were reluctant to let the outsiders into their circles. The outsiders’

210 Abrahams, Hebrew Ethical Wills, vol. 1, 146-148.
211 MS New York, JTS, Lutzky 2352, fol. 2 r-v.
names were not worthy of mention and their books were not worthy of copying – it is very well possible that most of the “radical” supercommentaries on Ibn Ezra has been lost.

The Maimonidean controversies had disastrous effects. Around 1232 the Christian authorities interfered: they condemned Maimonides’ GP and burned many copies of it. This was a dangerous precedence. A decade later the Talmud was condemned and burnt in Paris. Jews had to realize that their inner conflict could result in a new wave of persecution. Attempts were made on both sides to find an acceptable compromise or a modus vivendi in order to avoid further persecutions.212

During the second Maimonidean controversy (1303-1306) the events and the documents of the first conflict were remembered and referred to (we have seen the example of Jedeaiah ha-Penini in the Prolegomena). Shlomo Ibn Aderet, a key figure in the anti-Maimonidean camp, partly withdrew his original ban on the study of philosophy, probably because he feared that the scenario of the first controversy might be repeated.213

One of his students, Yom Tov ben Abraham al-Ishvili (the Ritba) wrote a treatise entitled Sefer ha-zikkaron (cc. 1320) in which he tried to defend Maimonides against the criticism expressed in Nahmanides’ Torah-commentary. This text starts with a poetic passage in which Yom Tov visualizes two angels of God engaged in a holy debate about the deepest mysteries of religion: the two angels are Maimonides and Nahmanides. The author emphasizes his own incapacity and unworthiness to pronounce judgments about topics on which such great and holy men were disagreeing.214

Yom Tov ben Avraham’s work showed a possible strategy of reconciliation. In the first half of the fourteenth century it was possible to perceive the key figures of the first controversy as belonging to a mythical past. Ibn Ezra, Maimonides, Nahmanides were all giants the likeness of whom cannot be found among contemporaries. Therefore, the contemporaries should not strive to decide the debate of such great men. They should be content if they understand the debate at all. Nahmanides’ Kabbalistic approach to the Bible and Maimonides’ philosophical exegesis was slowly considered to be two equally justified ways of Bible-interpretation.

Kabbalah, the Four Senses, and Polemics against Nahmanides

Such considerations might have appeared already in the second part of the thirteenth century. In some passages of the Zohar (second half of the thirteenth century) four senses are attributed to the Bible: peshat or literal sense, remez or philosophical interpretation, derash or traditionalist exegesis, and sod or Kabbalistic sense.215 From an exegetical point of view the Maimonidean controversies had four key figures: Ibn Ezra, Maimonides, Rashi, and Nahmanides. They correspond roughly to the four ways of interpretation mentioned in the

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212 The burning of Maimonides’ work is reported in two contemporary sources: in David Kimhi’s correspondance, see Dov Schwartz: Emuna ve-temuna: Darkhey ha-vikkuaah be-hagut ha-yehudit bi-may ha-habenayim (Jerusalem: Ministry of Defense, 2001), 88; and in a letter by Abraham Maimonides (the son of Moses Maimonides) who related that he had received a report about the event in February, 1235; see Colette Sirat: “Les manuscrits du Talmud en France du Nord au XIIIe siècle,” in Le Brûlement du Talmud, 125.


214 MS Vat. ebr. 249, fol. 36 v – 37 r.

215 The very idea of the fourfold sense appears in the Midrash ha-neelam that Scholem believed to be “one of the earliest works of the author of the Zohar,” that is to say, Moses de Leon. Bahyah ben Asher writing in Saragosa, 1291 mentions the doctrine of the four senses. The acronym “Pardes” is attested in the latest of the Zoharic books, Raya mehemma and Tikkune Zohar dated by Scholem to 1295-1305. Cf. Gershom Scholem: On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 54-61. However, Scholem’s statement according to which the kabbalists generally rejected allegory and preferred “symbolism” has to be qualified; cf. Moshe Idel: Kabbalah: New Perspectives (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988), 200-210.
Zohar: Ibn Ezra concentrates on the literal sense, Maimonides focuses on the philosophic interpretation, Rashi summarizes the rabbinic tradition, and Nahmanides enters the mysteries of Cabbala.

A supercommentator in the second half of the thirteenth century, Eleazar ben Mattityah refers to the Sefer Bahir in a philological explanation. Explaining Ibn Ezra’s remarks about a famous aggada (“The Torah was created two thousand years before the creation of the world”) Eleazar mentions that in the “wisdom of Kabbalah” Abraham is called “world” [be-hokhmah ha-qabbala qaru Avraham olam]. He apparently had no objection against Kabbalah as such, although besides these two examples the thoughts expounded in his supercommentary have no relationship to Kabbalistic doctrines.

Moses Nagari, a supercommentator who was active in Italy in the first half of the fourteenth century begins his work with a poem rich in biblical and post-biblical allusions that starts with the following lines:

From the foundation of his seat He gazes
Who the highly elevated Name is,
Powerful, Wise, and Willful he is,
Clothed in splendour, wearing the Crown
Of his Wisdom and Insight.

The author wrote a commentary to his opening poem in which he explains these lines:

Know that these three attributes that are attributed to God, may He be exalted, by the adherents of the doctrine of sefirot [baaley sefirot], namely “crown,” “wisdom,” and “insight” [keter, hokhma u-vina], have essentially the same meaning as those attributes of the same number that are attributed by the adherents of rational speculation [baaley ha-iyyun], namely “powerful,” “wise,” and “willful.”

Moses Nagari claims that there is a fundamental agreement between Kabbalists and philosophers about the three most important attributes of God. He alludes to the doctrine of the ten sefirot, a widespread theosophical model in mainstream Kabbalah, both in the poem and in the commentary. Three of the ten sefirot, namely keter, hokhma, and bina, he believes to be identical with the three basic attributes established in the philosophic tradition.

Commenting on Ibn Ezra’s interpretation of Genesis 2: 3 Moses Nagari explains the sacred character of the Shabbat in astrological terms heavily relying on a strictly neo-Platonic version of the emanation theory. Moses Nagari says that emanation proceeds from a “universal motion” or “encompassing motion” [tenua ha-kolelet] first to the “universal nature” [teva ha-kelali] and then from the “universal nature” to the particular bodies/corporeal substances. He claims explicitly that “universal motion” and “universal nature” – whatever they are – consist of more than the amount of their parts or their species; for in general a “whole” [ha-kol] is more than the amount of its parts.

Normally “universal nature” influences the individual things through partial emanations: each thing receives a part or a species of the universal essence according to its capability and the constellations of the stars. Astrological laws regulate the process of emanation and organize the partial emanations into cycles. However, since “universal nature”

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216 MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 166 r.
217 This is a verbatim quotation from Psalm 33: 14 and an allusion to the name of the author (Mi-mekhon Shivto Hishgiah – an acronym for Moshe).
218 MS Vienna, ÖNB, Cod. hebr. 106, fol 1 ra.
219 MS Vienna, ÖNB, Cod. hebr. 106, fol 1 rb; on the left margin.
is more than the totality of its parts it is possible that in certain times the whole universal essence is emanated on the individual things. If you manage to receive the direct emanation of the whole universal nature in its entirety you will get a considerable “surplus” [inyan nosaf or tosefet] in perfection as compared to the normal, partial emanations. Such an emanation might happen when a cycle of partial emanation is completed. When the partial emanations are accomplished the “surplus” becomes available.

Shabbat is a mysterious day; for this is the day when the cycle of partial emanations is completed and the reception of the universal emanation that has a “surplus” over the partial ones is possible. God’s blessing and sanctifying the day of Shabbat in Genesis 2: 3 refers to this fact according to Moses Nagari’s interpretation of Ibn Ezra’s words. The rationale of Jewish laws concerning the observation of Shabbat is to enable the people to receive the “surplus” of blessing from God, that is to say, the emanation of the universal nature. 220

Having finished his complicated argument Moses Nagari writes:

If you, who meditate [on my writing], belong to the intelligent men, it will be revealed to you from these sentences of mine what the sages of Kabbalah [hakhmey qabbala] said, namely, that the third meal [of the Shabbat] is the most precious one and it is more important than the previous ones, and its time is after the minha-prayer. The intention of this [teaching] is that on that day, in its last hour the universal cycle is completed. Since at that time the ultimate end of the cycle is completed, more of the blessing (which is the surplus [tosefet] of the good [fol. 13 v] and the sanctity) is attached to that time than what [is available] during the previous parts. And it is not hidden from me what some of them [i.e. some of the Kabbalists] meant when they explained the reason of the excellence of the third meal; for the thing to which [the third meal] alludes is stronger in existence than the things to which the previous meals allude. 221

Here we have an early Ibn Ezra supercommentator who integrated a Kabbalistic doctrine into his exegetical thought. Although in the rest of his work he does not refer explicitly to Kabbalistic sources and doctrines these two examples are sufficient to show that Moses Nagari was willing to admit the authenticity of Kabbalah. 222

In spite of these attempts at reconciliation between the Kabbalists and the philosophers the tensions remained, and the polemic probably never ceased completely during the Middle Ages. Joshua Ibn Shuayb (first half of the fourteenth century), another student of Shlomo Ibn Aderet of Barcelona, wrote a supercommentary on Nahmanides’ commentary on the Pentateuch in which he reinforced some of Nahmanides’ objections against Maimonides and Ibn Ezra. His example was followed by Shem Tov ben Abraham Ibn Gaon who also belonged

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220 MS Vienna, ÖNB, Cod. hebr. 106, fol. 12 v – 13 r.
221 MS Vienna, ÖNB, Cod. hebr. 106, fol 13r – 13 v. On the ‘third meal’ a classic statement is Zohar 2: 88b (ad Exodus 20: 8) although it is not certain that this is the particular text that Moses Nagari had in mind. This passage of the Zohar explains that the first meal of the Shabbat belongs to the matronita (a female aspect of the Godhead), the second meal is that of the atiga qadisha the “Holy Old One” (a male aspect of God), and the third meal is associated with zeir anpin the “Small –faced” or better “the Impatient One” referring to the sefira Tiferet imagined as a bride in exile waiting for his Lord: “This is the meal of the Impatient One that is in perfection and all the six days are blessed because of this perfection.” (I follow the interpretation of Yodel Rosenberg [tr. to Hebrew]: “Zohar” of the Holy Bible: Second Book of “Exodus” – “Shamos” (Montreal: The Rothchild Press, 1924), 88. On the meaning of zeir anpin see Gershom Scholem: On the Kabbalah and Its Symbolism, 142 and 145.) Cf. also Zohar 2: 252b and 3: 94b.
to the circle of Shlomo Ibn Aderet’s students and also wrote a supercommentary on Nahmanides.

Were these Kabbalist supercommentators of Nahmanides inspired by the philosophic supercommentaries on Ibn Ezra? Were they competing with them? Did they want to repeat or to re-enact the debate between Ibn Ezra and Nahmanides? I am unable to answer these questions at the present moment. The Ibn Ezra supercommentaries are not very explicit in polemics. There is only one instance in the early supercommentaries when an objection of Nahmanides against Ibn Ezra and Maimonides is explicitly answered (cf. part three, chapter two). Later, Hayyim of Brivescia wrote an Ibn Ezra supercommentary entitled *Ets hayyim* in which defending Ibn Ezra against Nahmanides’ criticism is a major objective. Zechariah ha-Cohen of Corfu (d. 1440) also wrote an angry refutation of Nahmanides in which Ibn Shuayb’s supercommentary on Nahmanides is also quoted and refuted. He charged Nahmanides with inconsistency and cowardice:

Indeed, this man [i.e. Moses Nahmanides], in my opinion is similar to someone who gazes from the window of his house, where he is, and shoots arrows on a strong man and mighty warrior, but after shooting the arrow he hides away and closes the window behind himself for he is scared lest the warrior kills him from below. This is the custom of this man and these are his deeds: he objects to men that are greater and nobler than him and attempts everything to refute them and then suddenly he finds refuge with the Cabbala and makes everything to pertain to the complete mystery. “And Moses hid his face for he was scared” (Exodus 3:7). So why is he jumping on two branches? If he is a Kabbalist [*mequbbal*] let him teach us Kabbalah and let him put aside the arguments and [rational] investigations. But if he chooses [rational] investigation let him not escape to Kabbalah.

The reader should note that Zechariah does not reject Kabbalah as such either. On the contrary, he considers it to be a completely legitimate subject. What is objectionable in Nahmanides’ Torah-commentary is the lack of methodological purity: Kabbalah and rational investigation are two distinct way of biblical exegesis. Both approaches are justified but they should not be mixed and confused.

Turning back to the early Ibn Ezra supercommentators there is no evidence for such a clear demand of methodological purity and recognition of Kabbalah, philosophy, and literal exegesis as equally acceptable approaches to the Bible. I have not found any implicit or explicit reference to the doctrine of the four senses of Scripture known from the Zohar. The supercommentators distinguish and contrast the *peshat* and the inner sense (often called *nistar* or *remez*) sometimes. For example, Eleazar ben Mattityah includes a long excurse about the geographical identification of the four rivers mentioned in the description of the Garden of Eden (Genesis 2) and then proceeds to the allegorical interpretation of the four rivers. However, neither he, nor others treat *peshat* and *remez* as parts of the broader structure of the four senses (PaRDeS). Nor do they sort out Kabbalah as an alternative way of exegesis that has its own rights. Although they did not refrain from using occasionally Kabbalistic sources


224 On this person see Alexander Marx: “A List of Poems on the Articles of the Creed,” *JQR* n. s. 9 (1919): 328, note 13 and Israel M. Ta-Shma: “Le-toldot ha-sifrut ha-rabbanit be-Yavan be-mea 14” (On Greek-Byzantine rabbinic literature in the fourteenth century) *Tarbiz* 62 (1993), 101-105. I have consulted MS Vat. ebr. 249, fol. 3-34; Ibn Shuayb is quoted and refuted on fol. 26 r-v within a long discussion about Moses’ sin at Meriba.

225 MS Vat. ebr. 249, fol. 17 v.
he did not try to decipher Ibn Ezra’s teaching as a Kabbalistic doctrine. These phenomena appeared only in later supercommentaries.

Institutional Framework

I am not aware of the existence of any evidence for Ibn Ezra’s commentaries being studied in yeshivot (religious associations for studying talmudic literature) although this possibility cannot be excluded a priori. One would like to know, for example, whether the school (midrash) planned by Maimonides’ principal student, Joseph ben Judah, in Baghdad ever came to existence and, if yes, whether its curriculum included Ibn Ezra’s commentary as well besides the works of Maimonides.\footnote{Cf. Mose ben Maimon [Maimonides]: \textit{Episulae}, ed. D. H. Baneth (Jerusalem: Mekizey Nirdamim, 1946), 68. English translation: Rayond L. Weiss and Charles E. Butterworth: \textit{Ethical Writings of Maimonides} (New York: Dover Publications, 1975), 123.}

Joseph Caspi mentions that Maimonides’ GP was studied by a group of Muslim physicians in Fez, Morocco under the supervision of a Jewish philosopher in the early fourteenth century.\footnote{See on this Wilhelm Bacher: “Aus der Bibelexegese Joseph Ibn Kaspis,” \textit{MGWJ} 56 (1912), 217} There are instances for Jewish-Christian cooperation in studying the works of Averroes and Maimonides from thirteenth-century Italy: Jacob Anatoli, the in-law of Moses Ibn Tibbon, studied Averroes and other scientific texts together with Michel Scotus at the court of the Holy Roman emperor, Frederick II. An interesting Hebrew document relates that the emperor himself was engaged in the study of Maimonides’ GP; he proposed a solution to a problem left unresolved by Maimonides.\footnote{MS Florence, BML, Plut. I, 50, fol. 78 v. The story is related in the name of a certain David ben Shlomo Yehiel. The emperor [\textit{qesar Feredigo}] asked a Jewish scholar why Maimonides did not explain the reasons for sacrificing the red heifer. The emperor himself could propose a persuasive explanation in the spirit of Maimonides: according to an Indian book possessed by the emperor, it was a custom of the Indians to sacrifice a red lion the ash of which was used for purifying the unclean persons. A similar rite must have been practiced by the Egyptians (and the Israelites) as well. Moses could not abolish completely this pagan custom; however, he replaced the red lion with a red heifer in order to make it less dangerous.} The earliest surviving commentary on GP written by Moses of Salerno around 1260-1280 mentions by name Christian scholars who cooperated with the Jewish authors and quotes sometimes the Latin translation of GP (transcribed into Hebrew letters). Judah Romano’s Hebrew translations of Latin scholastic works (Italy, first half of fourteenth century) were probably also the fruit of Judah’s intensive cooperation with Christian scholars.

It is impossible to imagine that Ibn Ezra’s name and exegetical ideas were not mentioned in these inter-confessional discussions. However, it is difficult to estimate the actual role and significance of Ibn Ezra.

At the same time, the success of Maimonides’ GP among Christians and Muslims could present a further reason for the Jewish interest in Ibn Ezra’s commentary. Maimonides erected an impressive apologetic construction for defending revealed religion against the possible criticism of pagan philosophers. Christians and Muslims happily learnt from him and adjusted his teachings to the needs of their own religions. However, exactly for this reason Maimonides’ accomplishment was not as effective in emphasizing the peculiarity of Judaism and defending it against the criticism by the adherents of Christianity and Islam as he wished.

Certain themes in Ibn Ezra’s thought could complement Maimonidean theology with clear and definite apologetical arguments. Ibn Ezra’s mystical interpretation of the divine names showed the superiority of Hebrew language and Hebrew Scriptures as compared to Latin, Greek, or Arabic. Since only Judaism was based on revelation in Hebrew the superiority of Hebrew languages meant practically the superiority of Judaism in medieval times. Ibn Ezra’s interpretation of the commandments as means of achieving redemption from
astrological fate was also more effective in polemics than Maimonides’ theory according to which the commandments’ primary intention was to meet the requirements of a historical period. Maimonides’ theory was easily adopted by Christians and turned against the Jews: in Moses’ times the commandments were wise and necessary, but today the world is completely different… Ibn Ezra’s theory could save the commandments from being relativized.

The commentaries on the Torah by Ibn Ezra never enjoyed such popularity between Christian and Muslim theologians as Maimonides’ GP. Unlike the latter, Ibn Ezra’s exegetical texts were not translated into Latin and not studied at Christian universities – although it should be remarked that some of his astronomical, astrological and mathematical works were circulated in Latin and even in Old French. However, only Jews studied the biblical commentaries.

Ibn Ezra’s text was probably studied in small, informal circles. A father teaching his sons, an accomplished scholar tutoring some devoted young men or a group of philosophically educated adults spending their free time with studying and discussing philosophical texts, finally, last but not least, an autodidact individual struggling alone with the “mysteries” of Ibn Ezra could have been the typical situations. The supercommentaries themselves were probably meant to facilitate and inspire such activities. We will be able to refine slightly this initial description after considering the evidence of the supercommentaries themselves.

One of the anonymous supercommentaries mentioned above (attested in MS London, BL, Add. 27561) refers many times to oral discussions between an unnamed master and unnamed students. If this text can be dated before 1348 then it is a further evidence for the existence of Ibn Ezra “study-groups.”

Contrasting Jewish mysticism and philosophy Moshe Idel points out that medieval Jewish philosophers were rarely organized into tight associations, “schools” or “circles” as mystics, especially Kabbalists, did. Philosophy was an individual activity more often than not: “the philosopher usually became the pupils of those thinkers whom they never met.”

The evidence of the early Ibn Ezra supercommentaries is far from challenging Idel’s claim. Nonetheless we can point to established social institutions or patterns that could be instrumental in organizing philosophical education even if they were not exactly what we call “school” or “intellectual circle” today.

The family is our first candidate. To be born or to marry in the proper family could have been the first step in acquiring philosophical education. In practice it did not necessarily mean “transmitting ideas” from father to son: in the first chapter of the present part we shall briefly characterize the case of Judah Ibn Tibbon who provided his son, Samuel Ibn Tibbon, with books, teachers, and an apt wife to promote his studies. Samuel’s actual philosophical thoughts came from the distant Maimonides, “a thinker whom he never met,” and not from the father. Similar is the case of Jacob Anatoli, who married Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s daughter: although he certainly learnt a lot from his father-in-law, his ultimate intellectual temper was determined by the milieu of Frederick II’s court in Sicily. The famous father-in-law’s role pertained more to promoting Anatoli’s career than to transmitting him ideas.

Similarly, rich and influential persons could “protect” and sponsor the philosophical studies of young scholars. Such relationships were most probably patterned on the patronage system known in the Mediterranean world for immemorial time.

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229 Cf. Friedlaender, Essays, 228-232; and the discussion below, Part Two, section I, chapter 6.


to his favorite disciple, Joseph ben Judah, to whom GP was dedicated, can be very well analyzed according to these lines. On the one hand, it implied unconditional protection of the protégé, which Maimonides was ready to offer when Joseph was attacked by the Gaon of Baghdad; on the other hand it authorized Maimonides to write Joseph ben Judah such sentences as “Do not depart from my advice in any respect,” “I give you permission to open a house of study;” and, speaking about Joseph in a letter addressed to a third person, “I have not permitted him to do something like that” meaning “it cannot be true that he did so.” We have already referred to the case of Levi ben Abraham of Villefranche, who was vulnerable during the Maimonidean controversy in the early 1300s because of the lack of appropriate patrons.

**On the Manuscripts**

Since most of the early supercommentaries are not edited at all some reflections about the manuscripts are inevitable. However, this is a subject of its own right that can easily fill a whole dissertation using different methodologies and focusing on different subjects than the present one. What is offered here is only a brief report on my results.

There is no manuscript surviving from the pre-1348 period. The only possible exception is MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 184. This manuscript contains (1) Joseph Caspi’s supercommentary (fol. 1 – 97), (2) a fragment of Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara’s supercommentary (covering Genesis except for the creation narrative and the beginning of Exodus; fol. 102 – 113) and (3) Caspi’s commentary on Proverbs (fol. 116 – 163).

The manuscript has a complicated history. There is no colophon. On fol. 1 r there is a note: “My lord, my father gave me this book in exchange for a part of Rashi’s commentary on Qiddushin.” The note is concluded by a signature in Latin letters: “bonyt.” On the top of fol. 8 r, 15 r, and 27 r the name Bonet ben Abigdor is inscribed in Hebrew letters. This was probably the same “bonyt” who exchanged Rashi’s commentary for this codex. Consequently, his father, the previous owner, must have been called Abigdor.

Only the first quire (fol. 1 – 16) is preserved in its original form in Caspi’s supercommentary. The rest of the quires lack the first and the last two or three folios. The missing leaves are replaced with blank paper that is different from the paper of the written pages. The same type of paper is also used to fill the lacunae in Caspi’s commentary on Proverbs. At the end of the codex missing parts from the commentary on Proverbs are written on this paper by a hand close to the one of the “bonyt” but not identical with it as far as I can judge. I suppose that this is the hand of Abigdor, the father of “bonyt.” He is probably the person responsible for the ultimate composition of the codex. The paper used for filling the lacunae bears a watermark similar to Briquet 7767 and 7768 attested in Cologne, 1419 and Constance 1439 respectively. Therefore Abigdor’s activity is probably to be dated to the first half of the fifteenth century.

The problem is presented by the watermarks appearing in the original paper of Caspi’s supercommentary. The first quire (fol. 1 – 16) and the surviving part of the second (fol. 19 – 22 and 25 – 28) and third quire (fol. 33 – 44) bears a watermark similar to Briquet 4171 attested the earliest in Genova, 1306 and the latest in Rome 1340. The fourth quire (fol. 47 –

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232 Cf. Maimonides, *Epistolae*, ed. Baneth, 63, 68, and 61; cf. Weiss and Butterworth’s English translation in *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, 120, 122, and 119. In the last case the English translators opted for a circumlocation instead of literal translating, although a literal translation perfectly makes sense if we take patronage-system into account.

bears watermarks similar to Briquet 3353 attested in Bologne, 1309 the earliest and Artois, 1322 the latest. The watermarks of the fifth quire (fol. 63 – 80) I was unable to identify. The original part of the sixth quire (fol. 82 – 97) contains watermarks similar to Briquet 5980 attested in Carpentras, c. 1340.

All these evidence point to the first half of the fourteenth century. This can hardly be by chance. However, other characteristics of the codex do not support such an early date. In all probability the quires were originally composed of 8 bifolios just like the first quire – the only one that is intact today. As far as I can judge on the basis of available handbooks this composition was not usual in the first half of the fourteenth century; it became widespread only in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth century. Moreover, the specialists of the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts in Jerusalem date the codex to the fifteenth or sixteenth century, I suppose, on the basis of palaeography (fol. 1-79 Byzantine hand, fol. 82 – 97 Spanish hand). Therefore, it is safer to assume a late fourteenth or early fifteenth century date to the codex and suppose that the scribes used paper that was produced earlier as is attested in some other cases as well.\(^{234}\)

The earliest dated manuscript containing Ibn Ezra supercommentaries is MS London, BL, Add. 27562 containing Pseudo-Caspi’s “Explanation of the Secrets of Ibn Ezra.” It was copied by a Byzantine hand in 1382. Another important dated manuscript is MS Vat. ebr. 104 written by Siman Tov ben Eliah Gazara (Sephardi hand) in 1399 containing the shorter recension of Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara’s supercommentary and Sen Bonet de Lunel’s Avvat Nefesh (attributed to Jedaiah ha-Penini in the ms). MS Oxford, Bodleian, Hunt. 293 (Neubauer 232) was believed to have been written in Crete, 1375 by Joseph Bonfils, the author of the famous supercommentary Tsofnat Paneah. However, Malachi Beit-Arié has shown that it is, in fact, not Joseph Bonfils’ hand but a later copy that was carried out by an oriental scribe perhaps in Jerusalem at the end of the fourteenth century.\(^{235}\)

Eleazar ben Mattityah’s supercommentary is attested in four manuscripts: MS Vat. ebr. 54 (fol. 161 r – 229 v), MS Vat. ebr. 249 (fol. 53 v – 143 r), MS Petersburg, Russ. Nat. Lib., Evr. 170 (fol. 1 r – 64v) and MS Jerusalem, JNUL, Heb 80931 (fol. 80r-163v).\(^{236}\) All four codices are written by Byzantine hands. The fourth manuscript belonged to L. Loewe’s collection. It is described in an article published in 1894 by H. Hirschfeld.\(^{237}\) According to Hirschfeld’s testimony the name of the author was given as ‘Eleazar ha-Dani’ in this codex. It was copied together with other texts of Byzantine provenance, such as Zechariah ha-Cohen of Corfu’s objections against Nahmanides; therefore, it is quite probable that this was a Byzantine manuscript as well.\(^{238}\)

MS Vat. ebr. 249 is dated to 1452. MS Vat. ebr. 54 can also be dated to the 1450s: on fol. 246 there is a relatively rare watermark (a “key”) resembling Briquet 3793 (attested in Venice, 1453) and Zonghi 569-573 (attested in Fabriano between 1451-1458). Other characteristics of the manuscript do not contradict this date.\(^{239}\) MS Vat. ebr. 249 is dated to 1452. I did not have opportunity to consult the Moscow manuscript.

\(^{234}\) For example, MS Oxford, Bodleian, MS Mich. Add. 28 (Neubauer 1992) contains texts from Italy from the period 1740-1750 written on paper with watermarks resembling Briquet 3471 and 3461 attested in between 1519-1538 and 1515-1526 respectively; see on this Malachi Beit Arié: The Makings of Medieval Hebrew Book: Studies in Palaeography and Codicology (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1993), 38.


\(^{236}\) Cf. David, “Le-toldotav shel R. Eleazar…,” 996. Note that the fourth manuscript is not yet included in the online catalogue of Hebrew manuscripts available on the homepage of JNUL.


\(^{238}\) See on this Abraham David, “Le-toldotav shel R. Eleazar…,” 996.

\(^{239}\) For a description of the codex see Cassuto, Cod. Vat. Hebr., 78-79.
MS Vat. ebr. 54 contains a longer recension of Eleazar’s supercommentary than MS Vat. ebr. 249. However, the text contains lacunae that are sometimes supplied by a second hand (for example on fol. 183 v at the bottom of the page, fol. 217 r lines 15 and 17) presumably from another manuscript. When a lacuna left by the first scribe was too big for the text to be inserted a stroke fills the additional space (for example on fol. 216 v).

I relied on the text of MS Vat. ebr. 54; the other manuscript will be referred to only occasionally.

Joseph Caspi’s supercommentary is attested in a great number of manuscripts. For the purpose of the present dissertation I chose MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 184 (see above). The passages on the creation of the world I checked against MS Vat. ebr. 36, another Byzantine (or, according to Cassuto, Kandian) manuscript with watermark resembling Piccard VII (Horn), ii, 144-150 attested in Bologna and Ferrara between 1374-1385 (e.g. on fol. 54). MS Munich, BS, Cod. hebr. 61 written in Venice, 1552 seems to me a valuable witness as well. It contains Caspi’s introduction that is omitted in the Vatican ms, and in fact, in most mss except for the Paris codex. Unfortunately, I could not devote as much attention to the Munich ms as it deserves.

As for Sen Bonet de Lunel / Avvat Nefesh I relied on the oldest witness, MS Vat. ebr. 104. This codex contains omissions in quite a few places but often offers better readings than MS Vat. ebr. 54 (fol. 1-147) the other manuscript I used. Occasionally I checked MS Vat. ebr. 107 that is dated to 1438 and probably of Provencal origin.

Moses Nagari’s commentary is attested in fifteenth-century Italian manuscripts. I have consulted three of them: MS Vat. ebr. 50, MS Florence, BML, Plut. I. 6, and MS Vienna, ÖNB, Cod. hebr. 106. I did not find major differences between them. The hand of the Vienna ms from fol. 52 on is probably identical to the hand of MS Oxford, Bodleian, MS Poc. 108, fol. 26 v, which is a copy of Ibn Ezra’s commentary finished in Fano, Italy, 1431. Similar date and provenance can be ascribed to the Vienna ms.

The textual history of Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara’s supercommentary – containing fragments from Moses Ibn Tibbon’s lost supercommentary and selections from other supercommentaries as well – is complicated and deserves a separate study. Here I cannot go into details; I will just simply state my preliminary conclusions.

The text survives in two recensions. The longer recension can be distinguished from the shorter one not only by the fact that it usually (though not always) contains longer explanations but also by the incipit ve-im ha-emet kemo ve-im yihye… (longer recension) as opposed to ve-hinne shakhu va-yivra… of the shorter recension. Moreover, the longer recension on Genesis 37: 35 has the name of the Latin translator correctly as yeronimush (Hieronymus, Jerome) whereas in the shorter recension the name is corrupted into nogmosh (MS Cambridge, UL, Add. 510.2, fol. 16 v) or rogmish (MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 9 v) or something similar.

The longer recension is attributed to Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara in MS Oxford, Bodleian, MS Hunt. 293 (about two more mss where the attribution appears in a corrupted form see below). Practically nothing is known about this author besides the fact that Joseph Bonfils in a colophon from the year 1375 (preserved also in the Oxford ms) speaks about him as a living person. Joseph Bonfils also claims that he corrected Shlomo Ibn Yaish’s text and he added his own remarks under his own name. He begs the later copyists not to omit his name from the further copies that the readers should be able to distinguishing Shlomo Ibn Yaish

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241 For a description see Cassuto, Cod. Hebr. Vat., 74.
and Joseph Bonfils’ opinion.\(^{243}\) However, I have encountered only one example so far where his name is not omitted and this example is not in the Oxford manuscript (where the colophon is transmitted) but in a Florence manuscript.\(^{244}\)

As a rule the shorter recension is transmitted anonymously and often referred to as \textit{Hinne shakhu} after its incipit. It was probably the most widely read Ibn Ezra supercommentary in the fifteenth century.

MS Vat. ebr. 104 seems to be the best witness of the shorter recension of the supercommentary because it represents a “core-text” of all the versions. Other manuscripts often add more materials to the core-text that differ greatly in the individual manuscripts (although MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 184 and MS Cambridge, UL, Add. 510.2 are clearly related).

As for the long recension of the supercommentary the three witnesses I have consulted (MS Oxford, Bodleian, Hunt. 293, MS Vat. ebr. 54, and MS Florence, BML, Plut. II. 49) all contain archaic elements that must go back to an original copy of the author and not found in any of the other three. A quotation from “Don Suleyman Ibn Yaish ha-Sephardi” in a later supercommentary by Ezra ben Shlomo Gateigno\(^{245}\) seems to be related only to the text of MS Vat. ebr. 54 (fol. 240 r) although Ezra ben Shlomo’s quotation is longer and more meaningful than MS Vat. ebr. 54. It seems to me that Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara’s work is not transmitted in its entirety in any of the manuscripts: perhaps even the “longer” recensions are shortened versions of a lost original.

The oldest manuscript of the \textit{shorter} recension (MS Vat. ebr. 104) shares a number of copying mistakes with a manuscript of the \textit{longer} recension (MS Oxford, Bodleian, MS Hunt. 293).

MS New York, JTS, Lutzki 844 certainly belongs to the same textual family as MS Florence, BML, Plut. II. 49. The former contains the name of the author in a corrupted form: “Rabbi from the town of Wadal Higriah [\(r’\) me-\(i r\) v’d’l hygry’h]”. On the top of fol. 2 v of the Florence manuscript there are the traces of a deleted inscription. This has been noted already by Biscioni.\(^ {246}\) With a help of a Wood Lamp I managed to read the deleted text:

\[
\textit{ze hu biu[\(r\) al perush ha-tora sh[\(el?\) r’ abl’ ezra z}’l u-ketavo r’ me-’ir v’d’l hygry’b n’} \\
\text{זֶה הוֹ הָבִיא עַל פּוּרְשָׁה תּוֹרָה שֶל [ל?] ר’ אבר’א עזֶרָא זל וְכָתוּבוּ ר’ מְשִׁירָ אָדָא אל הָעֵבֶּר נ’}
\]

This is a supercommentary on the Torah-commentary by Abraham Ibn Ezra of blessed memory and it was written by R[abbi] from the town of Wadal Higriab – may he rest in Eden.

The phrase “R[abbi] from the town of Wadal Higriah / Higriah” appearing in the Florence and New York mss is certainly a corrupted form of the inscription appearing in MS Oxford, Bodleian, MS Hunt. 293: “R[abbi] Shlomo Ibn Yaish the Younger from the town of Guadalajara [\(m-e-i r\) \(v’d’l’hg’r’h\)].” Perhaps, the inscription in the Florence ms was deleted by a medieval reader who noticed that it must be a corrupted one.


\(^{244}\) MS Florence, BML, Plut II. 49, fol. 7 r. On this ms see below.

\(^{245}\) MS Oxford, Bodleian, MS Hunt. 217, fol. 138 v – 139 r.

\(^{246}\) Antonio Maria Biscioni: \textit{Bibliothecae Ebraicae Graecae Florentinae, sive Bibliotheca Mediceo-Laurentianae Catalogus} (Florence: Ex Imperiali Typographio, 1757), 103: “Auctor reticetur.”
The Florence manuscript can be dated to the 1390s on the basis of a rare watermark similar to Piccard XV, iii, 462-463 attested in Florence, 1393. Therefore it is practically a contemporary of the Oxford manuscript and it represents an independent textual tradition. The Vatican manuscript is from the 1450s and it also seems to be independent from the rest of the witnesses.

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To sum up, two patterns can be observed in the textual transmission of the Ibn Ezra supercommentaries from the end of the fourteenth century on: there were “local” texts and
“international” texts. Moses Nagari and Eleazar ben Mattityah are transmitted only in Italian and Byzantine manuscripts respectively. They were hardly read outside the borders of Italy and the Byzantine zone. On the other hand, Josef Caspi, Sen Bonet de Lunel, and Pseudo-Caspi’s commentaries enjoyed wide circulation from the end of the fourteenth century on: they are transmitted in manuscripts belonging to various geographical areas (Spain, Italy, Byzantium, Near East). An excerpt from Bonet’s supercommentary containing his interpretation of the creation narrative started to live an independent life: it was copied alone and it found its way even to an Ashkenazi manuscript (MS Oxford, Bodleian, MS Opp. 572 [Neubauer 2282], fol. 84 v – 87 r corresponding roughly to MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 59 v – 64 r).247

Supercommentaries on Ibn Ezra often appear in book-lists at the end of fifteenth-century manuscripts. Although I have not researched this source-material systematically yet, my impression is that Ibn Ezra’s Torah-commentary and at least one supercommentary on it were standard items in the library of an educated man in the fifteenth century.248 However, in a very precious testimony from the first half of the fourteenth century, namely in Levi Gersonides’ autograph catalogue of his own library with references to his brother, Shlomo Gersonides, and his friend, Astruc Vidal’s book collections I could not find any item that could be identified as an Ibn Ezra supercommentary.249

A fifteenth-century Spanish manuscript (MS Vat. ebr. 106) deserves separate mention. This codex contains Ibn Ezra’s text in the middle and five different supercommentaries arranged around it in the margins and above and below the main text as it is usual with biblical and talmudic commentaries. This codex evidences the sacred status achieved by Ibn Ezra’s Torah-commentary by the middle of the fifteenth-century.250

247 MS St. Petersburg, Rus. Nat. Lib., Evr. I 481 (Firkovitch- collection I) contains a text entitled biur ma’ase bereshit that is nothing but the same excerpt from Bonet’s supercommentary.
248 Cf. MS Vat. ebr. 107, fol. 198 v (Provence, 1438; printed in Cassuto, Cod. Vat. Heb., 170, unspecified supercommentary); MS Florence, BML, Plut. I. 50, fol. 82 v (Italy, 1433; where A’vat Nefesh and Ibn Motot’s supercommentary are mentioned besides an unspecified biur on Ibn Ezra).
250 See the description of the codex in Cassuto, Cod. Vat. Hebr., 163-164.
Chapter 1: Moses Ibn Tibbon

Some information about Moses Ibn Tibbon’s lost supercommentary on Ibn Ezra are gained from Judah Mosconi’s supercommentary that was written in the 1350s in Majorca. In the introduction Mosconi relates that he consulted Moses Ibn Tibbon’s supercommentary before writing his own.\textsuperscript{251}

He refers twice to Ibn Tibbon’s supercommentary explicitly. In both cases the interpretation attributed to Ibn Tibbon can be found in Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara’s supercommentary composed around 1360-1375. The name of Moses Ibn Tibbon is not mentioned in any of these cases within Shlomo Ibn Yaish’s supercommentary.

Judah Mosconi mentions that Moses Ibn Tibbon interpreted Ibn Ezra’s famous allusion at Genesis 12: 6 as referring to the non-Mosaic authorship of certain passages in the Torah. As we shall see later this interpretation is proposed in Shlomo Ibn Yaish’s supercommentary as well.\textsuperscript{252}

More interesting is the case of Exodus 2: 11. Commenting on this passage Ibn Ezra writes: “And he [Moses] went out to his brothers” i.e. [his] Egyptian [brothers]; for he lived in the royal palace.” Explaining this passage Judah Mosconi quotes a sentence from Moses Ibn Tibbon’s supercommentary:

And the sage, Rabbi Moses Ibn Tibbon of blessed memory explained it in the following way: “[Moses went out] to his brothers” i.e. in Fustat [\textit{be-mitsrayim}]. For he lived in the royal palace; that is to say, he went out from the palace to Fustat \textit{[mitsrayim]}, that is to say, to the town itself; and [when Scripture] says “and he went out” – [this refers] to his going out from the royal palace to the town, not that he went out from the town. So far the words of Rabbi Moses Ibn Tibbon of blessed memory.\textsuperscript{253}

The quotation from Moses Ibn Tibbon appears almost verbatim in Shlomo Ibn Yaish’s supercommentary with an addition that makes the explanation clearer. In the “short version” of this supercommentary (called \textit{Hinneh shakhu} after its incipit) we read:

“And he [Moses] went out to his brothers” i.e. [his] Egyptian [brothers]; for he lived in the royal palace.” It seems that the correct reading is \textit{be-mitsrayim} [instead of \textit{ha-mitsriyim}]. That is to say, he went out to Fustat/\textit{mitsrayim}, that is to say to the town itself, and not outside of the town, for he lived in the royal palace; this is why [Scripture] says, “he went out.”\textsuperscript{254}

\textsuperscript{251} On Mosconi’s list see \textit{supra} in the introduction to the present part. Colette Sirat writes that MS London, “Beit ha-Din 33,” fol. 33 r – 36 r contains fragments of Moses Ibn Tibbon’s supercommentary. As far as I can see, this manuscript (call-number F 4702 in the collection of the Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts, Jerusalem) contains an eighteenth-century work by Jonathan Eybeschütz without any relationship to Moses Ibn Tibbon. I do not know the source of Sirat’s information; nor I am aware of any other manuscript that would contain selected passages from Moses Ibn Tibbon’s supercommentary on Ibn Ezra. Cf. Colette Sirat: “La pensée philosophique de Moïse Ibn Tibbon,” \textit{REJ} 138 (1979): 506. Note also the recent publication of Moses Ibn Tibbon’s commentary on the Song of Songs: Otfried Fraisse, (ed.): \textit{Moses Ibn Tibbons Kommentar zum Hohenlied und sein Poetologisch-Philosophisches Programm} (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004).

\textsuperscript{252} Cf. Simon, “Interpreting the Interpreter…” 105.

\textsuperscript{253} MS London, Montefiore Library, 49, fol. 46 r.

\textsuperscript{254} MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 12 v. The same text with a minor variant (\textit{le-mitsrayim} instead of \textit{be-mitsrayim} the first time the phrase occurs) can be found in MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 184, fol. 113 v.
In the “long version” we find further explanation:

“And he [Moses] went out to his brothers” i.e. [his] Egyptian [brothers]; for he lived in the royal palace.” It seems that the correct reading is: “to his brothers in Fustat [ba-mitsrayim].” For if we say: “he went out to his brothers, i.e., to the Egyptians” then what is “and he [Moses] saw their sufferings”? The intention is “and he went out to his brothers in Fustat,” that is to say, within the town itself, and not outside of the town, for he lived in the royal palace; that’s why [Scripture] says: “and he went out.” And the manuscripts [sefarim] with the reading “to his Egyptian brothers” [el ehav ha-mitsriyim] are possibly [to be vocalized] like isha metsera [“distressed woman” Jeremiah 48: 41] with an ‘e’ belonging to the ‘ts’ [meaning “to the distressed brothers” instead of “to the Egyptian brothers.”

Moses Ibn Tibbon found Ibn Ezra’s interpretation according to the textus receptus rather unconvincing; therefore, he proposed a textual emendation. Reading ba-mitsrayim instead of ha-mitsriyim Ibn Tibbon made Ibn Ezra say that Moses went out to his [Hebrew] brothers in the town of Fustat. The explanation is based on the convention that Fustat was often called Egypt both in Arabic [al-misr] and in Hebrew [mitsrayim]. Therefore Ibn Tibbon could suppose that Ibn Ezra meant the capital of Egypt by the word “Egypt.”

Uriel Simon suspects that Shlomo Ibn Yaish’s supercommentary took over large portions from Moses Ibn Tibbon’s supercommentary without naming the source. His hypothesis is corroborated by further references to Moses Ibn Tibbon in the text. At the famous passage on the allegoric sense of the Garden of Eden an interpretation is introduced with the following words in Shlomo Ibn Yaish’s supercommentary:

This is found in the first version [ba-tofes ha-rishon] from the mouth of the sage Rabbi Moses son of the sage Rabbi Samuel Tibbon of blessed memory.

255 MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 250 r.
256 Simon, “Interpreting the Interpreter…,” 108 and 123.
257 MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 3 v. In MS Vatican 54, fol. 240 r the same explanation is introduced by the following words: “And R. Sh. Yaish writes: and the sage [Ibn Ezra] says: ‘from the light of the intellect desire comes out,’ I have seen a commentary on some of these words but I do not know who wrote it. And the opinion of this commentator is – as far as it seems from his words – that the intention of the sage [Ibn Ezra] in this sentence is to describe the first causes of the things that exist in the lower world, in the world of generation and corruption. And this is the commentary: […]” What follows is identical with the supercommentary quoted in Moses Ibn Tibbon’s name in MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 3 v, MS Vat. ebr. 106, fol. 4 v, MS Vat. ebr. 287, fol. 2 r, MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 184, fol. 103 r, and in MS Cambridge, UL, Add. 510.2, fol. 6 v of the manuscripts of the shorter recension and in MS Florence, BML, Plut. II. 49, fol. 6 v and in MS Oxford, Bodleian, MS Hunt. 293 of the manuscripts of the longer recension. The remark “this is found in the first version” also accompanies the attribution to Moses Ibn Tibbon in the quoted manuscripts. The author of this remark probably saw a manuscript containing text similar to MS Vat. ebr. 54 where the comments were not attributed to Moses Ibn Tibbon and he also saw another manuscript in which they were attributed to Ibn Tibbon and he thought that the latter text represented an earlier recension of Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara’s supercommentary. A fuller version of the text quoted from MS Vat. ebr. 54 is to be found in Ezra ben Shlomo Gateigno’s supercommentary, MS Oxford, Bodleian, Hunt. 217 (Neubauer 230), fol. 138 v – 139 r quoted in the name of “Don Suleyman Ibn Yaish ha-Sephardi” and also in Ibn Shaprut (MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 852, fol. 305 r [301 r]) – The most probable solution is that the passage by Don Suleyman Ibn Yaish is, in fact, from the elder Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Seville’s supercommentary. Later, it entered the younger Ibn Yaish’s supercommentary as well (so MS Vat. ebr. 54 contains the passage) just like it entered Gateigno and Ibn Shaprut’s supercommentaries. After that a scribe saw the contradiction, namely, that Ibn Yaish (the younger) quoted the passages in Moses Ibn Tibbon’s name, and at same time, Ibn Yaish (the elder) quoted the passage with the phrase “I don’t know whose supercommentary it is...” Failing to make difference between the younger and the elder Ibn Yaish the scribe resolved the contradiction by saying “it is attributed to Moses Ibn Tibbon in the first recension.”
The note is evidenced in most of the manuscripts; but not in all of them. In MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 240 r the interpretation is introduced by the phrase “another explanation” [perush aher; abbreviated as p”a in the manuscript]. The note and the text it introduces is missing altogether from MS Munich, BS, Cod. hebr. 61. It is possible that the name of Moses Ibn Tibbon has disappeared from other passages in the text as well.

Another example is provided by MS Munich, BS, Cod. hebr. 61, fol. 128 r. In this codex the author says: “and I have seen Rabbi Moses B. T. of blessed memory who wrote that this is an Arabic phrase…” No doubt that the abbreviation “B. T.” refers to Ibn Tibbon, whose Hebrew translations from Arabic are well-known. The same sentence stating that the phrase in question is an Arabic one can be found in all the manuscripts I have consulted so far; however the attribution to Moses Ibn Tibbon appears only in MS Munich.

There is one counterexample where a passage is erroneously attributed to Moses Ibn Tibbon. In MS Cambridge, UL, Add. 510.2, fol. 34 r the phrase “Moses ha-Cohen” is replaced by “Moses Ibn Tibbon.” However, the replacement must be a mistake for the sentence in which the phrase appears is a quotation from Ibn Ezra’s comment on Exodus 19: 1. Needless to say Ibn Ezra could not possibly refer to Moses Ibn Tibbon who was born after his death. Nonetheless, it is possible that the mistake in the Cambridge manuscript is derived from a text in which the interpretation was attributed to Moses Ibn Tibbon.

A long quotation from Moses Ibn Tibbon explaining the sense hoshen and efod is quoted in Samuel Zarza’s supercommentary.\(^{258}\) However, this passage does not look like an excerpt from an Ibn Ezra supercommentary. It is rather an independent essay on the sense of the relevant biblical passages. It is not represented in Hinneh shakhu either.

To sum up, Uriel Simon’s hypothesis seems to be correct: It is possible that Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara’s supercommentary relies heavily on Moses Ibn Tibbon’s lost supercommentary. Moses Ibn Tibbon’s name probably disappeared at many places in Shlomo Ibn Yaish’s supercommentary during the textual transmission.

Shlomo Ibn Yaish’s supercommentary will be used as a possible testimony for Moses Ibn Tibbon’s lost supercommentary with great caution. I will ascribe an interpretation to Moses Ibn Tibbon only if there is a special reason to suppose that it indeed comes from his pen.

The Tibbonide Dynasty: Philosophy, Medicine, and Power

Moses Ibn Tibbon was the son of Samuel Ibn Tibbon (cc. 1150-1230), the founder and spiritual leader of the Maimonidean school in Provence. His grandfather, Judah Ibn Tibbon (cc. 1120-1200), who left Granada after the Almohad conquest (1148) and moved to Lunel, left an “ethical will” addressed to his son, Samuel, from which a great amount of useful information can be learnt about the everyday-life of these eminent philosophers.\(^{259}\)

Judah Ibn Tibbon was a rich man. He could buy a great number of manuscripts and provide his son, the future translator of Maimonides’ GP, with a rich library:

I have honored thee by providing an extensive library for thy use, and have thus relieved thee of the necessity to borrow books. Most students must bustle about to

\(^{258}\) Samuel Zarza, Meqor Hayyim, parashat Tetsawweh; MS Oxford, Bodleian, Opp. 30 (Neubauer 253), fol. 65 v/c – 66 t/a. Unfortunately, I was unable to access the printed edition (Mantua, 1559).

seek books, often without finding them. But thou, thanks be to God, lendest and borrowest not. Of many books, indeed, thou ownest two or three copies.  

Judah paid equal attention to the education of his son as well:

Seeing that thy Creator had graced thee with a wise and understanding heart, I journeyed to the ends of the earth, and fetched for thee a teacher in secular sciences [hokhmot hitsoniyot]. I minded neither the expense nor the danger of the ways. Untold evil might have befallen me and thee on these travels, had not the Lord been with us.

A third important point was finding an appropriate mate to Samuel. An offspring of the Ibn Tibbon family could not marry just any Jewish girl in Provence:

Thou knowest, my son! the trouble and expense that I endured for the marriage of thy elder and younger sisters. Never in my life had I undergone such dangers, thrice crossing the sea at great lost though my means were scanty. I pledged my books, I borrowed from my friends, though I was never wont to do so, and all this not to reduce thy share. Also at thine own marriage, thou art aware that I did not sell thee for silver, as others richer than I have done with their sons. None of thy companions made a more honorable union. I took for thee the daughter of a cultured and distinguished lineage, all of them the “seed of truth,” learned and of high standing.

Here we encounter the principles of building an intellectual aristocracy. An apt wife for the son of Judah Ibn Tibbon must come from a family of learned, rich, and influential men. The continuation of the text is even more interesting:

The community showed its consideration by imposing on thee no tax or due. Thou wast honored at thy wedding by princes and priests, men of the highest lay and cleric distinction, for my sake [hayita nikhbad min ha-sarim ve-ha-parashim ve-ha-hegemonim ve-ha-komrim ve-ha-gelahim ve-ha-kefirim].

Judah Ibn Tibbon’s social influence was indeed great. He managed to exempt his own son from contributing to the taxes of the community the distribution of which among the members was the most sensitive issue in medieval Jewish communal life. What might be even more surprising for the modern reader is the presence of Christian priests, bishops and noblemen as guests at a Jewish wedding.

Israel Abrahams’ translation of the last sentence is not literal. A literal translation would be more or less the following: “Thou wast honored by noble men and knights and bishops [hegemonim from Greek ηγεµών meaning ‘bishop’ in medieval Hebrew] and priests and clerics [gelahim, lit. “the shaved ones” alluding to the tonsure] and “lions” (?) [kefirim].” The meaning of the last word in the present context is not clear to me. In any case, Samuel ibn Tibon’s wedding must have been a spectacular event.

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261 Ibid.
262 Ibid., 66. The bride was the sister of Jacob Anatoli; cf. Abrahams’ note 45 to the translation.
263 Ibid., 66-67.
What was the source of the Tibbonide family’s high respect both within and outside of the Jewish society? The elements of the answer can be learned from the following passages that also highlight the generational conflict between the old and the young Ibn Tibbon:

Risk not thy life by taking the road and leaving the city, in times of disquiet and danger. Even where large sums are involved, travel only on the advice of men of mature judgment who are well disposed to thee; trust not the counsel of the young in preference to that of the old. Let not the prospect of great gain blind thee, to make light of thy life; be not as a bird that sees the grains but not the net.\(^{264}\)

In all thy business, thy buying and selling, thou didst not do me the honor to ask my advices, nor didst thou even keep me informed. Whenever I asked thee, thou wast impatient, and didst conceal the facts from me. If I gave thee advice thou didst regret it, though never didst thou succeed when thou didst act against my counsel. […] Long ago thou didst see what happened to thee with Solomon, son of the learned Joseph, when thou refusedst my order and advice. I will not further narrate how thou didst show me disrespect in this matter. Even in Marseilles, when we were together in a strange land, and thou didst purchase many worthless wares, my advice was not asked, nor was I told anything. I knew nothing of all thy doings and dealings until thou didst unload the goods from the ship in the city of Arles. If a non-Jew from my city had happened to be there, he would have consulted or informed me as to his buying and selling.\(^{265}\)

In our handbooks and encyclopedias Judah and Samuel Ibn Tibbon are described as the “fathers of Hebrew philosophical language,” “the great translators and transmitters of Arabic literature to the West” etc. If you asked somebody on the streets of medieval Lunel, he or she would answer, “They are rich merchants.” The social influence and power of the Tibbonide family rested ultimately on its wealth.

Philosophy and secular sciences were cultural marks distinguishing the social elite from the simple people. The elitism and esotericism of medieval Jewish philosophers had an obvious social function: the knowledge of the “mysteries” or “secrets” is the privilege of few elected people and was denied to the vulgar. Virtually all the post-Maimonidean philosophers emphasized and repeated again and again the distinction between the vulgar and the elite and the necessity to conceal philosophy from the eyes of the former. Philosophy was a key element of the aristocratic culture in the Jewish communities of medieval Provence; it was a privilege and an item of luxury that only the richest could afford in principle.\(^{266}\)

On the other hand, knowledge of philosophy, astrology, and especially medicine was a cultural capital as well. If you are rich you can buy books and hire a tutor for your son or yourself to learn sciences. If your family eventually looses its wealth, you or your son can still earn money as a well-trained physician whose services were frequently required in Provence by rich people, or as an astrologer or even as a philosopher serving rich people interested in philosophy as private instructor teaching them or their children etc. Learning secular sciences was a good investment and also a sort of insurance: your knowledge remains with you forever whereas your material wealth can disappear in a moment – we are quite often reminded in medieval ethical literature about these truths.

\(^{264}\) Ibid., 65
\(^{265}\) Ibid., 70-72.
No wonder that the Tibbonides also dealt with medicine. Benjamin of Tudela reports that Judah Ibn Tibbon was a practicing physician in Lunel around 1160. Samuel was also a doctor and his father criticized him in this respect as well. The grandson, Moses Ibn Tibbon translated many medical works from Arabic into Hebrew.

According to Joseph Shatzmiller’s estimation approximately 50% of the practicing physicians in fourteenth-century Provence were Jews. In Crete between 1365 and 1397 the rate of Jews among physicians amounted to 68%. Medical profession was obviously an attractive way of earning living for Jews in the Mediterranean basin. Learned physician were sought for, paid well, and respected by both Jewish and Gentile societies. Medical knowledge was convertible into material wealth and social influence.

On the other hand, since learned medicine was based on Greek scientific ideas Jewish doctors had to know, understand and accept Greco-Arabic scientific worldview. Many of them were intelligent enough to discover the tension between the reality they learned to experience and interpret as physicians and the reality they learned from the sacred books of Judaism and experienced following the patterns of traditional Jewish life. Maimonides addresses exactly this sort of readers in the introduction of GP.

Studying Jewish theological and exegetical texts that re-interpret and re-state the most essential doctrines of Judaism on the basis of Greco-Arabic scientific worldview was probably an unavoidable intellectual and emotional need for many Jewish physicians. Philosophy was partly a fashion, a luxury item associated with high social status. It was partly a cultural capital that could be converted into money and social standing. But on the other hand, for many educated people it was probably a need as elementary as bread. The fashion of philosophy and its functioning as cultural capital were probably based on its being loved and pursued for its own sake by intelligent human beings.

Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s predilection for Maimonides, the hero of a new generation, might have been accompanied with further changes in mentality and approach to life that met strong disapproval from the father for whom the old adab-culture of Muslim Spain was still the standard. The continuation of the passage quoted lastly reads:

Worst still, when thou didst write thy letters or compose thine odes [shirekha] to send abroad, thou wast unwilling to show a word to me and didst prevent me from seeing. When I said to thee, “Show me!” thou wouldst answer: “Why dost thou want to see?” as if thinking that my help was unnecessary. And this was from thy folly, in that thou wast wise in thine own eyes.

[…]. And remember what I said to thee, when thou didst make a blunder over an infinitive [lit. “when you wrote bishovi instead of be-shivti” – the latter is the correct form in Biblical Hebrew]. Avoid all such faults.

Samuel rejected his father’s supervision not only in economical matters but – what was more painful for the old Judah – in intellectual matters as well. Samuel did not conform to the esthetical norms Judah inherited from the courtly culture of Andalusia. The chief authority for Judah Ibn Tibbon was Samuel ha-Nagid, a great Jewish poet and statesman of the eleventh century whose book entitled Ben Mishle was a poetic compendium on the values

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267 Cf. Abrahams, Hebrew Ethical Wills, 68.
269 Abrahams, Hebrew Ethical Wills, 72.
270 Ibid., 69.
of courtly culture (adab). However, he did not contribute anything to philosophy and other subjects that were interesting for Samuel Ibn Tibbon:

My son! take upon thee to write one leaf daily and to meditate for an hour in the Ben Mishle [of Samuel ha-Nagid]. Read every week the Pentateuchal section in Arabic. This will improve thine Arabic vocabulary, and will be of advantage in translating, if thou shouldst feel inclined to translate. Show honor to thyself, thy household, and thy children, by providing decent clothing, as for as thy means allow, for it is unbecoming for any one, when not at work, to go shabbily dressed. Spare from thy belly and put it on thy back.271

It seems that the younger Ibn Tibbon had a remarkably different taste and different strategic choices not only in matters of intellectual interest, Hebrew style and composition but also in such material issues as selling and buying goods and providing himself and his family with “decent clothing.” Samuel apparently followed (or made) a new fashion alien to his father’s taste. Was Samuel’s new approach connected to his adherence to Maimonides’ person and ideals? I cannot answer this question at the moment. In any case, Samuel made a good choice: Maimonides was indeed the man who determined the social and intellectual ideals of many Provencal Jews in the subsequent generations – not Samuel ha-Nagid or Bahyah Ibn Paqudah or Judah ha-Levi or the other beloved authors of the old Ibn Tibbon.

The Hebrew translation of Maimonides’ GP and the correspondence with Maimonides that probably Samuel himself cleverly published together with the translation around 1204 established Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s fame independently of his father. He became the chief interpreter of Maimonides’ doctrine in the West. The power of the Tibbonide family was re-asserted in the new, Maimonidean world.

However, his position was soon threatened by Judah al-Harizi, an excellent and famous poet from Spain who published another Hebrew translation of GP and also a short outline of the main subjects of the book in order to facilitate its study. Judah al-Harizi’s translation followed a different methodological ideal than Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s one. Harizi was not as consistent in the rendering of philosophical terms as Ibn Tibbon and did not follow so much Arabic syntactical constructions. As a consequence his translation is much more readable than Ibn Tibbon’s one.

Harizi added an introduction to his translation where he openly pointed out the superiority of his own translation over Ibn Tibbon’s one. Without naming his rival he claimed that Ibn Tibbon used difficult language where simpler and easy-to-understand sentences could perfectly render Maimonides’ original intentions. The head of the Tibbonide family could not pass over in silence such an arrogant attack against the fame and power of his family.272

In 1213, nine years after Maimonides’ death, Samuel published a revised version of his translation together with a philosophical dictionary explaining the Arabic loan-words and Hebrew philosophical terms (many of them being his own inventions) that the reader will meet in his version of GP.273 The dictionary starts with a fierce attack on Judah al-Harizi’s

271 Abrahams, Hebrew Ethical Wills, 65-66.
273 This text often included in the traditional editions of GP under the title Perush ha-millot ha-zarot asher be-maamor ha-rav. I used the edition by Yehudah Even Shmuel in his edition of Ibn Tibbon’s version of GP: Doctor Perplexorum (Guide of the Perplexed), ed. Yehudah Even Shmuel [Judah Ibn Samuel] (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1946). Unfortunately I could not consult Carlos Fraenkel: From Maimonides to Samuel Ibn
translation; Samuel used all possible polemic means to discredit his rival’s work. He claims that Harizi is only a poet who is incompetent in matters of philosophy. His translation lacks terminological consistency and logical rigor; it is not technical enough for Samuel’s taste. Harizi’s knowledge of Arabic and Hebrew is undeniable according to Samuel; however, his lack of erudition in philosophy hindered him from understanding GP. His translation is useless; his resume of GP misleads the reader and disregards Maimonides’ prohibition to reveal the “intentions” of the GP.

Ibn Tibbon’s efforts were successful at the end of the day: practically all post-Maimonidean Jewish philosophers read GP in his translation. Nonetheless, the threat from Judah al-Harizi was real: he was invited to the court of Frederick II and the Latin translation of GP was made from his Hebrew version. Judah al-Harizi’s position at the Holy Roman emperor’s court was a serious challenge to the Tibbonide family. However, they had the means to cope with the situation.

For one reason or for another, Jacob Anatolio, Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s son-in-law was also invited to Frederick II’s court. He became involved in a very important project: translating Averroes’ commentaries from Arabic into Latin. He became a personal good friend of Michael Scotus.

Samuel’s son, Moses Ibn Tibbon also joined the company of Anatoli; he had the possibility of entering the court of the emperor and to learn from the scholars gathering around Frederick. The Tibbonide’s respect and influence within the Provencal Jewish communities must have been very considerable.

Moses Ibn Tibbon was the heir of Samuel’s position in Provence. His own fame rested on a great number of translations from Arabic into Hebrew, on a commentary on the Song of Songs and on a commentary on selected aggadot from the Babylonian Talmud. I have no doubt that he also continued his father and grandfather’s professions, namely medicine and trade although, unfortunately, there are no sources on his economical activities.

He was the first man who wrote an ongoing supercommentary on Ibn Ezra’s Torah-commentary as far as we know today. The fact that the head of the Tibbonide family wrote an Ibn Ezra supercommentary is very significant in itself. It shows the integration of Ibn Ezra studies into the aristocratic culture of the Tibbonide family. Ibn Ezra’s commentary probably met the intellectual needs of Jewish physicians, astrologers, courtiers, and philosophers in the thirteenth century. Perhaps, the head of the Tibbonide school, Moses Ibn Tibbon wanted to reaffirm his authority by writing a supercommentary to such an important text. Knowing the “secrets” of Ibn Ezra probably became a cultural mark distinguishing the vulgar from the educated already in the second half of the thirteenth century.

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Chapter 2: Eleazar ben Mattityah

The Basic Facts

On fol. 200 r of MS Vat. ebr. 54 the full name of the author is given in the following form: the little Eleazar, the son of the hasid, of the gaon, of the great Rabbi Mattityah of blessed memory. A man called Eleazar ben Mattityah and his father, Rabbi Mattityah signed a rabbinical decision in Candia, Crete on 15 Elul 1228. In a thirteenth-century Ashkenazi halakhic compendium a Rabbenu Mattityah is mentioned as a halakhic authority in Egypt. Perhaps he was the father of the supercommentator.

The hypothesis that this Eleazar ben Mattityah is identical with the author of the Ibn Ezra supercommentary is suggested by the fact that all the surviving manuscripts seem to be of Cretan provenance and that there are Greek glosses in the text evidencing Greek knowledge on the part of the author. The frequent use of the Hebrew word pitron or pitrono to divide the lemma from the commentary is also stylistic characteristic of Byzantine Jewish biblical exegesis. The supercommentary is more concerned with the polemics against the Karaites than other text of the same genre. The Byzantine cultural background might account for this fact as well.

At the same time the author was familiar with the town Rouen in Northern France where according to the probably correct assumption of the author Ibn Ezra wrote some of his works. He quotes several times the compendium Ruah hen that was composed probably around 1240 in Provence. There are also “Romance” (loaz) glosses in the supercommentary – the Hebrew term loaz often designates Old French or Provencal in medieval Hebrew literature. Thus the French background of the Eleazar who signed the rabbinical decision in 1228 is also reflected in the supercommentary.

The author of the supercommentary also spent probably many years in Egypt, both in Fustat [Mitsrayim] and Alexandria [No Amon]. He refers to a scholar, Tsaddoq ben Elisha ben Shemaya of Alexandria who explained to him an astrological matter relevant for understanding a passage in Ibn Ezra. He mentions that he saw a copy of David Kimhi’s explanation of Abraham’s vision in Genesis 18 in Mitsrayim which refers probably not to Egypt in general but to Fustat in particular in this context.

On the basis of this evidence we can safely assume that the author of the supercommentary was a French rabbi who traveled to the eastern half of the Mediterranean

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276 See Umberto Cassuto: Codices Vaticani Hebraici, 79. The glosses in MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 177 v (kwmtwn); 193 r (byrmyz’); 199 v (kyrwryt – χαπόρτι according to Cassutto); 225 r (’ypntws and platanos).

277 For example it is abundantly used by Meyuhas ben Eliyah now dated to the first half of the fourteenth century. Cf. Israel M. Ta-Shma: “Le-toldot ha-sifrut ha-rabbanit be-Yavan be-mea 14” (On Greek-Byzantine rabbinic literature in the fourteenth century) Tarbiz 62 (1993), 112

278 MS Vat. ebr. 54, 189 v, 206 v, 207 v, 213 v. The Karaites are usually referred to as tsadduqim, ‘Sadducees’ or minim, ‘heretics.’ Especially interesting is 189 v concerning the calendar (Ibn Ezra ad Exodus 12: 2) where Eleazar claims that he read the heretics’ books.

279 MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 190 r.

280 MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 203 v. He also mentions a place called Hanim in Egypt (fol. 214 r) and village called Shawwaya’a (?) outside the Land of Israel (fol. 208 v).
basin and spent some time, perhaps years in Crete and in Egypt. The identification of the Eleazar ben Mattityah who wrote the supercommentary with the person bearing the same name mentioned in the other sources is well-grounded.

Many Arabic glosses evidence the author’s knowledge of Arabic. These words either explain Ibn Ezra’s references to the Arabic language or scientific terms. For example in a long astrological passage describing the constellations the Arabic names are frequently mentioned.  

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Eleazar was probably no longer in Egypt when he wrote his supercommentary. He uses the past tense about his stay in Fustat in the comment on Genesis 18: 1.  

The Greek glosses were probably inserted into the supercommentary in order to facilitate the audience’s understanding of the text. As for the Romance glosses their function is to explain one particular reference by Ibn Ezra to the existence of similar words in Biblical Hebrew and loaz language.  

283 The Arabic glosses are mostly scientific terms; they were mentioned because they were widely used in Arabic scientific literature that was a firm point of reference for the author. Thus, it seems that the presence of Romance and Arabic glosses can be accounted for even if we suppose that the author did not stay in France or in an Arabic country when he wrote the supercommentary. Similar explanation does not hold for the Greek glosses. Therefore, the most probable is that the supercommentary was actually written in the Byzantine zone, most probably in Crete.

The date of the supercommentary can be determined by the following considerations. Eleazar ben Mattityah signed the aforementioned rabbinic ordinances (taqqanot) in 1228. Therefore, he must have been a well-established rabbinic authority by that time. The latest source quoted in the supercommentary is Nahmanides (cc. 1194-1270) who is mentioned as a deceased person. Consequently the supercommentary must have been written after 1270.  

This means that Eleazar ben Mattityah must have been a rather old man when he was composing his work. In fact, there is a remark in the supercommentary that might be connected to the author’s old age. Eleazar explained in details the allegoric meaning of the Garden of Eden already while commenting on Ibn Ezra’s introduction, where the topic is only briefly mentioned. Eleazar explains that he could not wait with the explanation of such an important topic until he reaches its proper place within the commentary (that is to say, Genesis 2-3) because he feared that death could hinder him from doing so.  

He quotes his own father on fol. 178 v; 181 r, 212 v, and 220 r of MS Vat. ebr. 54. He mentions that his father had visions. Eleazar also had visionary experiences when his father touched him. From the way he refers to his father it is obvious that the father was an educated and devoted man as well; and Eleazar probably learnt many things from him. Scholarship was a family tradition in Eleazar’s family as well.

It is quite probable that the purpose of the journey to the Holy Land was to get more of the divine emanation that was believed to be the strongest on the Holy Land by many medieval Jewish philosophers. Eleazar repeats this claim many times (175 v, 176 v, and 186v of MS Vat. ebr. 54).

On fol. 209 v of MS Vat. ebr. 54, having understood a particularly difficult passage in Ibn Ezra about the significance of a he-goat in the sacrificial cult, the author praises God in the following way: “May God be blessed who has instructed the heart of the little one concerning the [meaning] of the he-goat, the gates of which are not opened to anyone except to a pair from a clan or to one from a town.” In another passage the supercommentator remarks: “The sage [Ibn Ezra] mentioned [this topic] but did not speak about it – he only

281 MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 202 v – 203 v.  
282 MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 173 r.  
283 MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 190 r: sac and esopo.  
284 MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 169 v.
makes allusions to it for the sake of the wise” (fol. 216 r). Eleazar was elitist just like virtually all the post-Maimonidean philosophers. He rejoiced in knowing things that very few people knew besides him – at least according to his own estimation.

Byzantine manuscripts transmit a Hebrew grammar and a treatise about the spiritual significance of certain commandments attributed to Eleazar ben Mattityah.  

Presently I see no reason not to identify the author of these texts with the supercommentator. Eleazar might have enjoyed a modest fame on the island of Crete in his life and during the two subsequent centuries. He was hardly known outside of the Byzantine zone.

General Characterization of the Supercommentary

Eleazar uses the textus receptus of Ibn Ezra’s Torah-commentary, that is to say, he comments on the first introduction, on the Short Commentary on Genesis, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, and on the Long Commentary on Exodus. He refers to “other versions” (nushaot) of the Exodus commentary without identifying explicitly the Short Commentary on Exodus. He certainly consulted more than one manuscripts of Ibn Ezra’s commentary on Exodus; some of these manuscripts might have contained the Short Commentary or contaminated versions of the Short and Long Commentaries. As we shall see in the part on Genesis 1:1 it is often not easy to judge what sort of text he actually used. He was apparently unaware of the existence of Long Commentary on Genesis and other recensions.

Textual criticism was of major interest for the author. On fol. 177 r he remarks that he did not find a certain reference of Ibn Ezra to the commentary on the Exodus in any of the manuscripts except in one codex as a haggaha (emendation). The Hebrew word haggaha means probably a marginal correction in this context.

He proposes emendations several times in Ibn Ezra’s text. An interesting case is Exodus 2:2 (s. v. “shelosha yerahim”) where Eleazar’s quotes a variant from “the copies of Asaf the physician” (u-vi-sifrey Asaf ha-rofe matsati – fol. 180 v). Asaf the physician was probably a friend of the author who let him use his library.

The emendations show the realistic approach of the author to text – a closer definition of “realism” will be provided in Part Three. On fol. 179 r, for example, Eleazar could not make sense out of Ibn Ezra’s text. He checked all the manuscripts (nushaot) available to him and found no differences between them. Nonetheless, he was confident to declare that the passage in question was corrupted by the copyists. Eleazar’s knowledge that copyists make mistake was not derived from the classic sources of philosophy or Jewish religion but from everyday life. Observations from everyday life were permitted to play role in Eleazar’s hermeneutics.

Criticizing the incompetent copyists who corrupted the text is a topic we shall meet in the introduction of Caspi’s supercommentary as well. Copying philosophical texts indeed required great attention and the ability of understanding the text itself from the copyists. According to Malachi Beit-Arié’s estimation in some 60 % of the identifiable cases the medieval Jewish scribe was an accomplished scholar and made the codex for his own use. In case of philosophical manuscripts this ratio might have been even higher. To copy a text correctly was a proof of knowledge. On the other hand a copy full of mistakes proved the ignorance of the scribe. Therefore, medieval Jewish scribes were expected to be more than machines for reproduction. In some codices the scribe apologizes for not changing the

285 The grammar is entitled Diqduq ha-dani and attested in MS St. Petersburg, Inst. of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy C 14, fol. 73 - 90 written in 1419 by a Byzantine hand. The spiritual work is attested in MS Vat. ebr. 249, fol. 302 – 319.
original text where he suspected textual corruption. Eleazar ben Mattityah’s and the other supercommentators’ engagement in textual emendations and criticism of incompetent scribes has to be appreciated against this background.\footnote{Cf. for example MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 216 r where Eleazar claims that due to the mistakes of the copyists the sense of a passage cannot be recovered.}

Eleazar explicitly refers to a great number of sources. He had access to many of Ibn Ezra’s works besides the biblical commentaries. Maimonides’ works are often quoted as well: not only GP but the chapter on the calendar from the Mishneh Torah as well. A philosophical compendium called Ruah hen written in Provence around 1240 is also often quoted. Eleazar used Rashi’s and David Kimhi’s biblical commentaries as well.

More surprising authorities quoted by Eleazar are Hay and Nahshon gaons, Rashi’s and Rabbeinu Hananel’s commentaries on the Talmud, and a certain Eleazar mi-Mirmeza appearing on fol. 180 v. In my opinion this name should be emended to Eleazar mi-Germazya and to be identified with Eleazar ben Judah of Worms (cc. 1165-1230), the author of Sefer Rokeah, a key figure in the history of the German pietists (Hasidey Ashkenaz) movement. Eleazar also quotes a book called Sefer Hayyim that he attributes to Ibn Ezra. Naftali Ben-Menahem claims that the Sefer Hayyim quoted in the supercommentary was actually written by Eleazar ben Judah of Worms. Moreover, Eleazar quotes Saadyah gaon’s Book of Beliefs and Opinions in the early “Ashkenazi” translation, not in the Tibbonide translation (see on this more in the chapter about elohim).

Therefore, it seems that the teachings of the German pietists somehow influenced Eleazar ben Mattityah. Maybe his family had an Ashkenazi background. On fol. 200 r he names his father as “the hasid R. Mattityah.” What did he mean by the adjective “hasid?” Was his father an adherent of the hasidey Ashkenaz movement? Unfortunately, the source is not explicit enough to answer these questions.

There are two general statements about the main objectives of the supercommentary and the methods of interpretation applied. The first is at the beginning of Exodus 12: 2 – a long and remarkable passage in which Ibn Ezra explains astronomical, halakhic, and theological problems concerning the Jewish calendar and he uses the occasion to refute the Karaite heretics and to defend the dogma of the Oral Torah. Commenting on this famous excursus of Ibn Ezra Eleazar inserts an essay on the names and origins of Jewish months. This essay starts with the following words:

Eleazar says:
I have already explained the hidden senses of the sage’s [Ibn Ezra’s] words at the beginning of this book of mine together with the other mysteries that are scattered here and there [in Ibn Ezra’s commentary] because the [understanding of] the thing depends on the figure that was drawn [at the beginning of the book]. And now it is proper that I explain all the particular issues at its place similarly to the practice of the sage [Ibn Ezra], for I see that he did so: In the introduction to Genesis he opened his mouth in wisdom, and then returned [to the subject] in the present section, and a third time at the end of the book, and a fourth time in the section Emor, and the fifth time in the book Yesod mora. And everything goes to the same place [i.e. the discussions pertain to the same topic].

And from the ways of our Light – may He be exalted – we learn, who created the heaven and earth with all their parts [in one instant] and after that started to arrange the things in the appropriate days [of creation]. So I will also do so: I will explain the words of the sage according to my capacities at every sentence in its own place according to what I grasp of it.\footnote{MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 187 v.
Eleazar refers to an astronomical figure that indeed appears on fol. 163r of MS Vat. ebr. 54 in his commentary on Ibn Ezra’s introduction, where Ibn Ezra criticizes the Karaite exegetes who reject rabbinic traditions concerning the calendar. He refers to the rabbinic calendar as presenting a serious proof for the correctness of rabbinic tradition: the calendar cannot be learned from the Bible alone on the one hand, and its correctness is proved not only by Scriptural passages but also by the movement of the stars and the seasons of the year, in one word, by Nature itself, on the other hand.

This argument is recapitulated several times in Ibn Ezra’s commentary and in his other works. Eleazar could have collected all these texts in one discussion and explained them together. This alternative was deliberately avoided. Eleazar preferred the following strategy instead: He explains the main argument at the first place when it appears: here even an astronomical figure is provided that Eleazar saw necessary for the correct understanding of Ibn Ezra’s words. Whoever reads this first explanation will be able to understand the main points of Ibn Ezra’s reasoning. Therefore, in the later passages Eleazar does not repeat the main argument any more. He rather tries to elaborate further details about it in accordance with what Ibn Ezra says in the particular context.

Eleazar refers to a divine model to justify this practice: In the beginning God created everything at once – he probably presupposes Maimonides’ interpretation of creation – and then, during the six days he arranged and elaborated the details of the already created universe. Ibn Ezra follows such practice as well in exegetical matters and Eleazar joins this very prestigious tradition: he outlines first the main structure and then provides the details.

At the beginning of Leviticus (1: 1) Ibn Ezra alludes to some mysteries of the sacrifices described in the Leviticus. God does not need animals to be slaughtered for Him; however, the properly performed sacrifice is instrumental in defeating the astrological fate and in achieving redemption by clinging to the upper world with our souls – a central theme in Ibn Ezra’s thought.289

Commenting on this passage Eleazar collects other passages from Ibn Ezra’s commentaries where the master refers to the secrets or mysteries of sacrifices. After that Eleazar writes:

And in the book Yesod mora, in the seventh chapter, the sage [Ibn Ezra] gives a fuller account of his opinion concerning the “one covenant” and concerning the rest of [his] words. And it seems to me good to copy his words here. For his words here should be understood from his own words at another place and that his words should not be understood from the words of someone else than him who says something here and something there. Nonetheless, if I add to his words from the words of [other] distinguished authors, no harm befalls on us, but use.290

Eleazar applies the old exegetical principle Homerum ex Homero to Ibn Ezra’s text. He indeed often explains Ibn Ezra’s sentences by quoting in extenso other statements on the same topics from Ibn Ezra. Eleazar’s knowledge of Ibn Ezra’s corpus was vast and deep; I have the impression that no other supercommentators could compete with him in this respect among the early ones except perhaps the earliest glossators, like Joseph ben Jacob of Moudeville who had the privilege to be a personal pupil of Ibn Ezra.

289 Dov Schwartz argues persuasively that Ibn Ezra probably interpreted the sacrifices in terms of astral magic; cf. his Studies on Astral Magic…., 9-26.
290 MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 205r.
Exegetical Themes

Eleazar’s main interests are also closer to Ibn Ezra’s original intellectual world than that of the other early supercommentators. Eleazar is deeply interested in Hebrew grammar; he not only highlights Ibn Ezra’s grammatical remarks but also presents the results of his own researches on Hebrew grammar. Remarkable is his comparative analysis of Arabic and Hebrew personal nouns. Other supercommentators also tried to understand and explain Ibn Ezra’s grammatical comments. However, Hebrew grammar was not a “productive” field of research in the second half of the thirteenth century any more. David Kimhi’s (d. 1235) grammar and dictionary were the last original contributions to this subject that was so enormously important in Ibn Ezra’s days. Eleazar’s involvement in grammatical research makes him an exceptional – rather old-fashioned – supercommentator.

Another focus of interest was chronology. Biblical chronology is a “deep structure” of the text: you have to construct it yourself; you will not find it ready-made in the Bible itself. On the other hand, chronology definitely belonged to the literal level of exegesis: it was considered to be a part of peshat but it was by no means “simple” or “plain.” Ibn Ezra devoted much attention to solving chronological problems and Eleazar paid due attention to these passages in Ibn Ezra and added his own observations on chronological matters.

Moreover, he also made efforts to understand the chronology of Ibn Ezra’s life. We have already quoted in the Prolegomena his statement that Ibn Ezra finished his commentary earlier than Maimonides completed GP. He also claims that Sefer Hayyim is an early work of Ibn Ezra; that is why it is so different from his other writings – today the accepted opinion is that he was not the author at all. Eleazar is of the opinion that the (Long) Commentary on Exodus was written before the (Short) Commentary on Genesis – today we think the opposite. Whereas Eleazar’s interest in biblical chronology is paralleled in other supercommentaries as well, the observation about Ibn Ezra’s chronology renders his supercommentary unique again.

Astronomy, astrology, and all kinds of problems concerning the calendar received much more attention from Eleazar than from later supercommentators. Many astronomical figures help the understanding of Ibn Ezra’s allusions and arguments. Long excurses are inserted about the seven climates, the calendar in general, the constellations, astrological fate and redemption from it. He rejects the interpretation of certain biblical commandments in terms of astral magic. Nonetheless, he explains the prohibition of working on the Shabbat in an astrological framework: the seventh day is under Saturn that has negative effects on human works, so it is wiser not to work at all.

Another focus of interest, that makes Eleazar different not only from later supercommentators but from Ibn Ezra as well, is his detailed treatment of halakhic questions. He quotes the Talmud and other rabbinic writings, such as Mishnah, Mekhilta, Sifra, and Sifre much more often than other supercommentators. He signed a collection of rabbinic ordinances in 1228; therefore he must have been an authority in halakha already in his youth.

His halakhic knowledge led him to criticize Ibn Ezra in points where “the sage” differed from the talmudic tradition in the interpretation of verses that had halakhic implications. In principle Ibn Ezra respected halakha. But he was not an accomplished rabbi. His knowledge of halakha was rather superficial except for matters pertaining to the calendar; moreover, his commitment to halakha was lesser than that of rabbinic scholars. The same is true of the other supercommentators as well.

291 MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 191 r.

292 Cf. MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 172 v (on the war of Gen 14), 177 v and 180 r (on the servitude in Egypt) 186 v and 191 v(Job’s and Elihu’s relation to the Exodus) 204 v (on the date of the Sanctuary’s consacration and the creation of the world).
We shall see in the next chapter, for example, that Joseph Caspi praised God for his being free from the troubles of marriage and family – in spite of the fact that it is a positive commandment in rabbinc Judaism to get married and to procreate children. Later in his life Caspi fulfilled this commandment for sure; but his commitment in this matter was not as strong as not to express his negative sentiments about it openly. For Eleazar and for many other rabbis Caspi’s statement must have sounded arrogant and silly: how can you thank God for your not fulfilling a commandment of the Torah?! Although we have no reason to question that the members of the Maimonidean camp did observe the religious commandments in general – at least they did not do less than others did – their commitment probably was not always as unequivocal as the rabbinc authorities wished.

Eleazar stood alone in this matter as well. He treats in detail the obligation of eating unleavened bread during the Passover and he criticizes Ibn Ezra for his divergence from the talmudic halakha. In the next chapter we shall see that Caspi noted the problem as well; however, he took the matter much more lightly. Another notable passage in Eleazar’s supercommentary is a long discussion about circumcision as a prerequisite of partaking in the Passover meal, where Eleazar enumerates the different positions in the Talmud, identifies Ibn Ezra’s interpretation with one of these positions and argues that a different opinion should be preferred. Another halakhic discussion concerning the firstlings of animals is concluded by Eleazar’s decision of the halakha with an explicit reference to the traditional rules of decision (kelalim).

His occasional criticism of Ibn Ezra is expressed in a respectful way. “I am confused about his words” [nivhali al devarav] is the usual formula that introduces the critical remarks. Most of the criticism pertains to halakha; nonetheless, Eleazar also objects to Ibn Ezra in grammatical and exegetical points and once he points out an inconsistency in Ibn Ezra’s interpretation. It should be remarked that he does not object to Ibn Ezra’s Platonic concept of the soul – we shall see in the third part that a later supercommentator, Moses Nagari, was quite frustrated about Ibn Ezra’s apparent refusal of the standard Aristotelian account of the soul.

The most frequently quoted author besides Ibn Ezra is Maimonides and the most frequently quoted book is GP. In the Prolegomena we have seen how Eleazar combined Maimonides’ and Ibn Ezra’s texts.

Some remarkable philosophical discussions in the supercommentary are about God’s knowing of the futurum contingens, about temptation, about miracles, and negative theology. More will be said on his philosophical and exegetical ideas in part two and three.

Ancients and Moderns

There are few remarks about the relationship between the moderns and the ancients. On fol.175 v Eleazar promises to extend the words of Maimonides concerning Jacob’s ladder and his interpretation is indeed based on Maimonides’ enigmatic remarks on the subject.

On fol. 179 r commenting on Ibn Ezra’s grammatical explanation of the phrase va-yehi in Exodus 1: 5 Eleazar writes: “even if the sage [Ibn Ezra] provided a long explanation I will still add to his explanation since his words are not understood even by some of those who see [qetsat ha-roim].”

Here the point is again to expand the original ideas of Ibn Ezra. Eleazar mentions that even some of the competent readers [“those who see”] do not understand Ibn Ezra’s words. Whom did he have in mind? It is possible that he refers to previous supercommentators or – what seems more probable to me – he had a couple of friends with whom he read Ibn Ezra’s commentary together. Asaf the physician mentioned on fol. 180 v (see above) was probably one of them.
Eleazar admits at one place that he simply does not understand Ibn Ezra’s intention (180 v). A similar remark is to be found in the midst of the great excursus on the mystic interpretation of the divine names at Exodus 3: 15 – one of the most interesting and most difficult texts in Ibn Ezra’s commentaries. Eleazar writes: “And in the book Sod ha-shem [Ibn Ezra] goes very deep into this matter, and his great light blinds the eyes of those who see [eney ha-roim]” (183 v). Here Eleazar seems to presuppose that Ibn Ezra had a superior intellect whose light is too strong even for the competent readers (“those who see”) of the later generations. This topic will be much more enunciated in Caspi’s, Bonet’s and Moses Nagari’s supercommentaries.

A more general statement about the ancients’ superiority is to be found on 185 r also within the context of the excursus on Exodus 3: 15:

As for the matters pertaining to the heavens no man knows anything except for this small amount of learning. And if the ancients [rishonim] to whom the gate of the heavens was opened and saw divine visions were in disagreement concerning this knowledge, then how could those, who come after them, who walk in darkness like blind people not seeing light, how could they apprehend and expand [le-harhiv] the words of the [ancients]??

The ancients saw “divine visions” and the “gate of heavens” was “opened to” them – these words allude to Ezekiel 1: 1. The ancients had prophetic knowledge that their received as reward for their higher degree of spirituality and the moderns are not in the position to compete with them in this respect or to question the principles revealed to them.

Nonetheless, as we have seen, Eleazar does dare to criticize Ibn Ezra and to “expand” [hirhiv] – that is to say, to develop, to elaborate, or even to adjust – his doctrines. Is this practice consistent with the declaration just quoted?

When Eleazar interprets Ibn Ezra’s comments on the furniture of the Tabernacle he decides to add further interpretation and to explain those details that were left untouched by Ibn Ezra. He writes, “in order to embellish the intellect let us complete what is deficient in the knowledge of the ancients [rishonim]; so we say…” (fol. 195 v). The correction is an “embellishment” of the intellect. It does not concern the basic principles; it pertains to some details that were ignored by the ancients for some reason.

The modern is a commentator (or supercommentator) of the ancient: he interprets the basic principles and might “complete” the details. While completing the details the modern might even contradict the authority of the ancient in the details but not in the principles. On the other hand we should also remember that Eleazar’s criticism of Ibn Ezra was partly motivated by halakhic considerations, where a more ancient authority had to be defended than Ibn Ezra himself.

Nonetheless, the possibility that the moderns might know certain things better than the ancients is much less enunciated by Eleazar than by Caspi and Bonet. The feeling of inferiority and sorrow over the loss of a great amount of ancient material dominates in Eleazar’s text.

He repeats the ancient claim that the great pagan sages stole the books of King Solomon and other Jewish sages and published them under their own names (fol. 191 r, fol. 220 v). In another passage he refers to the apocrypha that survived in Christian hands: he mentions the Book of Judith [megillat Yehudit bat Yehoyaqim], the Book of Tobith [sefer Tovya] and the Book of Zerubabel different from the one that was widespread among medieval Jews (fol. 191 r-v). He remarks that many books referred to in the Bible are no longer extant (fol. 220 v).
He also mentions a non-rabbinical Jewish community (ahinu ha-niddahim ve-ha-ovdim – “our brethren who are expelled and lost;” perhaps the Falashas of Ethiopia?) that has a great number of oral tradition from Moses, Joshua, Pinhas, and Samuel but ignorant of the talmudic authorities. All these traditions are lost for the mainstream Judaism, concludes Eleazar, “we sit in darkness with our Babylonian Talmud, like those who are dead for ever, until the Teacher of Righteousness comes to us” (fol. 191 v).

On fol. 224 r a general statement about the talmudic haggadot is made. Eleazar’s main line of argument is in accordance with the famous introduction of Moses Ibn Tibbon to his Sefer ha-pea. Some of the talmudic stories use hyperbolic language: they were not understood literally even by the simple people. Some of them were understood literally by the simple people but not by the sages: these stories have to be interpreted allegorically or as noble lies, for the talmudic rabbis pretended to accept some popular beliefs in order to change the vulgar for the better by referring to them. In other cases the stories were understood literally both by the simple people and the sages: in these cases the modern reader has to accept that the talmudic text relates a miracle that indeed took place.

Information about Other Supercommentaries

Eleazar occasionally refers to other supercommentaries he consulted. Unfortunately these references never mention names, places or other circumstances about the texts seen by Eleazar. It is practically impossible to identify any of these references with certainty. Nor is it for sure that Eleazar always had in mind written supercommentaries – interpretations of famous passages in Ibn Ezra could have been circulated only orally. However, in some cases it is possible to point to texts that might have been seen by Eleazar. In one case the identification is highly probable.

He was apparently not familiar with Moses Ibn Tibbon’s supercommentary. At a famous passage (Genesis 12: 6) where Ibn Ezra suggests that Moses did not write every letter of the Pentateuch Eleazar notes that he saw “only empty words” concerning this although he “searched for an explanation of his words from the mouth of the scribes and from the mouth of the books, but none of them could answer” (fol. 171 v – the full text will be quoted in Part Three). We have information about Moses Ibn Tibbon’s interpretation of this passage: it seems that his solution followed the same path as Eleazar’s one. Therefore, it is quite probable that Eleazar did not see Moses Ibn Tibbon’s work.

Ibn Ezra introduces an interesting though enigmatic theological formula at Genesis 19: 21: “Everything [= God] knows everything in a universal way, not in a particular way [lit. “in the way of everything not in the way of part”].” Eleazar mentions that some of his contemporaries think that Ibn Ezra denied that divine knowledge and providence reaches the individuals as well. Eleazar rejects this interpretation and attempts to show that Ibn Ezra’s actual view was in accordance with Maimonides’ one quoting Ibn Ezra’s comment on Psalm 1: 6 and GP III, 20.

In the shorter recension of Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara’s supercommentary there is an explanation which is similar to the one rejected by Eleazar:

It is known that there are forms in the spheres and all the generations and all the particular things [he-halaqim] come from them. According to the view of Ibn Ezra

293 Eleazar is called ha-dani in MS St. Petersburg, Inst. of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy, C 14, fol. 73 r and in the manuscript of uncertain fate possessed once by L. Loewe (cf. Hirschfeld: “Die Handschriften Dr. L. Loewe’s,” 364). Was this epitheton inspired by the belief that the Falashas were the descendants of the (biblical) tribe of Dan? Did Eleazar travel from Egypt to Ethiopia to visit Falasha communities? Or did he contact Falashas some other way?
God knows everything that is going to be generated, all the becoming particular things in the world in a universal way \([al\ derekh\ kelal]\), that is to say, He – may He be exalted – knows the power of all the spheres. Now since it is in the power of the [heavenly spheres] to produce everything that is produced in the world – “and [God knows everything] not in a particular way” – [He does not know] the hour when the particular things reach the border of coming into being. For the particular things are always in change, and how could His knowledge be affected [by change]?! And it is not proper to explain it any further.\(^{294}\)

In the longer recension this passage is missing; another interpretation is offered that is in accordance with Eleazar’s one. This latter explanation is also present in the shorter version under the heading “another interpretation” \([perush\ aher]\).

One has the impression that Shlomo Ibn Yaish’s supercommentary is a compendium of different sources. Therefore, it is possible that the passage quoted above comes from a much earlier supercommentary that might have been seen and rejected by Eleazar. Unfortunately there is no further evidence to decide the question.\(^{295}\)

The great excursus on the divine names at Exodus 3: 15 is also an occasion for Eleazar to have some critical remarks about previous supercommentators:

I saw the words of the supercommentators [lit. “those who explain his words” \(mevaerey\ devarav\): In those matters that they understand they make longer explanations than necessary; but as for those matters that they do not understand they leave them unexplained as a dream that has no interpretation. And behold, this is our hope that we run there to help Ibn Ezra\(^{296}\) to explain briefly what requires explanation so that those who see it can understand it without being overburdened.\(^{297}\)

Later but still within the passage on Exodus 3: 15 Eleazar writes: “I have seen the words of the supercommentators \([mevaerim]\ but their text is confused due to the scribes who copied it” (fol. 182 v). What follows after is a resume of the arithmetic discussion about prime numbers and perfect numbers that is found incorporated into the shorter version of Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara’s supercommentary\(^{298}\) at Exodus 3: 15 and sometimes copied together with Ibn Ezra’s commentary as well (e.g. MS Cambridge, UL, Add. 1014.1, fol. 245 r – 252 r). As has been argued above, this interpretation of the arithmetic parts of the excursus at Exodus 3: 15 was written by a pupil of Ibn Ezra, probably by Joseph ben Jacob of Moudeville or Yitzhak ben Judah.

On fol. 183 r, at the end of the section on arithmetic, before turning to the interpretation of the geometrical part of the excursus Eleazar says: “So far the hands of the

\(^{294}\) MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 6 r.

\(^{295}\) It should be remarked at this point that the quoted passage does not imply necessarily that God does not know the particular existents or does not care for them. It is possible that the supercommentator thought that God’s knowledge includes an absolute chronology of all the events that happen in the world – and this absolute chronology does cover all the particulars as particulars and still does not imply any change in the divine knowledge itself. What God does not have is the type of perspective we humans have of time. For example, God knows everything that happens on 2 February 2006, but He does not know that \(today\) is 2 February 2006. In this sense “He does not know the hour when the particular things reach the border of coming into being.” A modern philosopher would say that God’s knowledge is devoid of the first group (or ‘A-series’) of the so-called ‘McTaggart series’ of time-words (such as “now,” “today,” “tomorrow,” etc.) and it operates only with the second group ( or ‘B-series,’ such as “earlier,” "simultaneous,” “later,” etc.). Cf. Richard Sorabji: \(Time,\ Creation,\ and\ the\ Continuum\) (London: Duckworth, 1983), 33-34.

\(^{296}\) The beginning of the sentence is a verbatim quotation from Isaiah 20: 6.

\(^{297}\) MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 181 v.

\(^{298}\) MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 17 v – 18 r; missing from the longer version.
supercommentators [ha-mefarshim devarav] reach. And indeed, his words had to be explained. But we find further subjects here that nobody has touched until now” (183 r). After these words Eleazar quotes the beginning of the geometrical part of the excursus and interprets it with the help of three geometrical figures (183 v).

I think there is no reasonable doubt about the fact that Eleazar saw the earliest supercommentary on the arithmetical section of the excurse at Exodus 3: 15 attested in Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara’s supercommentary. Three arguments can be brought forth:

(1) This supercommentary explains the term “in potentia” and “in actu” in a way that might have been proper for students who never heard the name of Aristotle before, but for the erudite Aristotelian philosophers of the post-Maimonidean era was completely redundant (the text is quoted above, in the Prolegomena). Hence Eleazar’s complaint about the “supercommentators” who explain those things that need no explanation is a logical response if we suppose that he indeed had in mind the aforementioned (earliest) supercommentary.

(2) Eleazar’s summary of the “supercommentaries” with “confused text” about the prime numbers and perfect numbers seems to be in agreement with what we find about this topic in the earliest supercommentary.

(3) Eleazar claims that the “supercommentaries” stop at the end of the arithmetic section and do not enter the geometric example. This is true of the earliest supercommentary.

On fol. 199 v Eleazar reports that some of the contemporary scholars [qetsat hakhmey zemanenu] decipher the efod (a piece of cloth worn by the priests) as an allegory for the brain and its parts. It is not for sure that the reference is to Ibn Ezra supercommentaries.

Conclusion

There are many more highly interesting passages in Eleazar ben Mattityah’s supercommentary that cannot be treated here. He mentions for example a lapis sinaiticus on fol. 180 v. He describes a house that was suffering from leper as a punishment from God for the owners’ not respecting the Sabbatical laws during its building. The episode happened in a place called Shawwaya’a (?) outside of the Holy Land, that I couldn’t identify so far (208 r-v). He describes a pagan custom of drinking the blood of goats in order to receive prophecy and gives a long description of a magical operation in order to predict the future with the help of water, oil, and nine years old boy. The ordeal of bier is mentioned on fol. 220 v. A report about a tooth of a giant that was displayed in a royal court is quoted on fol. 224 v. Eleazar describes a necromantic custom and mentions that the ius primae noctis was practiced in Egypt during biblical times (fol. 228r).

Eleazar’s significance is that his is the oldest surviving supercommentary that covers more or less the whole text of Ibn Ezra’s Torah-commentary. His text witnesses the most important characteristics of post-Maimonidean philosophical literature: Tibbonide phraseology, Maimonides’ GP as the chief authority in philosophical matters, profound concern for exegesis of both biblical and talmudic texts following the footsteps of Ibn Ezra and Maimonides, extending the circle of philosophically interpreted texts, belief in astrology, in the privileged position of Israel and the Holy Land and conceiving salvation as redemption from the astrological fate.

299 Eleazar’s report on lapis sinaiticus is some 60 years earlier than that of Moses Narboni (on GP I, 66) that Susan Weingarten believed to be the earliest account in Hebrew. The earliest known description of lapis sinaiticus is from the year 1217 by a Christian pilgrim called Thietmar according to Susan Weingarten: “‘And this Shall be a Token to Thee’ (Ex 3.12): Lapis Sinaiticus in Jewish and Christian Traditions,” Journal of Jewish Studies 54 (2003): 1-20.
Chapter 3: Joseph Caspi

The Basic Facts

At the end of his Sefer ha-Sod Joseph Caspi writes that his work was completed in Arles, Provence, in the year 5077 of the Jewish era corresponding to the year 1316/1317 of the Common Era. In the same work he mentions that two years before he traveled to Egypt and he was 35 years old at that time. Assuming that Caspi wrote his book in a relatively short time modern scholars conclude from this facts that Caspi was in Egypt circa 1314-1315 C.E. and he must have been born around 1279/1280 C.E.

In the light of Israel Ta-Shma’s, Malachi Beit-Arié’s, Colette Sirat’s and other scholars’ conclusions about the nature of medieval Hebrew book-production these assumptions are no longer self-evident. For example, José Luis Mancha managed to prove on the basis of Gersonides’ astronomical works that their author added a considerable amount of astronomical information to the text known to us that must have been derived from observations during the years following the date of completion of the work as stated by the author in the colophon. Gersonides was a contemporary and compatriot of Caspi. Medieval Jewish authors often perceived their texts as databases that can be continuously augmented and improved even after the “official” date of publications.

In spite of this objection I will not challenge in the present study the generally accepted chronology of Caspi’s life and works. Critical re-examination of Caspi’s chronology is a task that cannot be carried out here. At the same time the reader should remember that the “facts” recollected here are often based on premises that can turn out to be false in later research.

The basic study on Caspi’s life and literary activity is that of Barry Mesch. The dates and identifications of persons and places are taken from Mesch’s study in the account to follow below unless indicated otherwise.

Caspi was born in Argentière, or L’argentière, Southern France in 1279/1280. The name Caspi itself is derived from the name of his native town (kaspi is from Hebrew kesef meaning ‘silver’). We do not know anything about his “civil” profession: he could easily be a rich merchant or physician although medical interest plays lesser role in his works than in the case of many Jewish philosophers in the period who were physicians as well.

His first literary product was the Ibn Ezra supercommentary we shall discuss. He claims in the introduction that he composed the first version when he was seventeen years old (1296/1297) with the help of R. Yeshaya ben Meir vulgo ‘Durant de Meyerkgesh’ [a person about whom I know nothing. Caspi talks about him with great respect and indicates that he was no longer alive when he wrote the introduction to the supercommentary. At the same time he does not call him his master or teacher; this could be expected if “R. Yeshaya” had been older than Caspi himself. Perhaps he was a good friend and fellow-student of Caspi from his youth.

The young Caspi wrote also a commentary on Abulwalid Merwan Ibn Ganah’s Sefer ha-riqma, a work on biblical Hebrew grammar.

302 MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 184, fol. 2 v. This information is missing from Mesch’s account but mentioned in Steinschneider, “Supercommentare zu Ibn Ezra...” 125.
In a later work he remarks that in his youth he laughed at the superstitious customs of his native town:

It happened to me when I was young that I used to laugh at what was widespread among the multitude of our people, namely, that it is not good to gaze into a mirror at night. But now, approximately a year ago I got a manuscript [sefer] from one of the important persons of our land who is an expert in Arabic language who found it written in an Arabic book written by a great scholar that gazing into a mirror at night causes the perversion of the mouth [? ivvut ha-pe].

Philosophically educated people were probably quite conscious about the distance between their level of knowledge and that of the simple people already in a young age. Tensions between generations, which are likely to exist in whatever society of whatever age, could color the juxtaposition of educated versus vulgar culture in late thirteenth-century Provence.

It is worthy of noting that what was rejected as a vulgar superstition by the young Caspi is admitted as scientific truth once it is read in an Arabic book. This fact highlights the profoundly bookish nature of the high education of the age. It was literacy what made the difference between the vulgar and educated level of culture in Caspi’s time.

Caspi married a rich woman who was dealing with money-lending. They had several sons and daughters. Caspi’s travels and researches were probably sponsored by his wife.

Around 1315 he traveled to Egypt in order to meet the great grandson of Maimonides, Abraham ben David ben Abaraham ben Moses Maimonides who was the leader of the Jewish community in Egypt. His purpose was to learn more about the philosophy of Maimonides from his descendants.

This travel gave him the opportunity to observe many oriental customs. In a later work Caspi remarks that this knowledge profited him in understanding the background of biblical narratives. For example, commenting on the topic of blessing so important in patriarchal narratives he writes:

This matter is first of all a basic custom of that land just like it is in our land though not to the same extent as in that land. It happened to me in Egypt when I was there the first time that I went to meet the nagid [=leader of Jewish community], the fourth [generation] offspring of the Guide of blessed memory [=Maimonides] that they blessed me with a long blessing to show their love and benevolence to me. But I remained in silence.

Caspi was obviously not prepared to answer the benediction from the part of the nagid with a similarly long and elaborated blessing as was required by local rules of courtesy.

The encounter with Maimonides’ offspring disappointed Caspi. He estimated greatly Abraham as a pious and virtuous man but the nagid was of no help to Caspi in understanding the philosophy of his famous ancestor.

Having returned to Provence Caspi composed the aforementioned Sefer ha-sod: a long treatise about the esoteric meaning of the narratives in the Pentateuch. The first part of this book is of special interest since Caspi explains his basic approach to biblical exegesis there.

The Sefer ha-sod provoked angry replies from a circle of philosophers in southern France. Two senior teachers of philosophy in the city of Salon, Moses ben Solomon of

303 Mishneh Kesef, 10.
304 Cf. Hannah Kasher’s introduction in Caspi, Shulhan kesef, 12.
305 Mishneh Kesef ed. J. L. Last (Pressburg: Alkalai és fia, 1905), 42.
Beaucaire and Abba Mari ben Abigdor / Eligdor commissioned their student, Kalonymos ben Kalonymos to write a refutation of Caspi.

Following the instructions of his masters Kalonymos ben Kalonymos argues that Caspi should not have published this book at all, for a philosopher should not reveal the esoteric meaning of the Torah to the multitude. In the second part of his study Kalonymos advances his own objections. He argues that Caspi’s “mysteries” are not deep enough. A philosophically educated reader will not learn much from Caspi’s work about the esoteric sense of Scripture. Thus in Kalonymos’ eyes Caspi’s work is too much philosophical for the needs of the multitude but not philosophical enough for the educated public.

These critical remarks display two basic mechanisms of the way the community of philosophers functioned in Provence during the first half of the fourteenth century. The elite club of the philosophers was defined in juxtaposition to the uneducated masses. “Philosophers” were quite conscious about the distance between simple people and themselves and they did their best to maintain the distance. Esotericism was the basic procedure that regulated the relationship between the two groups in the philosophers’ opinion. A philosopher should deny the vulgar to access his knowledge.

On the other hand, the exact border between the vulgar and the philosophers was far from being clear. The philosophers were competing with each other: and in this competition they questioned each other’s competence. In Kalonymos’ eyes Caspi failed to enter the club of the philosophers: his silly propagation of ideas that should not be propagated and the shallowness of his actual ideas were both signs of incompetence.

Caspi himself was also very critical of his contemporaries. In the first part of the Sefer ha-sod he points out that many so-called philosophers use esoteric language in order to hide their ignorance: they pretend to possess great mysteries that cannot be communicated in open words but in fact, only their ignorance lies behind the mysterious words:

Many people hide their secrets in order to conceal their blemish that who sees them should think that they know wondrous things. This reminds me of that woman who hides her privy parts in order that her ugliness should not be seen but the stupid think that this is because of her chastity. However, the sages, who possess intellect, will find out the things as is said by the prophet in a parable of a woman: “Now I shall reveal your privy parts etc.” (Hoshea 2: 12). And there are many similar [texts in the Bible]. Therefore I have decided to reveal what is in the treasure of my heart that everybody should know the mysteries of our mind [daatenu] before our death; perhaps it will be of use for them. For if somebody objects to us, then he will grasp our [opinion] and will criticize our way if it is wrong and his reward shall be perfect from the Giver of Wisdom. 306

In this passage Caspi openly breaks with the Maimonidean tradition of esotericism and insists on the superiority of open and frank discussion lead by logical rigor. However, in the chapter preceding the quoted passage Caspi emphasizes that in the Sefer ha-sod he will never reveal completely his opinion but “whenever I reveal a hand-breath I will conceal four hand-breaths.” In other words, Caspi restates Maimonidean esotericism in a rather conventional way. To explain the emergence of the apparent contradiction would lead our discussion to far away.

Caspi traveled a lot in search of knowledge, in hope of finding true friends who – unlike the philosopher-colleagues in Provence whom Caspi did not appreciate too much – are on a similar intellectual level as himself. A third factor might have been to avoid persecutions

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306 Mishneh kesef, 9.
and attempts at forced conversion from the part of the Christian authorities. In these years he wrote many books including two commentaries on Maimonides’ GP.

Barry Mesch argues persuasively that in the 1330s Caspi became more and more engaged in polemics against Christians. Caspi himself describes a debate with “an honored bishop of our country” and also another dispute with a Christian scholar in Valencia.

Hebrew language played an important role in his apologetics. Caspi pointed out the superiority of Hebrew language and the Hebrew text of the Bible to show that Judaism is the original and true version of revealed faith. In this context he integrated many ideas of Ibn Ezra into his thought concerning the significance of divine names in the original Hebrew text of the Bible.

We do not know much about the last years of Caspi. It is generally assumed that he died around 1340.

**Caspi’s Supercommentaries on Ibn Ezra**

In his auto-bibliographical account Caspi gives the title to his Ibn Ezra supercommentary written in his youth *Parashat kesef*. This text is attested in a great number of manuscripts. It was one of the most widespread supercommentaries in the Middle Ages. There is no reason for questioning the authenticity of it although one should remember that Caspi admits the role of a certain Yeshaya ben Meir in its composition.

In the auto-bibliography Caspi also mentions a second supercommentary on Ibn Ezra. In the first version of the text (MS Munich, BS, Cod. hebr. 265) Caspi writes:

The sixth book is *Keforey Kesef*. My purpose in it is to mention all of those places where I differ from Ibn Ezra’s interpretation of the Torah and some of those where I differ from the Guide [=Maimonides], their honor notwithstanding. And there I brought proofs for each and every case to show why I differ from them and cannot accept their views.307

In the later version (MS Parma 755) Caspi characterizes this book in the following way:

The fourteenth book is *Keforey Kesef*; its purpose is to mention arguments concerning many details in the Pentateuch and the rest of the Bible where I disprove and reject the interpretations of my predecessors, their honor notwithstanding. In any case, I will indicate the reasons for which I differ from their interpretations; however, their intentions are hidden from me.308

In other words, *Keforey Kesef* was a *correctorium* to Ibn Ezra and Maimonides concerning exegetical questions.

There are no surviving manuscripts of this work. There are two references to it in Caspi’s *Matsref la-kesef*.309 Since the later book is believed to have been completed by 1331 the lost supercommentary must have been written before 1331. I do not understand why Mesch dates *Keforey kesef* after 1331.310

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A third Ibn Ezra supercommentary is transmitted under Caspi’s name in the manuscript tradition. It is entitled Perush ha-sodot ha-rab”e (“An explanation of Ibn Ezra’s secrets”). This supercommentary focuses on the esoteric intentions of Ibn Ezra’s commentary on the Pentateuch. There is no reference to it in any versions of Caspi’s auto-bibliography or in his other works.

As has been already noted in the introduction to Part One the authenticity of this text is generally rejected today. In an article published in 1990 Hanna Kasher states that the author was a compatriot and contemporary of Caspi. However, this statement is not supported by any argument; it is based only on an impression. The dating of Pseudo-Caspi is an unsettled problem; his supercommentary will not be treated here.

Introduction to the Supercommentary: the Ibn Ezra Game

The introduction is omitted from most of the manuscripts. I am aware of the existence of two witnesses at the moment: the Paris and the Munich manuscripts.

It seems to me that the introduction was partly written by the seventeen year old Caspi and reshaped later by the old Caspi.

The text starts with a difficult paragraph written in rhymed prose:

In that thing should the boaster boast: the intellect. And it is well known that knowledge, the knower, and the known thing are one. He should grasp that they are always in actuality in the sitting one who establishes it with that one who is not together with it.

Indeed the top of this [tree] is knowledge and many are its roots and numerous are the number of its branches. Since the sciences [hokhmot] are on a ladder containing seven grades and the two sides are noble. And in fact, the things that are before them are openings, and bridges were made for them in order that the passengers move toward them. In this the one who wants to enter should enter in order to purify [himself]. He should be slow in getting possession of it and he should not hasten. Let him ascend through the steps of the ladder one by one, and let him not leap to the top lest he will be a root of poisonous herb, lest he will be a disciple of Aher. Also let him pay attention to walk on the path of life still when he is alive and let him not delay before his day comes otherwise his memory perishes and he is forgotten like a dream. Let him enjoy the good of his days, let him be a disciple of Rabbi Akiva who enters in peace and exits in peace.

The first sentences recapitulate a basic theological formula of post-Maimonidean philosophy taken from both Maimonides’ and Ibn Ezra’s works: God is the intellect that is always in actu. That means that in God the intellect, the intelligible, and the intellection are identical. Caspi’s sentence uses Ibn Ezra’s vocabulary [yodea, yadua, daat] and not the Tibbonide terminology [sekhel, muskal, haskala].


313 MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 184, fol. 1 v.
This sort of intellection is identified as the ultimate knowledge that is compared to the top of a tree. Caspi mentions that this tree has many roots and branches. However, this metaphor is not elaborated any more. Caspi introduces another metaphor in which the seven grades of knowledge are likened to seven grades of a ladder. He mentions that further preparations are needed for approaching the ladder. They are alluded to with the image of “openings” and “bridges.” It is also mentioned that getting to the ladder is a sort of purification.

Caspi insists that no steps should be skipped during the ascension on the ladder. Such leaps are very dangerous because they can result in heresy. Caspi alludes to Deuteronomy 29:17 where traitors of the covenant are compared to a root from which poisonous flowers are growing. The Hebrew word for “poisonous herb” is rosh, which is a homonym of ‘head.’

A second allusion is to the story of Elisha ben Abuyah, a heretic from the talmudic times. His name was changed to Aher (“Other”) by the talmudic tradition after his supposed apostasy. He is the archetype of heretic in rabbinic literature. According to the tradition he entered the Paradise in a mystic vision and then he saw something the meaning of which he misunderstood and then he started to uproot the plants of the Garden. Caspi admonishes the reader to avoid Aher’s faith by following patiently the prescribed curriculum. At the same time he implicitly adds a further element to the vision: the ladder leads to the Garden of Eden.

Finally Caspi admonishes the reader not to waste time. One has to accomplish the task of intellectual perfection within this life otherwise his memory will be erased. Caspi probably meant by this that without intellectual perfection no afterlife is possible. Those people who fail to actualize their potential intellect will not taste the bliss of immortality.

The quotation ends with evoking the positive counterpart of Aher: Rabbi Akiva, who also entered the Paradise in a mystic vision without suffering any harm. He entered in peace and returned in peace.

This difficult and highly allusive text illustrates well a number of phenomena we shall discuss later in this paper. The carefully build up imagery resembles to a great extent the memory-images that were used in medieval Latin culture. According to Mary Carruthers’ classic on the topic the ladder and the garden (especially the Garden of Eden) were typical memory-images. Grades of the ladder can be associated to the things one wants to remember in a certain order. Although Caspi does not tell us explicitly what are the things that correspond to the seven grades and to the two sides he certainly had firm convictions about the meanings of these elements. It seems to me quite probable that Caspi’s text is based on a memory-image that contained the correct curriculum of studies in the form of a ladder that leads from bridges symbolizing the necessary preparations to the ultimate intellectual perfection that is a precondition of eternal life symbolized by the Paradise. It is also remarkable that Caspi seemingly takes it for granted that his competent readers would understand the allegoric meaning of the image; this is why he did not spent time with explaining it. And as for the incompetent readers, it is better for them if they do not understand what the image is about according to the common assumptions of post-Maimonidean philosophers.

Caspi conceives the progress of the supposed student as a spiritual transformation. The student has to purify himself and the knowledge gained will bestow on him eternal bliss.

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315 Carruthers, The Book of Memory, 27 and 230-238.
Caspi’s words form clearly an instant of “spirituality” according to Michel Foucault’s definition. Caspi’s introduction continues:

And behold, I, Joseph, am seventeen years old, [I am] still looking from the window of desire, from the skylight of yearning to see light, for I am groping in the darkness of mind, in the dusk of thoughts around myself. And to all [the rest] of the Israelites there was a [great] light in their dwelling places. And all the people of God are prophets with those who prophesize. And more and more [of them] are ascending and descending on the ladder that is set on the earth and its top reaches the sky. Woe to me, [and to] my mother that she bore me, and now that I have been created I wish I died for I, the youngest / smallest among the thousands of Israel am bad and deficient in understanding and inane, who cannot grasp the intelligible; [only] the obvious is mine, and only the popular things [mefursamot] I apprehend.

In spite of this my desire has brought me and my yearning forced me to look from the distance at the noble book that was composed by the great sage, the philosopher, Abraham, our father, also called Ibn Ezra, [namely] the commentary [fol. 2 r] on our holy and excellent Torah – may he enter in peace and may he rest where he lies.

I translated the text in the present tense. However, in the Hebrew original it is by no means clear whether the seventeen year old Caspi is speaking or an older one recalls the situation of his youth.

The reader should remark the implicit distinction between “open,” “popular” and hidden, esoteric knowledge. It is an expression of modesty on Caspi’s part that he claims that only the “open” things are understood by him.

The very beginning of the introduction emphasizing the correct order in education prepared the ground for this paragraph. The young Caspi understood only the evident things and did not enter the deep mysteries. He talks about himself in a humble way. However, the secret agenda is that the young Caspi kept the proper order of study: He did not leap immediately to the “mysteries” but was content with the easier subjects.

The text continues with an extremely difficult passage that might easily be corrupted in many places. The following translation is only a report about my latest attempts in understanding the text:

And when I was twenty years old I perceived a small commandment [? tsav meat ?] and my eyes were illuminated: How shall I decide? Whence shall I get jumping on two branches? And my soul was alarmed by deliberations whether I should withdraw [? ahoran] my vain book or not. And I saw that [withdrawing it] will remove a big damage from me even if a small part of what I have understood is lost. For easy things do not require [much] study. And one’s writing reveals his intellect, and if somebody competes with me this… [corrupt text?], moreover, because of people, who will mock me when they see that nothing is proper in my mouth, and thus I shall make a bad name for myself and for my family. So I said this is my name for ever.

My mind [lit. kidneys] advised me to withdraw it [? ahor]. And perhaps in the future when a new generation emerges that does not know Joseph an other [aher] man will come who is not worthy and will call it after his name and will think to thrust me off and to acquire name and glory as I did and he does not know that he speaks against himself, and he boasts and there is a deficiency for them. So I said, it is better if I do not err on the way anymore, and I will drink the wine that I mixed [prepared for myself] and if I say stupidities only I will bear them. After that my heart gave license
to me that it should remain with me and only my eyes should see it all my life for my enemies should not enjoy the good thing that it contains, and they should not mock me in? [illegible word]. Nonetheless I said that the advice is not good. For thanks to God my friends overpowered my enemies and the latter do not count because of their small number. And when there is one man in a town or two in a clan whose wicked hearts incite them to talk against me and to mock me because of a mistake that they think to have found in my supercommentary [biur] because of their deficient knowledge or even if the matter is indeed [fol. 2 v] as they think – many people will help me either [by saying] that it is not a mistake as the [opponents] thought or that I am a child who is poor in perfection and years. As for my enemies’ enjoying the good thing [that is in the supercommentary], I said, this is my revenge and my rejoicing and their shame when they see that I am good and that they were walking in darkness until my sun shone upon them and [now] they walk in my light. So the love of my friends won and they rejoiced.

After my mind was settled I girded my loins and prepared for action, I, Joseph, who is called the son of Abba Mari, the son of Joseph, the son of Jacob from the place of Caspia to explain [le-vaer] the words of this sage called Ibn Ezra according to my capacities and to the degree my intellect reaches. I have omitted the explanations of the secrets because they are not clear to me and also because it is not proper to explain what he has hidden away.

This passage highlights the social context of Caspi’s supercommentary. The author is quite conscious about the possible reactions of his readers and about the possible scenarios of the reception of his book. This is a remarkable fact in itself.

The readers expect Caspi to explain the “secrets” of Ibn Ezra. This is their major focus of interest. However, Caspi will disappoint them. He will explain only rudimentary matters. Therefore, the author is afraid of being mocked by unfriendly readers.

At the age of twenty he regrets that he published his book three years before. He considers its “withdrawing” for personal usage. But it is too late. If he renounces his authorship, someone else can steal his intellectual property and use it improperly.

On the other hand, Caspi is aware of a more optimistic scenario as well. His friends are many and his opponents are few: the friends will defend him against unjust criticism by pointing out that it is unjust, or, if the criticism is justified, they will apologize on his behalf by pointing to Caspi’s young age. Therefore, Caspi decides to reclaim his authorship of the book.

The broader context of Caspi’s argument is the intellectual competition among Jewish philosophers in late thirteenth-century early fourteenth-century Provence. Philosophy was a prestigious science. The most famous family of philosophers, the Tibbonide family, was held in high reputation among Jews and Gentiles. Its members had tremendous political influence, and they were probably quite rich. The reader should recall at this point the struggle between the Tibbonide family and Judah al-Harizi related in Chapter One of the present part. The race among Jewish philosophers for the various functions they could fulfill within the society was serious.

Having philosophical education formed a sort of cultural capital in the Mediterranean world. Philosophical knowledge could open the way to the higher circles of society, both Jewish and Gentile. A talented student could marry into a rich or prestigious family or he could become a trusted attendant of influential persons within the Jewish community. It was also possible to enter the service of Christian noblemen or ecclesiastics. And for the most
famous philosophers, such as Samuel Ibn Tibbon or Judah al-Harizi, even the highest circles of Christian society were opened.

As a consequence, philosophy was fashionable in thirteenth-century Provence. It became the key element of the aristocratic culture of the social elite of the Jewish community. Many people wanted to belong to the “club of philosophers.” And who considered himself to belong to this exclusive club was reluctant to permit newcomers to enter. The competition between the Tibbonids and Judah al-Harizi was probably repeated many times on lower scales.

Interpreting a text, a “classic” in philosophy was an ideal field of competition. Maimonides’ GP and Ibn Ezra’s commentary on the Torah were perfect racecourses because of their enigmatic style, difficult content, and obvious relevance for understanding the fundamental doctrines of Judaism. By the time Caspi wrote his supercommentary there was probably a firm tradition of Ibn Ezra supercommentaries that required the interpreter to concentrate on the “secrets” of Ibn Ezra. If you really belong to the club of philosophers, then please explain to us Ibn Ezra’s secrets.

However, Caspi himself dissented to the generally accepted rules of the game in a quite open and provocative way:

I know that many will mock me when they see that I make a supercommentary [biur] on the simple things. They don’t understand I made it for myself and for those who are of my age and not for the wise. And I also know that I omit the explanation of sentences that are by no ways understood by some of the readers who think of themselves as competent [readers] and they would think that I belong to their number – and this was exactly the reason why I omitted mentioning [the secrets]. And they should be responsible for their own sins.\(^{316}\)

Caspi insists on the correct order in study. “I am too young for the secrets of Ibn Ezra; I have to proceed to them later.” By this Caspi questions the competence of his critics who run to the secrets too hastily. The real philosopher knows the correct order of study and does not hasten.

Preceding the quoted passage Caspi writes:

And how much the mocker’s jealousy increased when he found mistakes in the supercommentary for it is not unknown to any of the intelligent persons that this work will be long and difficult so much that I almost say that it is the nature of the book that one cannot penetrate the author’s intention completely. And as for this work, that I started, it would have been more proper to be done by the greatest of our generation and even this [person] [fol. 3 r] [if] he understands it [it is counted] as a miracle. How much and how much more the same holds in my case who is hindered by all the five causes that hinder study and understanding – except for one of which my Rock has delivered me, may He maintain this [situation] always – and this is occupation with woman and children.

And I expect myself that it is possible that when I reach the age of understanding then I will understand by myself what is presently hidden from me and I will be able to correct all the errors in my supercommentary.

The circle is complete. Caspi is too young presently at the age of twenty to grasp the deeper layer of Ibn Ezra’s text but he hopes to get to this layer as well when he reaches the

\(^{316}\) fol. 3 r.
age of “understanding.” The idea of spiritual knowledge is clearly presupposed by the text: it is not enough to be clever or diligent; one has to achieve the proper age in which his character is fit for understanding deeper truths.

The reader should note that Caspi praises God for his being undisturbed by the problems of marriage and family and expresses his wish to be unmarried forever. Marriage and procreation are positive commandments in rabbinic Judaism. Caspi actually fulfilled these commandments later in his life: we know about two of his sons and a daughter. Nonetheless, his expressed preference for unmarried life reveals something important about his mentality. Even if he observed the commandments of marriage his approach to the subject was not determined by halakhic or other rabbinic texts but by philosophic sources teaching asceticism. This was probably the case with many other Provencal philosophers as well. Their attitude to marriage could easily provoke conservative rabbinic authorities.

To sum up, the first part of Caspi’s introduction establishes Caspi’s true competence in philosophy and in Ibn Ezra exegesis and questions his opponents’ competence by reference to the ideal of correct order in study and correct age for grasping the higher level of truth.

In the second part of the introduction Caspi proceeds to answer the possible objections of another type of critics: the traditionalists who accuse Ibn Ezra with heresy. Caspi writes:

And God knows that the things that motivated me to produce this supercommentary [are the following:] the first cause among them and the most important of them is what I have already mentioned: that I should not forget anything [fol. 3 v] of what I have grasped; and another [cause] is to benefit my beloved ones and friends. And another [reason] is that I feel sympathy towards the sage who wrote it [i.e. Ibn Ezra] when I see men among us who scorn him, who stand up and speak against him and they say that he denies the law of Moses and that of the Jews hating the ancestors [=talmudic rabbis]. They even call him “like the one who uproots the plants.” For these men, who are sinning against their own souls, do not understand his words and they interpret his words in the opposite way of his [Ibn Ezra’s] intention and thus they attribute wickedness to him, God forbid, which is very far from him. And behold, you can see them, when the whispering people are gathering with the murmuring ones and they are making speeches and their anger is incited like burning fire against him [Ibn Ezra] and they open their mouth wide like the growling donkey. And these men did not see what he wrote in the foreword of his book: “And because of the midrashic exegesis [derash] the literal exegesis [derekh ha-peshat] is not a deviation for the Torah has seventy faces. Only concerning the commandments if we find [more than one possible] senses of the [biblical] verses and a sense [of the possible ones] is like one [of those things] that the transmitters [of the tradition] said who were all righteous, [then we know] that the matter is doubtlessly according to their true opinion [held] in strong hands. God forbid to be mixed with the Sadducees who say that their tradition contradicts the Scripture and grammar! Only our ancestors are right and all their words!” So far the words of the author of blessed memory. But these men reply to this: his mouth is smooth like butter but his heart is full of hatred (cf. Psalms 55: 22).

But how can it be such a big deal for them to do literal exegesis [asot peshatim] of non-halakhic verses when our sages [of talmudic times] also used to ask “what is the literal sense of the verse?” And Rabbeinu Shlomo [=Rashi] always says: “and according to the literal sense this is the meaning.” Aren’t they ashamed, these cursed people, who say about this sage [Ibn Ezra] [fol. 4 r] that he was negligent in the commandments seeing his statement in the section ele ha-mishpatim that one has to eat unleavened bread during [all] the seven day [of Passover] whereas the [talmudic]
sages made it obligatory only for the first night?! All this is because of the preciousness of the commandments in his eyes and for his being very strict about them. But when this is told to the [opponents], they reply that he [Ibn Ezra] said this only in order to contradict the sages or because he liked the taste of the unleavened bread and whoever adds to the commandments decreases them. See now these men’s abomination for they belong to those who are spurious about what is kosher and they do not have a share in the world to come.

This quotation reveals the second aspect of the “Ibn Ezra game” as conceived by Caspi. Ibn Ezra’s good fame and orthodoxy is to be defended against the criticism of the traditionalists who accuse him of having a secret inclination towards Karaism (the Karaites are referred to by the phrase “Sadducees” in the text) because of his criticism and apparent refusal of midrashic exegesis. The traditionalists “stand up and speak against” Ibn Ezra – this might refer to sermons in the synagogues. They also have informal gatherings where they accuse Ibn Ezra with heresy.

Caspi might exaggerate the hatred of the traditionalists’ fervor a bit; however, there is no reason to doubt the basic correctness of his report. It is quite probable that the charges and arguments against Ibn Ezra referred to by Caspi were real charges and arguments that were brought forward by the partisans of the anti-Maimonidean camp in late thirteenth-early fourteenth-century Provence. The surviving literature of these circles usually criticizes Maimonides and not Ibn Ezra; therefore, Caspi’s testimony is very precious.

In the continuation Caspi remarks that many copying-mistakes entered Ibn Ezra texts and advises his reader to read Rashi’s commentary before reading Ibn Ezra’s one “for a thing can be understood through its opposite.” The implication not made explicit is that Rashi’s and Ibn Ezra’s way of exegesis is generally opposed to each other. It is possible that Caspi’s remark reflects an opposition in the reading-customs of the traditionalists and the Maimonidean camp. The traditionalists preferred the greatest Ashkenazi exegete’s commentary that is based on the talmudic tradition and evidences the intellectual and spiritual ideals of Ashkenazi Judaism. On the other hand the philosophers found Ibn Ezra’s commentary more fitting for their intellectual and spiritual needs; therefore, Ibn Ezra rather than Rashi was the key authority in biblical exegesis. Further studies are required to clarify this point.

In sum, Caspi sees the mission of his supercommentary in re-integrating Ibn Ezra’s commentary to the place where it belongs in the curriculum of philosophical studies: it is an elementary text for teaching young people the rules of Hebrew grammar and the literal sense of Scripture. The “secrets” of this commentary should be left for higher studies.

Caspi conceives his own exegetical program in opposition both to the practice of the incompetent philosophers who does not follow proper order in education and to the charges of heresy brought against Ibn Ezra by the traditionalists.
Chapter 4: Avvat Nefesh: Dating and Authorship

The author of *Avvat Nefesh*, a widespread supercommentary on Abraham Ibn Ezra’s Pentateuch-commentary called so after its *incipit*[^317], was identified as Jedaiyah ben Abraham Bedersi, also called Jedaiyah ha-Penini, by Moritz Steinschneider in an article published in 1868.[^318] The information was drawn from the oldest of the surviving manuscripts, MS Vatican, ebr. 104, a codex dated to 1399.[^319] The title of the text, on folio 48[^320], states the attribution quite clearly: *biur le-ferush ben ‘ezra la-hakhham ha-gadol r’ yeda’ya ha-bedershi z”l*.

Four years later, in another article, Steinschneider modified his former view.[^320] Meanwhile he had found two manuscripts which attribute the work to Asher ben Abraham Crescas, the author of a commentary on Maimonides’ *The Guide of the Perplexed*. The two codices are MS Vatican, ebr. 107 (dated to 1438, Italy) and MS Hamburg, Cod. hebr. 95 (sixteenth century, Germany).[^321]

Steinschneider preferred this attribution to the previous one, without giving any explicit argument. He probably thought that the text should be ascribed to the less famous of the two candidates. It is more probable that the name of Asher Crescas was erroneously replaced in some manuscripts with the famous Jedaiyah ha-Penini, the author of the extremely popular *Behinat ‘Olam*, than *vice versa*. Relying on Steinschneider’s second view, all the subsequent encyclopedias, manuscript catalogues, and studies ascribed the supercommentary to Asher Crescas.[^322]

However, the possibility that Asher Crescas was the author of the Ibn Ezra supercommentary *Avvat Nefesh* can be safely excluded. The proof for this is to be found in his commentary on Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, II, 30. Crescas writes thus at the beginning of the text:[^323]

> This is the explanation of the encyclopedic scholar (*he-hakhham ha-kolel*), R. Jedaiyah of blessed memory: […]

What follows is identical, almost verbatim (with minor variants), with a passage in the Ibn Ezra supercommentary *Avvat Nefesh* starting in the last line of fol. 50[^324] in the oldest

[^317]: The introduction of the text has been edited by Naftali Ben-Menahem in his *Mi-ginze Yisrael be-Vatican*, 30-33. The rest of the supercommentary is still unpublished.


[^319]: See the description of the codex in Umberto Cassuto, *Codices Vaticani Hebraici (codices I-115)* (Città del Vaticano, 1956), 160-163. The date given in the colophon (1399) is corroborated by the two watermarks that can be found in the paper. The first resembles Briquet, N° 11680 (attested in Florence, 1382-83), Picard, *Dreiberig* I N° 797 (Barcelona, 1393), and N° 749 (Brüggge, 1396), whereas the second is very similar to Picard, *Fabeltiere* N° 359 (Bologna, 1392-93) and N° 324 (Utrecht, 1394).


manuscript (Vat. ebr. 104) and ending on fol. 52r. \(^{324}\) This manuscript – as we mentioned before – attributes the text to Jedaiah ha-Penini.

On fol. 50v the author of *Avvat Nefesh* remarks that having explained Ibn Ezra’s commentary on the first chapters of Genesis he will continue with an explication of Maimonides’ interpretation of the same biblical text as is found in *The Guide of the Perplexed* II, 30. This serves as an introduction to his own interpretation of the creation story, to be presented after the explanation of Maimonides’ text. The same procedure, namely, explaining Ibn Ezra’s commentary first, discussing Maimonides’ interpretation second, and presenting the author’s own view third, is applied in other parts of the supercommentary as well. Thus, it seems that the passage explaining Maimonides’ *Guide* II, 30 is an organic part of *Avvat Nefesh*. Asher Crescas could hardly have copied “the explanation of the encyclopedic scholar, R. Jedaiah of blessed memory” from a source other than *Avvat Nefesh*.

Moreover, by “the encyclopedic scholar, R. Jedaiah” Asher Crescas doubtlessly meant Jedaiah ha-Penini. Thus, it is quite probable that Crescas himself – just like the oldest manuscript, Vat. ebr. 104 – attributed *Avvat Nefesh* to Jedaiah ha-Penini.

From this fact two conclusions follow: (1) Asher Crescas was certainly not the author of the Ibn Ezra supercommentary *Avvat Nefesh*. (2) It is very probable that the real author was indeed Jedaiah ben Abraham Bedersi also known as ha-Penini. The other “candidate,” Asher Crescas himself, testifies to Jedaiah’s authorship.

This fact was recognized by some of the nineteenth-century scholars and has been pointed out by William G. Gärtig. \(^{325}\) However, according to Gärtig Crescas and Vat. ebr. 104 are both mistaken in ascribing the text to Jedaiah ha-Penini. Gärtig prefers to suppose an anonymous author in the second half of the fourteenth century. Crescas and the Vatican manuscript testify only an early misattribution of the text:

Having looked at Jedaiah’s *Apology* and the commentary on Midrash Psalms attributed to Jedaiah, my impression is that there is not enough similarity in style or content for Jedaiah to have written *Avvat Nefesh*. Until someone can show through a detailed comparison that my impression is mistaken, I will take Jedaiah Bedersi as an early false attribution to a scholar who was very widely known at the time. \(^{326}\)

Therefore, I will advance further arguments for Jedaiah’s authorship. These arguments will show that although not all the doubts can be excluded, it is quite probable that Jedaiah ha-Penini was indeed the author of the supercommentary *Avvat Nefesh*.

Gärtig has pointed out that *Avvat Nefesh* was written in Provence. This fact is secured not only by the intellectual climate the text seems to presuppose but also by the presence of Provencal glosses. \(^{327}\) There is nothing to be added to Gärtig’s argument: it is as persuasive as anything can be in medieval studies.

As for the dating, Gärtig is of the opinion that *Avvat Nefesh* was written in the second half of the fourteenth century. However, his dating is not based on some explicit argument applying any of the accepted methods but only on his general impression.

\(^{324}\) The quotation in Crescas appears from 57b to 58b in the printed edition referred to in the previous footnote, ending with the phrase ‘ad kan devarav. I have found so far two more instances where Crescas’ commentary seems to be influenced by *Avvat Nefesh* without an explicit reference. (1) On the *Guide* II, 10 (26b, note gimel in the edition); cf. *Avvat Nefesh*, MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 94 r. (2) *Guide* III, 24 (37b, note dalet) seems to be a short summary of *Avvat Nefesh*, fol. 83–85.


In the following paragraphs I will try to show that Avvat Nefesh can be safely dated to the first half of the fourteenth century. The sketch of the argument is the following: There are numerous parallels between Moses Nagari’s supercommentary and Avvat Nefesh. These parallels cannot be by chance. Therefore either Moses Nagari influenced the author of Avvat Nefesh or vice versa or both of them used a common source. I will show that Moses Nagari is dependent on Avvat Nefesh.

Moses Nagari’s supercommentary is safely dated to the first half of the fourteenth century. Consequently, Avvat Nefesh must have been written in the same period or earlier. But we do not have any particular reason to assume much earlier date. Therefore, Avvat Nefesh was written in Provence during the first half of the fourteenth century.

1. Avvat Nefesh and Moses Nagari: Parallels

Commenting on Genesis 24: 14 Ibn Ezra remarks that the way Abraham’s servant asked a sign from God is different from Jonathan’s search for a sign to start a battle against the Philistines related in the first book of Samuel. In the Avvat Nefesh we find the following explanation:

“And Jonathan’s way is different.” That is to say, when [Jonathan] said to his servant, “If they tell us to go up to them, we shall go up” this was not a way of asking sign [from God] neither the way of divination but Jonathan was an expert in juridical astrology [hokhm[t ha-mishpat] and thought of the [proper] hour and mabbat in which who starts [the fight] will win whereas who does not start it is defeated. And this is what he said “If they tell us…” we shall be silent until we get to them and then we shall attack.\(^{328}\)

Moses Nagari comments on the same passage:

“And Jonathan’s way is different.” I think that he [Ibn Ezra] means that Eliezer’s activity was not according to [human] cleverness like concluding one thing from the causes that make its existence necessary, but he was relying solely on divine mercy. On the other hand, Jonathan’s way, when he said “If they tell us to go up to them, then we shall go up” was a skill of warriors or it is possible that his decision was according to one of the [temporal] divisions in accordance with the investigations of juridical and mabbat astrology [behinat ha-mishpat u-mabbat ha-maarekhet].

Avvat Nefesh continues with a supercommentary on Genesis 24: 17. At this verse Ibn Ezra mentions the possibility that a girl can get pregnant without the obvious signs of loosing her virginity. The Avvat Nefesh comments:

“It is a strange explanation that Scripture would talk about some other way [of sexual intercourse]” That is to say, not according to the usual way, such as the [talmudic] rabbis said; “the sense is only that it is possible that a girl is virgin but nonetheless a man sleeps with her and she gets pregnant.” This can happen according to [fol. 86 r] Shmuel’s saying, “I am able to have sex with many virgins without blood” because he was an expert in this art [hittiyya].

Moses Nagari comments on the same passage:

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\(^{328}\) MS Vat. ebr., fol. 85 r.
“It is a strange explanation that Scripture would talk about some other way [of sexual intercourse] the sense is only that a girl is virgin but nonetheless a man sleeps with her and she gets pregnant.” It is a farfetched explanation according to him [Ibn Ezra] that “and no man knew her” refers to unusual [sexual intercourse]. The [correct] explanation is that it is possible that a girl sleeps with somebody, even gets pregnant and keeps her virginity at the same time. And Shmuel alluded to the truth of this [statement] saying, “I am able to have sex with many virgins without blood.” In order to teach her [Rebecca’s] perfect purity [Scripture] had to add “and no man knew her” in spite of the fact that [Scripture] told us before that she was virgin.

The similarities in wording and thoughts are obvious.

Commenting on Genesis 27: 11 both texts refer to Aristotle’s definition of “plain” in the Categories to explain Ibn Ezra’s remark on the Hebrew word halaq meaning “smooth.”

The witty explanation is based on the apparent connection between heleq ‘part’ and halaq ‘smooth:’ according to Aristotle ‘plain’ is the thing the parts of which are equal. None of the other supercommentators proposed a similar interpretation.

Further examples are Exodus 1: 16 and Genesis 12: 6 where the comments in Avvat Nefesh and Moses Nagari are very similar; almost verbatim the same. Besides the quoted examples there are numerous places where the two supercommentaries resemble each other significant differences notwithstanding. Neither Avvat Nefesh nor Moses Nagari share similar parallels with other supercommentaries.

2. Avvat Nefesh and Moses Nagari: Who Quotes Whom?

As we shall see in the second part, Moses Nagari’s supercommentary evidences its author’s familiarity with contemporary Latin scholastic thought of the school of Aquinas and Giles of Rome. Metaphysical discussions are often based on the notions of time and eternity as basic ontological properties of being. This idea cannot be derived from the standard sources of Judeo-Arabic philosophical tradition but it is a common place within those branches of Latin scholasticism that were inspired by Pseudo-Dionysius and Proclus.

In the Avvat Nefesh we do not find the slightest reference to these ontological concept or any other ideas adopted from Aquinas or Giles of Rome. As far as I can see it today there is only one passage which might have to do something with Latin scholasticism but this passage resembles rather Ockham’s theory of time than anything from Aquinas’ or Giles’ thought. The author of Avvat Nefesh seems to be simply ignorant of that intellectual tradition which was a basic source of inspiration for Moses Nagari.

329 Babylonian Talmud, Hagiga 15a. The printed editions have “I am able to have many sexual intercourses without blood [yakhol ani li-vol kama beilot be-lo dam]” reading beilot ‘intercourses’ instead of betulot ‘virgins.’ On the margins of the quoted codex the talmudic quotation in Moses Nagari is corrected according to the printed editions of the Talmud. However, all the medieval mss I have managed to consult so far (MS Göttingen, NSU, Cod. ms. hebr. 3, Or. 13., fol. 60 v; MS London, BL, Harley 5508; MS Vat. ebr. 134, fol. 195 v) read betulot just like the quotations in the supercommentaries. This reading is testified by the Munich ms, some of the geonim, and Rashba as well. Cf. Raphael N. N. Rabinowitz: Sefer digdugey sofrim: Variae lectiones in Mischnam et in Talmud Babylonicum, vol. 5: Tractates Betsa and Hagiga (Munich: Heinrich Resl [H. Huber], 1869), 52.

330 MS Vienna, ONB, Cod. hebr. 106, fol. 36 r.

331 MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 41 r (in MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 92 v half of the comment is omitted) and MS Vienna, ONB, Cod. hebr. 106, fol. 37 v.

332 Eleazar ben Mattityah offers a medical explanation (MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 175 r); Caspi and Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara does not comment on the passage.
On the other hand all the key elements of the Avvat Nefesh’s thought are present in Moses Nagari’s supercommentary. Astrological worldview, interpretation of Judaism as a mystery religion that brings about salvation from the astrological fate, interpretation of the Sanctuary, the priests’ vestments and other sacred objects in the framework of cosmic symbolism and astral magic, the excellence of the Land of Israel in receiving special divine emanation due to its geographical position are all important topics in Moses Nagari’s supercommentary as well. Needless to say Moses Nagari could learn about these things from many other sources besides the Avvat Nefesh. But we have seen already a number of closer textual parallels between the two sources. Therefore, it is much more probable that Moses Nagari drew from Avvat Nefesh than vice versa.

The comparison of the following passages also leads to the same conclusion. The author of Avvat Nefesh explains Ibn Ezra’s famous words at Genesis 12: 6 suggesting the non-Mosaic authorship of the Torah in this way:

IT IS POSSIBLE THAT THE CANAANITE TOOK THE LAND OF CANAAN FROM SOMEONE ELSE that is to say, the word az can have two meanings. The first is that at the time Abraham was wandering in the land the Canaanite was already there but not before. And this is what he [Ibn Ezra] says, “he took it from someone else.” Or it can mean that at the time Abram was wandering in the land, the Canaanite was there, but this was written later, when [the Canaanite] was no longer there. And this is what he says, “and if it is not so, it has a secret” for he means that Moses did not write it; on the contrary, it was written after [fol. 76 v] the land was conquered. And this is his opinion about many other verses. And most of their secrets are dependent on this [passage] as he says at the beginning of Deuteronomy.

But we are not fond of him concerning this opinion, for the whole Torah was written by Moses from the mouth of God without distinction or change.333

At the beginning of Deuteronomy the author of Avvat Nefesh returns to the topic and adds a further comment:

But we are not fond of him concerning this interpretation for we think that Moses wrote all [the Torah] from the mouth of God. And because [fol. 129 r] they were soon to cross the Jordan God commanded him to use such a language as if they already crossed the Jordan and because of the future generations that would live in the Land of Israel [he used such a] language that they would understand where those things were said.334

In other words, the author of Avvat Nefesh refutes Ibn Ezra’s argument by saying that the anachronisms found in the Torah do not indicate non-Mosaic authorship but divine providence and foreknowledge: the prophet adopts the perspective of the future generations when he relates the events of his own age.

Moses Nagari’s supercommentary on Genesis 12: 6 reads:

AND THE CANAANITE WAS STILL ON THE LAND: IT IS POSSIBLE THAT THE CANAANITE TOOK THE LAND OF CANAAN FROM SOMEONE ELSE ETC. Because the word az signifies temporal limit in such a way that the thing it refers to exists only in that limited time. Therefore, if the word az refers to the time Abraham was wandering in that land and [Scripture] says ‘az’ because before that time the Canaanite was not found on that

333 MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 76 r-v.
334 MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 128 v – 129 r.
land, then he took it from someone else. And if this [interpretation] can be maintained then it is possible that Moses wrote it, for this [historical event] was known to the prophet and perhaps to everybody. And if the word az do not refer to the time Abraham was wandering in that land but to other time then he [Ibn Ezra] thinks that someone else wrote it. And this [verse] is similar to other verses that were written by someone else according to his judgment. And he says WHOEVER UNDERSTANDS IT SHOULD BE SILENT ABOUT IT, because he grasped the fragility of this intention that most scholars would reject it, but nonetheless, his investigation necessarily resulted that it must be true.

And even if we are not fond of him concerning this point since it is proper to believe with a necessary faith that Moses our master – peace upon him – wrote [the Torah] from be-reshit to yisrael [i.e. from the first word to the last one] without exception, not even one letter [was written by someone else] – I have decided to write an apology for him [Ibn Ezra] that “they should not talk badly about God’s anointed one [meshiah ha-shem].”

He thinks that the things apprehended from the future or present that are hidden from sense perception do not add any perfection to the prophet and it is not even the divine intention [that the prophet should] instruct others by telling them [the future or present hidden from the senses] because it is not necessary for the prophet that he should apprehend them.

It is obvious that Avvat Nefesh and Moses Nagari are related in this case as well. The similarities in content and wording cannot be by chance. The last paragraph of Moses Nagari’s comments seems to be a reply to the Avvat Nefesh’s argument: Moses Nagari accepts the solution offered there, namely that as a prophet Moses could speak from the perspective of the future generations. However, he presents an “apology” for Ibn Ezra claiming that in Ibn Ezra’s opinion a prophet does not have to know the future; therefore, the argument of Avvat Nefesh was not conclusive for Ibn Ezra. To sum up, it seems that Moses Nagari reflects on Avvat Nefesh at this point.

Commenting on the Akedah (Abraham’s trial in Genesis 22) the author of Avvat Nefesh inserts a long excursus on the correct theological interpretation of divine temptation. He remarks that the vulgar version of the doctrine (God inflicts a righteous man with several bows in order to know whether he would remain faithful to Him or not) attributes imperfection to God concerning both knowledge and justice.

Maimonides’ solution, namely that the point of trial is not that God should know whether Abraham or Job is faithful to him, but that other people should know it (cf. GP III, 24), is also rejected by the author because it contradicts the literal sense of Genesis 22: nobody saw Abraham’s sacrificing Isaac, thus the publication of Abraham’s faith could not be the primary intention of the trial.

The author’s own solution is based on the ideal of asceticism and put into Aristotelian language. Certain human perfections exist only potentially in the human soul. To bring them into actuality is not possible without suffering. “Trial” or “divine temptation” is a process of actualization: through suffering the righteous man will acquire a good character. This suffering is not a punishment for sins but a means by which one’s character is improved. At the end of the discussion the author argues that Ibn Ezra’s opinion was actually the same as the one proposed by himself. He quotes two passages from Ibn Ezra to prove this.

The same explanation is recollected in Moses Nagari’s supercommentary as well as an explanation of Ibn Ezra’s position. However, there is a big difference between the Avvat

335 MS Vienna, ÖNB, hebr. 106, fol. 32 r.
336 MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 82 v – 85 r.
Nefesh’s and Moses Nagari’s account: the first is a long and detailed presentation whereas the second is a brief and dense recapitulation.\textsuperscript{337}

It seems to me that the author of Avvat Nefesh presented an idea which seemed new and original to him. He had to justify why he departs from Maimonides’ solution and why he thinks that Ibn Ezra thought the same of the question as he did. This was not necessary for Moses Nagari.

I think the reason for the difference is that the author of Avvat Nefesh attempted to establish his own position in a debated question whereas Moses Nagari only recapitulated a solution that he found in a source. In other words, it is much more probable that Moses Nagari actually read the Avvat Nefesh than vice versa.

We have mentioned above MS Oxford, Bodleian, Or. 597 (Neubauer 222) written in Italy, 1311. This manuscript contains Ibn Ezra’s commentary on the Pentateuch with occasional marginal notes. On fol. 131 r there is a remark on the opening sentence of Ibn Ezra’s commentary on Leviticus (“We find the unique covenant [\textit{berit yahid}] because of two things”):

\begin{quote}
We find the “covenant of the member” [\textit{berit milla}, i.e. circumcision] that was commanded to Abraham, who was unique in his generation concerning his faith in God. This is why he calls it [i.e. circumcision] “unique covenant.”\textsuperscript{338}
\end{quote}

In Avvat Nefesh we find the following comment to the same \textit{locus}:

The intention of this saying [in \textit{Sefer Yetsira}] is that the ten numbers on which all the numbers are based are from nothing [\textit{me-ayin}], and this is [the meaning of] the phrase \textit{beli ma}. And the text “five is opposing five” refers to the five fingers on the hand and the five fingers on the foot that are opposite of the other [five]. Just like God – blessed be He – operates [\textit{mekavven}] in between the ten \textit{sefirot}, for the \textit{waw} is in the middle, and the \textit{waw} can change into \textit{yod} according to the [grammatical] rule, and God – blessed be He – is one – so, in a similar way, the “covenant of the member” [\textit{berit ha-mila}, i.e. circumcision] concerns the member, which is unique, and operates in the middle of the fingers, namely the fingers of the hands and feet to teach [fol. 68 r] the unity of God. This is the meaning of “the covenant of the unique one,” that is to say, the covenant that concerns the unique member to remind [man] of the confession of unity [\textit{ha-yihhud}] which he is commanded. And who started it was unique in his faith in God, I mean Abraham – peace be on him.\textsuperscript{339}

The last sentence of the quoted passage resembles the sentence found in the Oxford manuscript both in wording and in content. Moses Nagari’s supercommentary does not contain a similar remark on Abraham, although in other respects it resembles Avvat Nefesh (for example, the phrase “to teach the unity of God” appears almost verbatim in Moses Nagari). It cannot be found in the other early supercommentaries either.

Therefore, it is likely that Avvat Nefesh was the source of the gloss appearing in the Oxford manuscript. Since this codex was written in Italy and dated to 1311; therefore, the evidence indicates the presence of the Avvat Nefesh in Italy during the first half of the fourteenth century. It seems to me that the hand of the glossator is not identical with the hand that carried out the bulk of the work; therefore, it cannot be taken for granted that the gloss dates from 1311. But there is no reason to suppose a much later date either. On the other hand,

\textsuperscript{337} MS Vienna, ÖNB, hebr. 106, fol. 35 v – 36 r.
\textsuperscript{338} MS Oxford, Bodleian, Or. 597 (Neubauer 222), fol. 131 r.
\textsuperscript{339} MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 114 r-v.
nothing indicates the presence of Moses Nagari’s supercommentary in Provence; in fact, his supercommentary was hardly available at all outside of Italy.

On the basis of these arguments we can conclude that Avvat Nefesh pre-dates Moses Nagari’s work and consequently, it must have been written in the first half of the fourteenth century.

3. The Introduction of Avvat Nefesh: Dating and Clues of the Author

In the first lines of Avvat Nefesh the author claims that it is not proper to comment on the literal sense of Scripture in “scattered writings” [bemikhtav mefuzarim ve-nifradim]. It is better to devote a separate work to the subject in which everything is treated at its proper place. He also remarks that new interpretations came to his mind concerning the esoteric sense of the Torah [al derekh ha-nistar] not mentioned by previous sages or his contemporaries. Therefore, the main intention of his work is to present his biblical exegesis in a well-organized writing.

After that the author remarks that it was his intention in all his life to explain the words of Ibn Ezra, because he estimates Ibn Ezra’s words as much as the words of the prophets except for those cases when Ibn Ezra contradicts the rabbis of talmudic times. In these cases he does his best to interpret Ibn Ezra in accordance with rabbinic tradition; but if this is not possible then he disagrees with Ibn Ezra for “this sage [Ibn Ezra] is beloved to us but the truth is beloved even more” [ki im he-hakham ha-ze ahuvnu ha-emet yoter havivnu].

The author relates that some of his friends who are accomplished scholars [hakhamim mehukkamim] hearing some of his explanations that were hidden in his heart in his old age [b-imi horfi] urged him to write his explanations of Ibn Ezra in a book. The author emphasizes that he does not conceal his real opinion but tells the truth plainly, “for truth witnesses itself.” He mentions again that many of his explanations are new. These innovations require a justification. Therefore the author proceeds to present an apology for himself.

This apology concerns the relationship between the “ancients” [rishonim] and the “moderns” [aharonim]. The ancients are believed to be superior to the moderns in both intellectual and spiritual terms. So how can “a modern” criticize and refute the solution of an ancient and propose new doctrines?

The author replies that even if in general the ancients are superior to the moderns it is possible that in specific questions the moderns managed to grasp the truth better than the ancients. He refers to an observation according to which people of weak sight can see certain objects better than people whose sight is sharp. Human intellect is connected to the bodily faculties; therefore, if the body is tired the intellect can err as well. A man of greater intellect can fail to grasp a truth what a man of inferior intellect is able to understand if the former is tired and the latter is not. Therefore, the author concludes, the moderns have every right to propose new interpretations and to correct the mistakes of the ancients.

What do we know about the author on the basis of the introduction? He was an old man at the time of composing the Avvat Nefesh. He probably wrote many other works before in which he had occasions to comment on the literal or esoteric senses of the Torah. He was surrounded by a circle of accomplished scholars whose knowledge of philosophy must have been considerable just like the author’s one. The phrase “courts of wisdom” [hatserot ha-

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340 This sentence is obviously based on the famous adage attributed to Aristotle: “amicus Plato sed magis amica est veritas.” I found very little information on the history of this saying in Jewish literature. The earliest firmly datable mention is apparently a paraphrase by the Ibn Ezra supercommentator Judah Leon Mosconi (second half of the fourteenth-century) directed against Moses Narbini; cf. Steinschneider, HÜ, 314, note 340. In the Mivhar ha-peninim, an important collection of philosophical adages in Hebrew (probably from the early twelfth century) I did not find any trace of the saying.
hokhma] appears in the introduction. Later in the supercommentary the author refers to the “general custom of kings” to invite scholars into their courts and some of his remarks display familiarity with courtly life. Therefore it is possible that the author was a member of a circle of Jewish philosophers who were connected to a royal court in early fourteenth-century Provence.

Ibn Ezra’s authority was already well established in the author’s time. Moreover, the importance of the topic of ancients versus moderns (in which Ibn Ezra and Maimonides are implicitly subsumed under the category of ancients for their views are criticized and rejected sometimes in the supercommentary) shows that the author was aware of a considerable time-gap between his own and Maimonides’ times. His emphasis on the innovative character of his work and his defense of the possibility to criticize “the ancients” recalls Joseph Caspi’s statements to the same effect in the first part of his Sefer ha-sod.

The author of Avvat Nefesh presupposes the contemporary existence of a rich and competitive philosophical literature in which there is a pressure of innovation on whoever wants to write something. All these phenomena accord very well with what we know about Provencal Jewish philosophical life in the first half of the fourteenth century. Therefore, there is no reason for supposing a much earlier date for the work. The author of the Avvat Nefesh was most probably a contemporary of Joseph Caspi.

4. Jedaiah ha-Penini: the Author of Avvat Nefesh?

The manuscript tradition ascribes Avvat Nefesh to Jedaiah ha-Penini, or Gersonides or Asher Crescas. Most of the manuscripts transmit it anonymously. First I will show that Gersonides can be safely excluded from the circle of candidates (and the same has been proved already concerning Asher Crescas). Therefore, Avvat Nefesh was written either by Jedaiah ha-Penini or by an anonymous author. After that I will argue that Jedaiah’s authorship is probable though not all the doubts can be excluded at the present state of research.

Gersonides’ authorship can be easily excluded on the basis of doctrinal and exegetical considerations. Gersonides argued that the world was created out of pre-existing matter both in his Milhamot ha-shem and in his commentary on Genesis. He criticized and openly rejected Maimonides’ opinion concerning this question. On the other hand, the author of Avvat Nefesh accepts fully the idea of creation out of nothing and agrees explicitly with Maimonides. There is not the slightest sign of criticism or disagreement with Maimonides in this question although the author rejects quite clearly and explicitly Maimonides’ opinion in other questions (such as the interpretation of Abraham’s trial, Moses’ sin, or the purpose of creation).

Other characteristics of Gersonides’ interpretation of the creation story are also missing from Avvat Nefesh. Thus, Gersonides interprets the “upper waters” of Genesis 1:7 as referring to a peculiar matter that fills the gaps between the spheres in both the Milhamot ha-shem and the commentary on Genesis whereas the author of Avvat Nefesh takes the “upper waters” to refer to vapors and clouds both in the supercommentary on Ibn Ezra and in his own exposition of the creation narrative.

Furthermore, the author of Avvat Nefesh proposed an allegorical exegesis of the three sons of Adam, whereas Gersonides rejected such explanations as absurd. One could probably find a number of further differences between Gersonides’ and the Avvat Nefesh’s positions. I think the ones quoted already are sufficient to exclude Gersonides from the circle of possible authors. It should be remembered that Avvat Nefesh is a work of old age;

341 Cf. Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 70r-71r
therefore the consideration that the young Gersonides could have different ideas about the creation of the world than the mature Gersonides does not apply.

Turning to Jedaiah ha-Penini, the difficulties pointed out above disappear. Jedaiah wrote commentaries on rabbinic midrashim such as the Bereshit rabba, the Midrash Tanhuma and the Midrash Tehillim. In these works he does comment sometimes on the literal or esoteric senses of the Scripture. But these comments are necessarily scattered. Similarly, in his famous Letter of Apology, Jedaiah treats briefly questions of biblical exegesis. However, this epistle was not the work either where he could display systematically his exegesis. Thus, the reference to the “scattered writings” in the introduction to Avvat Nefesh makes perfect sense if we suppose that Jedaiah was its author.

Ruth Glasner has argued that Jedaiah ha-Penini was connected to a circle of philosophers gathered around Gersonides. Gersonides himself was connected to the papal court at Avignon in the 1320s. Some of Jedaiah’s works testifies his familiarity with certain ideas of Duns Scotus and William Ockham. Jedaiah probably got the information from the papal court of Avignon where Ockham spent long time in the 1320s. It is possible that Jedaiah himself entered the service of the pope as well. In any case it is quite probable that he was in close contact with Jews who regularly appeared at the papal curia.

All these remarkably agree with the image we can gain about the author of Avvat Nefesh from the text itself. A circle of “accomplished scholars” [ḥakhamim mehukkamim] persuading the author who is familiar with certain customs of royal courts and refer to the presence of scholars at royal courts as a self-evident fact – all these point to the direction that the author of Avvat Nefesh was possibly a member of Gersonides’ circle. There is hardly any other candidate for a royal court with Jewish philosophers in Provence during the first half of the fourteenth century than the papal court at Avignon.

If we compare Avvat Nefesh to Jedaiah’s works we find a few remarkable points of contact. At the end of Genesis the author of Avvat Nefesh inserts a long excursus about the question why Jacob and Joseph insisted that they should be buried in the Holy Land rather than in Egypt:

Here I find it proper to explain a matter that was dubious for me for a long time. And this is the commandment of Jacob, our father, peace upon him, that he should be brought to the land of Israel after his death to be buried there. And similarly, Joseph, his son commanded that his bones should be brought from Egypt when they go out from the servitude and should be buried in the land of Israel.

The author wonders why the holy fathers were so much concerned with the fate of their bodily remnants when it has no relevance for the salvation of their souls which was much more important for them. At the same time the author is confident that there must be some proper reason; otherwise such holy men would not care for their corps.

The following solution is proposed: It is well-known, the author argues, that the multitudes are very much concerned with the graves of their forefathers and point to them as evidences for their long presence in a land to secure their rights over the land. Therefore, Jacob and Joseph were aware the possibility that the people of Israel would be unwilling to leave Egypt at the time of the Exodus if their graves were there. And it was very important to return to the Land of Israel.

344 MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 98 v.
for it is well-known that the air of the land of Israel is cleaner than the air of other countries because it is in the middle of the oikumene [yishshuv]. Therefore, its inhabitants are able to realize human perfection and to deserve eternal life as [the talmudic rabbis] say, “the air of the land of Israel makes you wise.” Now since the fathers are obliged to command and to guide their sons to keep the way of God as is said “that he [Abraham] commands his sons and his house after him…” (Genesis 18: 19) it was necessary for them [Jacob and Joseph] that at the time of their departure when the people and the sons still pay great attention to their deeds and words they recognize the value of the land of Israel and they choose it as [the place] of their burial in order to make them attached to the [land] which is the land of life for it is capable to help man to reach the level of being attached to the separate [intellects] as we explained and to live forever.345

Jedaiah ha-Penini at the end of his commentary on the Bereshit rabba writes:

Why did all the fathers want to be buried in the land [of Israel]? … [Bereshit rabba 96: 5] The intention of this saying shows the excellence of that one who said it and the truth of his opinion. He means that the excellence of that land and of that air is widely known as they say “the air of the land of Israel makes you wise” (Baba batra 158b) and “who lives outside of the land has no God” (Ketubbot 110b) and this is why it is called “the land that God has elected” (Deut. 12:6). And accordingly it is the root of prophecy, and its principle and its source. As if the author of this adage explained that what is alluded to by the preference for being buried in the [land of Israel] is the conviction and wish of each men to live in the land in his life for it is the “land of life” (Psalms 116:9) and of the emanation of perfection.346

The similarity of the two texts is obvious. The only significant difference is that in the commentary on Bereshit rabba the simple people’s concern for the graves of their forefathers is not pointed out. At this point we should recall the opening sentence of the Avvat Nefesh’s discussion: “Here I find it proper to explain a matter which was dubious for me for a long time.” If we suppose that Jedaiah ha-Penini was the author of Avvat Nefesh then this sentence is completely intelligible. Jedaiah wrote already about this topic in the commentary on the Bereshit rabba; but now he proposes a fuller explanation.

Commenting on a famous passage of the Mishnah (“All Israel have a share in the world to come…” Sanhedrin 10: 1) Jedaiah ha-Penini argued that immortality can be achieved by women and children as well and not only by the philosophers. His position is summarized by Marc Saperstein thus:

CM [= Jedaiah’s Commentary on the Midrashim] in contrast, understands the statement in the traditional way, as referring to the entire people, including the masses, women and children, who are taught by the sages, in a simplified form, those truths necessary to ensure immortality.347

345 MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 99 r.
347 Cf. Marc Saperstein: “R. Isaac b. Yedaya, a Forgotten Commentator on the Aggada,” Revue des études juives 138 (1979): 30. Saperstein refers to a passage in Jedaiah’s commentary on Pirqey Rabbi Eliezer, chapter 19 that is to be found only in a Parma manuscript (de Rossi, 222) which lacks folio-numbers. Unfortunately, I could not consult this manuscript.
This position was by no means self-evident. Many post-Maimonidean philosophers thought that only few elected individuals are able to attain eternal life because apprehending the Active Intellect is a precondition of it and not many can apprehend the Active Intellect. The author of Avvat Nefesh writes:

[…] even if somebody cannot apprehend all the intelligibles and he cannot attach himself to the separated [intellects], but, nevertheless, he does apprehend most of the intelligibles in a general way, or at least some of them, then he can still attain eternal life, as we explained in our treatise “The Bundle of Life” when we brought our arguments against the opinion of the philosophers.

Thus, the opinion of Jedaiah seems to be in agreement with the author of Avvat Nefesh in this question as well. Unfortunately, I am not aware of any further references to a work “The Bundle of Life” (tsaror ha-hayim) in medieval Hebrew literature that could be identified reasonably with the lost work referred to in this passage. In two Byzantine manuscripts the author of Avvat Nefesh explaining Maimonides’ opinion about the first instant of creation remarks that “point is not a linear principle [hathala qavit] for it is not in the species of line [ki enenna be-min ha-qav].”

Jedaiah ha-Penini in his treatise on the opposite movements writes:

And after that I say that the Philosopher [Aristotle] attempts to prove that the distance between two opposite points is straight and not curved. We ourselves say that ‘line’ in general is a genus and its first species are ‘straight’ and ‘curved.’ And the [species] ‘straight’ is not divided into [further] species.

Jedaiah introduces a system of classification of geometrical objects according to Aristotelian genera and species. This was apparently his innovation and not a part of the standard Aristotelian tradition. The author of Avvat Nefesh seems to share Jedaiah’s approach when he remarks “[point] is not in the species of line.”

Commenting on Abraham’s making a covenant with God in Genesis 15 the author of Avvat Nefesh talks about the soul as a “captive” [anus] in the body. Although the opposition between body and soul is a commonplace in post-Maimonidean philosophy, such a dramatic description is rather unusual. Jedaiah’s most famous work, the Behinat olam is focused on the soul’s imprisonment in the body and the ways it can liberate itself.

A further clue is that Moses Nagari in the introduction to his supercommentary mentions the fact that he consulted earlier supercommentators “who sank into the ocean of Ibn Ezra and brought up pearls [peninim].” The phrase peninim might easily be a pun on Jedaiah’s name. This argument might seem to be a bit far-fetched; however, there is a further reason to believe it. Jedaiah ha-Penini dedicated one of his works [Ohev nashim] to Judah and Meir ben Don Solomon Dels Infanz. The editor of the text, Adolf [Abraham] Neubauer believes the family-name Dels Infanz to be identical with Italian Dei Fanciulli which is

348 See on this: James T. Robinson: Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s Commentary on Ecclesiastes.
349 MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 18 v; cf. MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 69 v where the text is corrupted.
350 MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 992, fol. 112 r and MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 6 v. The clause “for it is not in the species of line” is missing from MS Vat. ebr. 104 and from the quotation in Asher Crescas’ commentary on GP II, 30 (Warsawa: I. Goldman, 1872), 58a.
351 MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 984, fol. 25 r.
353 MS Vat.ebr. 104, fol. 79 v.
probably the Vorlage of Moses Nagari’s family name [“Nagari” is a modern corruption of min ha-Nearim]. Neubauer himself refers to Moses Nagari in this context. If he is right, and I do not see any reason to object to his opinion, then Moses Nagari could have easily been a relative of the two Dels Infanzs to whom Jedaiah dedicated his Ohev nashim and who were good friends of him. Thus, Moses Nagari must have had a link to Jedaiah ha-Penini. Therefore, it must have been possibly for him to get a copy of Jedaiah’s supercommentary. 

These arguments are far from excluding the possibility that Avvat Nefesh was actually written by an anonymous influenced by Jedaiah or belonging to the same circle of philosophers as Jedaiah.

5. The Probable Author of Avvat Nefesh: Sen Bonet de Lunel

As a matter of fact, there is a candidate for this role. In Natanel Caspi’s commentary on Judah ha-Levi’s Cuzari (written around 1424 in Provence) we can read the following about a passage of the Sefer Yetzira quoted in Cuzari [III, 7]:

And the author of Sefer Yetzira indeed says: “Ten sefirot beli ma, five is opposing five, and the covenant of the unique one operates [mekavven] in the middle, etc.”

And the explanation of the sage, Sen Bonet de Lunel in his book, which is a supercommentary [biur] on the book of the sage Ibn Ezra of blessed memory is as follows:

The intention of this saying [in Sefer Yetzira] is that the ten numbers on which all the numbers are based are from nothing [me-ayin], and this is [the meaning of] the phrase beli ma. And the text “five is opposing five” refers to the five fingers on the hand and the five fingers on the foot that are opposite of the other [five]. Just like God – blessed be He – operates [mekavven] in between the ten sefirot, for the waw is in the middle, and the waw can change [into yod] according to the [grammatical] rule, and God – blessed be He – is one – so, in a similar way, the “covenant of the member” [berit ha-mila, i.e. circumcision] concerns the member, which is unique, and operates in the middle of the fingers, namely the fingers of the hands and feet to teach [fol. 68 r] the unity of God. This is the meaning of “the covenant of the unique one,” that is to say, the covenant that concerns the unique member to remind [man] of the confession of unity [ha-yihhud] which he is commanded. And who started it was unique in his faith in God, I mean Abraham – peace be on him.

The quotation from the “sage, Sen Bonet de Lunel” comes from Avvat Nefesh.


355 MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 677, fol. 67 v – 68 r. About Natanel Caspi and his commentary on Cuzari see: Moritz Steinschneider: “Frat (Prat?) Maimon und seine drei Schüler,”,” Hebräische Bibliographie 16 (1876): 126-132 where the passage was mentioned (though not printed) on pp. 131-132. The manuscript (Paris 677) was written in Provence and dated to 1424. According to Beit-Arié and Sirat it is not autograph as claimed in Zotenberg’s catalogue, but an “author’s copy,” i.e. written by a professional scribe and corrected by the author, Natanel Caspi, himself. Cf. Zotenberg: Catalogues des manuscrits hébreux et samaritain de la Bibliothèque Impériale (Paris: Imprimerie Impériale, 1866), 106 and Beit-Arié – Sirat: Manuscrits médiévaux en caractères hébraiques, vol. 2, 64 [= “Manuscrits datées, II, 64”] where the manuscript is described. On Frat Maimon’s school see Dov Schwartz: Central Problems of Medieval Jewish Philosophy.

356 At the beginning of Parashat Va-yiqra. The quotation appears on fol. 114 r-v in MS Vat. ebr. 104 (with minor variants). It has been quoted above, in this chapter, section 2.
Sen Bonet de Lunel is not known from any other sources. Therefore, he is more likely candidate than Jedaiah ha-Penini, since it is more probable that a well-known writer, Jedaiah ha-Penini, replaced the name of a practically unknown man, Sen Bonet de Lunel, in the course of manuscript-transmission than vice versa.

There is a slight problem, however. It is not impossible that Sen Bonet de Lunel is Jedaiah ha-Penini. In 1877 Michel Friedlaender being unaware of the relation of Natanel Caspi’s quotation to Avvat Nefesh and all the problems surrounding this text suggested that Sen Bonet de Lunel is identical with Jedaiah ha-Penini. Friedlaender did not add any explanation to his suggestion, but we can easily supplement one. In fact, Jedaiah was called in Provencal En Bonet, and Natanel Caspi’s Sen Bonet might be a corruption from En Bonet. 

Although it is difficult to exclude a possibility completely, when we have so little information, this argument is not very persuasive. A corruption from En to Sen is not more probable than from Sen to En – the second alternative is a possible explanation of the fact that the text was eventually attributed to Jedaiah ha-Penini in some manuscripts. Moreover, the presence of the phrase de Lunel makes the identification with Jedaiah quite difficult.

Names indicating geographical origins often functioned as proper family names in our period, the first half of the fourteenth century. For example, Moses Narboni was not from Narbonne; he was born in Perpignan. “Narboni” was already a family name for him. Similarly, Jedaiah ha-Penini’s other name, “Bedersi,” “from Béziers” did not indicate place of birth. It was a family name inherited from his father, Abraham Bedersi. According to a note in a manuscript, Jedaiah was actually “from Perpignan,” and, according to another manuscript, he was “one of the sages of Catalonia.”

“De Lunel” was quite a widespread family name among Provencal Jews. Its Hebrew equivalent was Yarhi, playing on the etymology of the word (yerah = Moon). It is quite improbable that somebody who had the Hebrew family name Bedersi could have the Provencal family name de Lunel and vice versa. It is much more probable that Sen Bonet de Lunel was a man different from Jedaiah ha-Penini, he wrote the supercommentary Avvat Nefesh, and his name was confused with Jedaiah’s one in some of the manuscripts, by 1399 the latest (MS Vat. ebr. 104).

Nonetheless, the parallels existing between Jedaiah ha-Penini’s works and Avvat Nefesh suggest a relationship between Jedaiah and Bonet. This possibility will turn out to be interesting when we examine Bonet’s concept of time in the supercommentary on Genesis 1:1. Moreover, as has been pointed out above, it would explain how Moses Nagari could access Avvat Nefesh. Otherwise, the possible connection between the two scholars will not play any role in the interpretation of the material.

The lost work entitled Tseror ha-hayim mentioned in the previous section is also to be attributed to Sen Bonet de Lunel.

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357 The Jewish Encyclopedia contains a short article about him (vol. 2, p. 305, s.v. “Bonet de Lunel, Sen”) with the following text: “French author of the Middle Ages. He wrote a supercommentary on Ibn Ezra's Bible commentary, which is mentioned by Nathaniel Caspi in his commentary on the "Cuzari," written in 1387, and is still extant in manuscripts (among others, in "Cat. Bodl." No. 1229).” This sentence is misleading. The manuscript referred to (“Cat. Bodl. No. 1229,” i.e. Neubauer 1229) does not contain Bonet’s supercommentary, but Natanel Caspi’s commentary on the Cuzari. There is no reason to believe that it was written in 1387. Friedlaender, Essays, 214, n.1.

Chapter 5: Moses Nagari

The name of the author is stated in the introduction to the supercommentary: Moses the son of Rabbi Judah the son of R. Moses of the Nearim [min ha-Nearim]. The min ha-Nearim or degli Adolescentoli or Fanciulli were members of one of the four “aristocratic” families in Rome who were believed to be brought by Titus from Jerusalem to Rome after the siege of Jerusalem in 70 C.E. The author of this supercommentary belonged to a famous and rich family in Rome; therefore, it is usually assumed that he was born and he lived in Rome.

In the introduction the author mentions that he was 25 years old when he composed the supercommentary on the request of a friend. Thus we have the work of a relatively young author in this case.

The latest source explicitly referred to in the supercommentary is Judah Romano’s Hebrew translation of the Latin version of the Liber de causis which was completed around 1325. This date is a terminus a quo for the date of the supercommentary itself.

However, there is no reason to assume a much later date. As we shall see in the chapter on creation Moses Nagari was quite familiar with Judah Romano’s philosophy and with the scholastic authors Judah Romano translated from Latin into Hebrew, that is to say, Aquinas and Giles of Rome. However Judah Romano’s translations were not known outside of his circle; they “incidentally had little influence on the later history of Jewish literature or philosophy.”

We shall see that Moses Nagari’s work definitely belongs to the same intellectual environment as Judah Romano’s translations and Immanuel Romano’s poetical and exegetical writings. The supercommentary can be roughly dated between 1325 and 1340.

The author also wrote an index of subjects to Maimonides’ GP.

The supercommentary starts with an allegorical poem in which the universe as known by medieval Jewish philosophers is displayed using sometimes Kabbalistic terminology (cf. introduction to the present part). The author himself wrote a commentary to his own poem.

The text continues with a long introduction in which the author describes a divine invitation to leave the temporal values and to pursue wisdom that guarantees eternal life. The author responded to the invitation with a sort of conversion: he realized that all other values besides wisdom are futile in the eyes of God and he decided to devote all his activities to achieve knowledge.

When the author was 25 years old – 25 is a square number, Moses points out – a friend from the “pleasant colleagues” [haverim neimim] started to urge the author “to copy my book, the explanation of the commentary of the flower of the sages and scholars, the sage Ibn Ezra.” [le-haqot al sifri biur al perush nezer he-hakhamim ve-ha-yodim, he-hakham a”el]

If I understand this sentence correctly the implication is that Moses Nagari already had a


363 Cf. Steinschneider, CB, 1834.

364 MS Vienna, ONB, Cod. hebr. 106, fol. 2 v.
supercommentary written just he did not publish it yet. The friend wanted to copy Moses Nagari’s private manuscript containing his explanation of Ibn Ezra and this act was equivalent to publishing the text.

The author claims that he resisted the wish of the friend fiercely for he knew that Ibn Ezra’s commentary is full of deep mysteries and subtle allusions and the author was often not certain whether he correctly understood the inner sense of Ibn Ezra’s words [tokhe devarav]. Moses Nagari uses the standard Maimonidean vocabulary for describing the esoteric sense of Ibn Ezra’s text; this vocabulary is also applied to the Bible and to GP in post-Maimonidean literature.

Furthermore, the author continues, many great scholars already wrote supercommentaries on Ibn Ezra, so the friend could get what he wanted from other scholars, and Moses is scared to enter the company of such great men.

As the reader might have expected, in spite of all these difficulties Moses Nagari finally assented to the friend’s wish. He apologizes for this decision in front of all Israel and concludes the section with a short prayer.

After that a second introduction comes. The author uses highly allusive language; it is often difficult to tell what he is talking about. It seems to me that he justifies the esoteric interpretation of rabbinic midrashim, because it is impossible to think that such excellent philosophers as the rabbis of the talmudic period were would teach absurdities. He emphasizes the authority of the talmudic sages and claims that their opinion is to be preferred if Ibn Ezra happens to contradict them. This argument also recalls Bonet’s introduction to Avvat Nefesh.

The supercommentary itself is influenced not only by the theories of Latin scholastics but their approach to exegesis as well. Moses Nagari very often starts his explanation with “introductions” [haqdamot] that summarize the main points of Ibn Ezra’s text or some relevant information about the topic that does not appear directly in the commentary. These introductions present a good opportunity to the author to put Ibn Ezra’s words into the context of recent scholastic theories. For example, Ibn Ezra’s etymology of the word boqer “morning” in Genesis 1: 5 presents an occasion to discuss the role of light as medium [emtsai] in rendering the potentially visible objects actually visible and the potentially seeing human soul actually seeing.  

Moreover, Moses Nagari often numbers the points in his introductions or resumes of Ibn Ezra. The supercommentary on the excursus in Exodus 3: 15 uses a further scholastic devise: Moses Nagari divides the text into smaller units, he identifies the beginning and the end of each units by quoting the first and last sentences and then proceeds to explain the structure of Ibn Ezra essays and the particular passages. This part of the supercommentary resembles very much, for example, Aquinas’ commentary on the Physics in this purely formal respect.

Moses Nagari’s commentary on Ibn Ezra’s treatise on the divine names is one of the most interesting texts in the history of medieval Jewish philosophy in my opinion. It deserves a full study. Here I will pick up only three points: (1) Explaining Ibn Ezra’s words concerning the order of the created world the supercommentator uses theological formulas that can be traced back to (Ps.-) Dionysius Areopagita. (2) Explaining the differences between God’s

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365 MS Vienna, ONB, Cod. hebr. 106, fol. 7 v. Moses Nagari’s formula resembles Judah Romano’s theory of light expounded in his commentary on Genesis 1: 3 (MS New York, JTS, Lutzki 2362, fol. 5 r). As Sermoneta notes, Judah Romano preferred the view of Giles of Rome to that of Thomas Aquinas in this question, see Sermoneta, “Jehudah ben Mošeh...,” 237, note 4. The difference of opinion is recorded to in the supercommentary as well (MS Vienna, ONB, Cod. hebr. 106, fol. 9 v).

366 Cf. MS Vienna, ONB, Cod. hebr. 106, fol. 28 r – 30 v and 41 r – 46 v (the manuscript is mistakenously bound).

367 MS Vienna, ONB, Cod. hebr. 106, fol. 45 r. The passage will be quoted in the next part, chapter on bara.
proper name and the other names taken from the divine activities Moses Nagari describe the difference between God and the created world as difference between infinite and finite existence.\(^{368}\) (3) Commenting on the graphical shape of the Hebrew letter ‘he’ Moses Nagari informs us that the reason for the space left between two strokes of this letter is to allude to the fact that God is the form of the universe and the universe cannot exist without its Form, therefore they are “one in existence and two in essence.”\(^{369}\) Whether this sentence is to be understood as claiming a univocal existence for God and the world in the spirit of Duns Scotus I cannot decide at the moment.

Moses Nagari’s reliance on Christian neo-Platonic doctrines might have been a reason for his attraction to Ibn Ezra’s thought. The role of Ibn Ezra’s commentary is comparable from this point of view to the role of the Dionysian corpus in Latin scholasticism. Both Ibn Ezra and Dionysius transmitted neo-Platonic lore to thirteenth- and fourteenth-century philosophers.

Beside the usual sources, Aristotle, Averroes, Avicenna, Maimonides, and Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s *Maamar yiqqevu ha-mayim*\(^{370}\) the supercommentary refers to Judah Romano’s translation of the *Liber de causis*,\(^{371}\) to the *Sefer Yetsira*,\(^{372}\) and to the “sayings of Enoch” that might refer to Hermetic literature.\(^{373}\) The evaluation of these references cannot be carried out in the present paper.

Another remarkable passage is the supercommentary on Exodus 7: 4. Ibn Ezra remarks that the Torah was revealed in order to enable the righteous persons to achieve immortality. In Moses Nagari’s interpretation this means that the Torah itself is the eternal life for those who study it in the proper way. Therefore, the supercommentator argues:

In my opinion whoever says in the blessing [that is to be recited after the reading] of the Torah [*birkat ha-tora ha-aharonah*]: “and eternal life Thou have planted in us” is mistaken, because he declares the world-to-come to be different from the Torah. But this is not the case, for the [Torah] in itself is [eternal life] as Solomon pronounces it in his beloved sayings: “it is the tree of life for those who seize it” (Proverbs 3: 18).\(^{374}\)

What Moses Nagari dislike is the word ‘and’ separating the words ‘Torah’ and ‘eternal life’ from each other in the text of the blessing (“…Who gave us the true Torah and eternal life planted in us”). The supercommentator probably thought that the correct text was *without* the ‘and:’ “Who gave us the true Torah eternal life planted in us” suggesting identity between the Torah and eternal life. Orthodoxy, ‘kashrut’ in technical philosophy and theology became a source for rethinking liturgical practices on the expense of poetical beauty and grammatical soundness.

As far as I know, no separate study has been devoted to Moses Nagari’s person and work yet. This is likely to change in the future.

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\(^{368}\) MS Vienna, ONB, Cod. hebr. 106, fol. 29 r

\(^{369}\) MS Vienna, ONB, Cod. hebr. 106, fol. 44 v.

\(^{370}\) MS Vienna, ONB, Cod. hebr. 106, fol. 1 v

\(^{371}\) MS Vienna, ONB, Cod. hebr. 106, fol. 1 r quoted in the next part, chapter on *bara*.

\(^{372}\) MS Vienna, ONB, Cod. hebr. 106, fol. 7 r where a sentence from the *Sefer Yetsira* is explained independently of Ibn Ezra’s commentary.

\(^{373}\) MS Vienna, ONB, Cod. hebr. 106, fol. 26 v.

\(^{374}\) MS Vienna, ONB, Cod. hebr. 106, fol. 49 v.
Chapter 6: Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Seville

The fragments of Shlomo ben Abraham Ibn Yaish of Seville’s supercommentary on Ibn Ezra will not be analyzed in this paper, because they do not discuss the interpretation of the creation-story. Nonetheless, I will summarize briefly the available information on this author, because he is not well-known and because he is often not distinguished from Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara, the author of a widespread supercommentary.

Shlomo ben Abraham Ibn Yaish of Seville was a famous and respected physician. He died in Siwan, 1345 and was buried in Seville. A eulogy the deceased was inscribed on his tomb. The grave-stone containing the poem was eventually re-used in the building of the Dom of Seville where it was discovered in the nineteenth century and published in Spanish translation. On the basis of this publication Leopold Zunz reconstructed the original Hebrew text (that is to say, he re-translated the modern Spanish translation into medieval Hebrew). I have no information about the fate of the gravestone and I do not know whether the original text was published. My translation is based on Zunz’s retranslated Hebrew text:

This is a monument and a memorial pillar
See the writing on it for the sake of memory
For who is buried here was a treasure of precious vessels
Of the Torah and of attestation
He spoke miraculous words concerning the divine science [lit. “wisdom of the Name”]
And the medical books are no longer understood without him
And the tree of life is also hidden
He is the sage, the pious, the righteous, and the trustworthy
Rav Shlomo bar Abraham Ibn Yaish bar Barukh
Who was collected to his people and buried to his world
In the month of Siwan in the year five thousand and one hundred five.

He wrote a very long commentary on Avicenna’s Canon in Arabic (hence the reference to the “medical books” in the eulogy) that was translated into Hebrew (or transcribed into Hebrew letters?) from the author’s copy by Joseph Ibn Nahmias still in the author’s life. Some 30% of this work survives in the Arabic original and several abridged versions in Hebrew. In Hebrew medical literature the author is also referred to as Don Suleyman and abu‘l-Rabi‘ Suleyman.

According to Wilhelm [Vilmos] Bacher and M. Seligsohn’s article in The Jewish Encyclopedia the sixteenth-century Ibn Verga-chronicle (Shevet Yehuda, 7) mentions Shlomo Ibn Yaish among the envoys sent by the Castilian Aljama to King Alfonso.

The supercommentary on Ibn Ezra is believed to have been written in Arabic although all the surviving fragments are in Hebrew. According to Steinschneider Jacob Alfandri translated it into Hebrew.

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375 Zunz, Zur Geschichte und Literatur, 411; cf. also the remarks on pp. 388 and 399.
378 Cf. The Jewish Encyclopedia, vol. 11 (New York and London: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1905), 458; s.v. “Solomon Ibn Ya’ish ben Abraham.” However, their doubt about which of the two Shlomo Ibn Yaishs wrote in Arabic is out of place – there is no reason to question Steinschneider’s solution at the present level of knowledge. Also their statement that none of Ibn Yaish’s medical works is extant is mistaken.
MS Oxford, Bodleian, MS Hunt 293 (Neubauer 232) on fol. 62 v introduces a fragment with the following words: “An explanation from the sage R. Shlomo Ibn Yaish the Elder from Seville of blessed memory” [Perush me-he-hakham ha-r’ Shlomo n’ Yaish ha-yashish me-Ashvilia z”l]. The text itself is about a geometrical exercise mentioned by Ibn Ezra in his essay on the divine names in the Long Commentary on Exodus 3: 15 (62 v – 63 r). On fol. 63 r a second text starts ascribed to our author: “This is also by the elder Ibn Yaish of blessed memory” [gam ze leshon ha-yashish n’ Yaish z”l]. The text explains Ibn Ezra’s interpretation of efod, hoshen, urim, and tummim that were worn by the priests (63 r – 64 v).

The same excerpt appears in MS Oxford, Bodleian, MS Michael 336 (Neubauer 230), fol. 139 v – 140 r starting with the inscription leshon ha-yashish R’ Shlomo ibn Yaish z”l.

A quotation from “Don Suleyman Ibn Yaish ha-Sefardi” in Ezra Gateino and Ibn Shaprut seems to come from Shlomo Ibn Yaish the Elder as was pointed out above in the first chapter of the present part.

Unfortunately, these texts do not fit to the framework of the present paper and will not be mentioned any more.

379 Steinschneider, *Die arabische Literatur der Juden*, 167. The information is based on a passages in Samuel Zarza’s supercommentary where he relates that he asked his good friend, Jacob Alfandri to translate several texts from Arabic into Hebrew. Alfandri translated Sefer ha-atsamim attributed to Ibn Ezra before, and he translated excerpts from Ibn Waqar’s and Shlomo Ibn Yaish’s supercommentaries on Zarza’s request. Cf. MS Oxford, Bodleian, Opp. 30 (Neubauer 253), fol. 95 v/d; *Meqor Hayyim* (Mantua, 1559) parashat Be-huqqotay. The passage quoted contains a theory of human ages.

380 Quoted in Ibn Yaish’s name in Ibn Shaprut’s supercommentary (MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 852, fol. 315v-316 r [311 v-312 r]).

381 Quoted in Ibn Yaish’s name in Ibn Shaprut’s supercommentary (MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 852, fol. 319 r [315 r].

382 Uriel Simon (“Interpreting the Interpreter…” 123, note 12) claims that MS Hunt 293 (Neubauer 232), fol. 62 v – 70 v contains excerpts from Shlomo Ibn Yaish the Elder. The reference should be modified to fol. 62 v – 64 v. What follows in the manuscript cannot be ascribed to Shlomo Ibn Yaish with certainty. on fol. 64 v – 66 r we find a letter about astrological passages in Ibn Ezra’s Torah-commentary. On 66 r – 68 r there is a correspondence between a Karaite and a Rabbite scholar about the geometrical example in Ibn Ezra’s essay at Exodus 3: 15 (also attested in MS Vat. ebr. 36, fol. 85 r – 86 r). Fol. 68 r – 69 v is an excerpt from Ibn Ezra’s Long commentary on Genesis (the famous passage about Ibn Gabirol’s interpretation of Eden); fol. 69 v – 70 v is an explanation of various numerological passages from an unknown scholar who often uses the phrase pitrono ‘its explanation’ typical of Byzantine writers such as Eleazar ben Mattityah and Meyuhas ben Eliah.

383 As for Gateigno, see e.g. MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 185, fol. 6 r – 7 v or MS Oxford, Bodleian, Hunt. 217 (Neubauer 230), fol. 138 v – 139 r; as for Ibn Shaprut see: MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 852, fol. 305 r [301 r]. Cf. Schwartz: *Yashan be-qanqan hadash*, 157-158.
Conclusion

Joseph Caspi, Sen Bonet de Lunel and Moses Nagari all referred to a group of “colleagues” [haverim] who urged them to compose and publish their supercommentaries. This must have been a topos; nonetheless, there is no reason to believe that the topos did not reflect an actual reality. The supercommentators belonged to informal circles of philosophers and the supercommentaries intended to promote the intellectual activities of such circles.

Two levels can be distinguished in the reception of Ibn Ezra’s commentary on the Torah: On the one hand it was read in the context of elementary education: the rules of Hebrew grammar and biblical history were learnt from Ibn Ezra. Joseph Caspi’s supercommentary from the extant material certainly belongs to this context. If we accept Mosconi’s evaluation then Abishay of Sagora and Kaleb Korsino’s lost supercommentaries also should be subsumed under this category. Moreover, the rest of the supercommentaries also contain plenty of materials that pertain only to grammar and elementary exegesis without obvious philosophical or theological implications.

On the other hand, the “mysteries” or “secrets” of Ibn Ezra were thought to belong to the highest peaks of human knowledge in post-Maimonidean philosophy. Therefore they formed a subject that deserved the interest of the greatest scholars of the age. The quasi-official justification for this practice was provided in (Ps.-) Maimonides’ “ethical will” to his son quoted in the Prolegomena. Eleazar ben Mattityah, Sen Bonet de Lunel and Moses Nagari wanted to understand “the secrets” first and foremost.

All the surviving texts (except for the “earliest” supercommentaries) are written by authors thinking in the paradigm of post-Maimonidean / Tibbonide philosophy and their terminology and linguistic register is rooted in Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s Hebrew translation of GP. Although Eleazar ben Mattityah and Moses Nagari were slightly influenced by Kabbalistic sources most of their supercommentaries are unrelated to Kabbalah. The early Ibn Ezra supercommentaries were produced by the Tibbonide intellectual elites of medieval Provence, Spain, Italy, and Byzantine.

As a rule the authors were famous and important persons and most of them were probably rich. Joseph Caspi’s researches were probably sponsored by his wife. In any case he had the opportunity to enter the presence of Maimonides’ great-grandson, who was the official representative of Egyptian Jewry. Eleazar ben Mattityah’s father was an important rabbi: both father and son participated in issuing the taqqanon (“ordinances”) that were supposed to regulate Jewish life in Crete. Jedaiah ha-Penini’s father, Abraham Bedersi, was a famous poet. His grandfather might have been identical with Yitzhak ben Jedaiah, the author of a very important commentary on the haggadot. Moses Nagari was a descendant of one of the four aristocratic families of the Roman Jews. Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Seville was a famous physician. Moses Ibn Tibbon needs no comment. Only the case of Sen Bonet de Lunel is not clear.

Nevertheless, we cannot exclude the possibility that some of the “outsiders,” i.e. persons not belonging to the Tibbonide elite, also composed supercommentaries or explained Ibn Ezra’s comments on public occasions. Success in understanding Ibn Ezra might have opened the higher circles of society for them. Caspi’s complaints about those “philosophers” who lack the proper educational background (and the financial means of acquiring it) can

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easily refer to such people. The point of the “Ibn Ezra game” was to exclude the amateurs from the company of genuine philosophers.
Part Two: “In the beginning…” – The Interpretation of Creation Story

**Ibn Ezra on Genesis 1**

There are two texts displaying Ibn Ezra’s interpretation of the first chapters of Genesis. The so-called short commentary on the Pentateuch was probably finished around 1145 in Lucca although it is possible that further remarks were added to the text by Ibn Ezra later in his life. This text has become the commentary on Genesis during the history of textual transmission. It is attested by a great number of manuscripts and has been printed many times since the fifteenth century.

Ibn Ezra started to write a longer commentary on the Pentateuch probably in Northern France or England in the late 1150s or in the 1160s. This longer commentary was called *Sefer ha-Sod* (The Book of Secret) by Ibn Ezra. The longer commentary on Exodus has replaced the shorter commentary on the same book in the textus receptus: it is longer version what is usually referred to as “Ibn Ezra on Exodus.”

As for Genesis, the longer commentary is preserved only on chapter 1-17 of the book in some manuscripts. It is possible that the rest was never written. Even the surviving chapters seem to be unfinished. The comments often present a sort of raw material of various notes, discussions, critical remarks, possible solutions rather than a well-composed commentary. It is also possible that students of Ibn Ezra freely added to the texts what they remembered from his oral lectures or what they found in his other writings. This practice is well documented concerning his commentary on the twelve prophets. (See on this more in the Prolegomena.)

Ibn Ezra’s itinerary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Place</th>
<th>Source</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1146</td>
<td>Lucca</td>
<td><em>Sefer ha-mispar</em> 1st recension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1146</td>
<td>Pisa</td>
<td><em>Liber de rationibus tabularum</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1146</td>
<td>Mantua</td>
<td><em>Kli ha-nehoshet</em> 2nd recension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1146</td>
<td>Verona</td>
<td><em>Sefer ha-ibbur</em> 1st recension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1148</td>
<td>Narbonne</td>
<td><em>Sefer taamei ha-luhot</em> 2nd recension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1148</td>
<td>Béziers</td>
<td><em>Kli ha-nehoshet</em> 4th recension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1154</td>
<td>Rouen</td>
<td><em>Sefer ha-moladot</em> 2nd recension</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1157</td>
<td>Rouen</td>
<td>Comm. on Twelve Prophets</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1158</td>
<td>England</td>
<td>Iggeret ha-Shabbat</td>
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For the early supercommentators Ibn Ezra’s commentary on Genesis was the shorter version written probably in Northern Italy around 1145. They might have consulted occasionally the long commentary as well; however, it did not influence their exegesis of Ibn Ezra too much. Therefore we shall concentrate on the short commentary in the subsequent

386 Information is collated from Shlomo Sela, *Abraham Ibn Ezra*, 79-81, unless otherwise indicated. There are often more than one sources indicating Ibn Ezra’s presence in a certain place at a certain time. Not all the sources are enlisted. For further information the reader should consult Sela’s book. An older table is to be found in David Rosin: “Die Religionsphilosophie Abraham Ibn Esra’s,” *MGWJ* (1898): 25-26.
discussion. The longer version will be used only when it can elucidate the sense of the shorter commentary.

Ibn Ezra’s basic strategy of interpreting the creation-story was determined by two considerations. The first we can learn from his *Yesod mora*, one of his last works that was composed in London in the 1160s:

And because there is no thing on earth that remains [for ever] except the upper soul [neshama] of man alone, this is why the Sublime Name [= the tetragrammaton] is not mentioned in the creation story. [It appears] only with the word elohim, because God is also called after their name, just like speech is called ‘tongue’ and ‘lip.’ This is why the [talmudic] rabbis said, “The complete name is pronounced only over the complete world” (*Bereshit rabba* 13: 3). [God] is called [in the creation narrative] elohim until Cain is born. When Eve saw that human race would be preserved by the birth of Cain, she said, “I have begotten a man with the Name – using the tetragrammaton without elohim the first time” (Gen 4: 1). And this is why Moses mentioned only the Sublime Name who is “the God of the Hebrew” in front of the Pharaoh, because whoever receives [the Sublime Name’s] power is able to perform miracles on the earth. This is why you will not find this Name [the tetragrammaton] in the Book of Ecclesiastes for it is about the wisdom of the elohim. And the power that everything can receive is not the one that was in Moses; that’s why Jethro said, “Now I know that yy the tetragrammaton is greater than all the elohim” (Exodus 18: 11).387

Further elaborations are added in the long commentary on Genesis 1: 1:

And now pay attention to the words of Scripture. Until “And it was completed” (Gen 2: 3) elohim is used in the creation story. After that, yy elohim [i.e. the tetragrammaton together with elohim], and after the birth of Cain the Sublime Name appears alone. And the word elohim [denotes] true forms that are not bodies and not in the bodies. […] And the angels are called elohim and the stars are called benei elohim [“the sons of elohim”] […] And since the works of God become manifest through them, that is why they [the angels] are called elohim. Just like ‘tongue’ and ‘lip’ […] [refer to speech] for it seems that the phonemes [otot lit. “letters”] are proceeding from the tongue and the lips.388

The kernel of the idea is attested already in the short commentary on Exodus written around 1145 in Northern Italy:

Pharaoh knew about the existence of elohim, but he did not know this Name [the tetragrammaton]. This is why this Name is not found in the creation story and you will not find it in Ecclesiastes either.389

The main intention of these passages can be summarized in the following way: The Hebrew word elohim denotes that aspect of God that influences the world through the intermediary of the angels. God preserves nature through a cosmic order in which the angels are entrusted to implement those regularities that we can conveniently call natural laws. This is not what the most proper name of God, the tetragrammaton signifies. The tetragrammaton

denotes that aspect of God that interferes with the natural order. God can directly influence what is happening on the earth. Miracles are the results of such direct interventions. This is why Moses refers to this aspect of God in front of the Pharaoh who accepted God as the ultimate cause of the natural order but denied that He can put aside the natural laws – in other words, he accepted elohim but denied the tetragrammaton.\footnote{David Rosin points out the similarity between Ibn Ezra’s and Judah ha-Levi’s views on this topic (cf. Cuzari IV, 15 and Rosin, “Die Religionsphilosophie Abraham Ibn Ezra’s,” MGWJ (1898): 58-59. A recent article is Shlomo Sela: “La creación del mundo supralunar según Abraham Ibn Ezra; una estudio comparativo de sus dos comentarios a Genesis 1: 14,” Sefarad 63 (2003): 147-181. See also Abraham Lipshits: “Iyyun ve-heqer be-ferushey Ibn Ezra le-Bereshit, pereq 1” (An investigation of Ibn Ezra’s commentary on Genesis 1), Sinai 134 (2005): 19-45.}

In the light of this line of thought the fact that the creation story uses the name elohim for God instead of the tetragrammaton becomes most significant. In fact, for Ibn Ezra this is the key for understanding the whole text. Genesis 1 does not happen to talk about the miraculous beginnings of the universe according to him. What is at stake in the first chapter of the Bible pertains to natural order. It is elohim who creates the world in Genesis 1. Elohim refers to the divine will mediated through the angels. Therefore, the creation story presupposes the existence of angels. This is why their creation is not related in the text.

A short digression is necessary at this point. Some modern scholars assume on the basis of Ibn Ezra’s commentary on the creation-story that Ibn Ezra denied the doctrine of \textit{creatio ex nihilo} and held the doctrine of the eternity of the universe or creation out of pre-existing matter.\footnote{Cf. Hermann Greive: \textit{Studien zum jüdischen Neuplatonismus: Die Religionsphilosophie des Abraham Ibn Ezra} (Studia Judaica, vol. 7) (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1973), 179; Hayoun, \textit{L’exégèse philosophique dans le judaïsme médiéval}, 154.} Nothing in the texts justifies such conclusions. Ibn Ezra’s point is simply that Genesis 1 is not about creation out of nothing. This is his \textit{exegetical} opinion. It says nothing about the \textit{doctrinal} acceptance or rejection of creation. Maimonides emphasized in GP II, 25 that his main reason for accepting creation out of nothing was not the literal sense of Genesis 1:1 but the need to maintain the coherence of Jewish theology. Doctrine and exegesis could be separated.

The second basic consideration on which Ibn Ezra’s interpretation of the creation narrative rested was the hypothesis that the biblical text described a \textit{meteorological} process. The word ‘meteorology’ should be taken here in its Aristotelian sense. This name was assigned to that treatise of Aristotle that discussed the various processes and phenomena and materials that emerge due to the mixture of the four elements. Ibn Ezra consistently held the opinion that the biblical creation narrative did not concern the heavenly bodies at all. All what is related in Genesis 1-2 is about meteorological processes in the sub-lunar world. The existence of the angels (separated intellects) and heavenly bodies is taken for granted. Their creation is not related in Genesis.\footnote{Sara Klein-Braslavy’s monograph, \textit{Perush ha-Rambam le-sippur beriat ha-olam} (Maimonides’ interpretation of the story of creation) (Jerusalem: Ha-hevra le-heqer ha-miqra be-Yisrael, 1978) points out the importance of Aristotle’s \textit{Meteorology} in medieval Jewish interpretations of the creation narrative.}

We have already seen Ibn Ezra’s reason for claiming that the existence of angels is presupposed in the creation story, therefore their creation is not related there. Why did he think that the existence of heaven was also presupposed and consequently their creation not mentioned by Moses? Genesis 1: 1 and 1: 16-17 speak quite explicitly about the creation of heaven and heavenly bodies! The motivation for Ibn Ezra’s exegetical decision will be clear from his comment on Genesis 1: 17:

\begin{quote}
ON THE FIRMAMENT OF HEAVEN showing the there is a heaven above the [firmament]. And this is [how to understand] “the heaven of heaven” as well. And before [this
\end{quote}
The problem is the following. Genesis 1: 6-8 describes the creation of the “firmament” that separates the “lower waters” from the “upper waters.” Thus, it seems, there are waters above the firmament. It is convenient to identify these waters with the clouds, and this solution is accepted by Ibn Ezra as according to the simple or literal sense of Scripture (peshat).

However, according to Genesis 1: 17, “God has placed the Sun, and the Moon, and the stars on the “firmament of the heaven.” If the “firmament” is something in between the lower waters and the clouds then Genesis 1: 17 claims that the heavenly bodies are posited under the clouds! This is patently absurd not only according to Aristotelian natural philosophy but according to sense perception as well. The gravity of the problem is well documented by the fact that the great Saadyah gaon omitted this verse in his commentary according to Ibn Ezra.

Thus the commentator is faced with the following dilemma: either he posits the “upper waters” of Gen 1: 6-8 over the heavenly spheres – a statement difficult to defend against the criticism of Aristotelian natural philosophy – or to interpret Genesis 1: 17 as talking not about the creation of the heavenly bodies – that would be the prima facie reading of the passage. Viewed from a broader perspective the question is whether to maintain the archaic cosmological imagery of an ancient Near Eastern text or to adjust it to a Greek cosmological model widely accepted by medieval scientists.

Ambrose of Milan and many Western Christian writers following his authority chose the first option. They were ready to break with Aristotle’s authority in order to defend a literalist interpretation of the creation story. For Ibn Ezra, or for his possible source (see later), the same decision must have been much more difficult. In Ambrose’s time Aristotle was one of the many philosophers. He was held in high esteem but he was far from being the principal representative of Hellenic rationalism. In twelfth-century Arabic philosophy Aristotle was the philosopher. Rejecting his principles without proper philosophic reasons meant rejecting the possibility of rational investigations into the nature of reality.

More than that, Muslim philosophers questioned the authenticity of the Hebrew Bible by claiming that it taught false doctrines – that is to say, doctrines that did not have the slightest justification from the philosophical perspective. How could God say such absurdities?! Therefore, the Jewish scriptures could not possibly be the authentic revelation of God, Muslim polemists argued. Threatened by such polemics Ibn Ezra could not afford to

393 This remark is problematic. Saadiah gaon does solve the problem in his commentary and his solution is very similar to Ibn Ezra’s one. We have to suppose that Ibn Ezra read a considerably different recension of the gaon’s commentary from the one we have. Cf. Perush Rav Saadya gaon le-Bereshit, ed. Moshe Zucker (New York: JTS, 1984), 230. A similar example is Long Commentary on Exodus 16: 15 where Ibn Ezra criticizes Rashi, but, in fact, Rashi’s explanation – as evidenced by the edited text – is the same as Ibn Ezra’s one. Thus we hav to suppose again that Ibn Ezra read a different recension of Rashi’s commentary. Or is it possible that later scribes simply emended Saadah’s and Rashi’s text in accordance with Ibn Ezra’s criticism?

394 Cf. Ambrose, Hexameron, II, 3, 9-14; PL 14: 148-152. Ambrose determined the framework in which Latin Christian writers of the subsequent centuries, such as Augustine, Bede, Alcuin, and Hugh of Saint Victor dealt with the problem. This exegetical tradition was summed up in Peter Lombard’s Sentences. He declared that the “firmament” of Genesis 1:6 is the same heaven that contains the stars and brought arguments from natural philosophy – different from Ambrose’s ones – that this water can get above the heavens. Cf. his Sentences, II, dist. 14; PL 192: 680.

apply the argument “God knows the truth better than Aristotle or any mortal philosophers, anyway” in this context, as Ambrose did in the late fourth century.

Moreover, the second option, namely to sacrifice the literal sense of Genesis 1: 17 in order to save both the literal and philosophically acceptable interpretation of Genesis 1: 6-8 does not compromise the principle of literal interpretation as much as it seems at first sight. In Genesis 9: 13 God is reported to have said, “I have placed my rainbow in the clouds.” Rainbow is an optical phenomenon as we know from Aristotle’s *Meteorology* (III, 4). Maybe, as a rule, Scripture employs the verb ‘to place’ for signifying the generation of optical phenomena. Thus, God’s “placing” of the heavenly bodies on the “firmament” in Genesis 1: 17 might refer to the fact that they became visible in the air separating the lower waters from the upper waters.

Moreover, a close reading of Genesis 1: 17 will reveal that Scripture does not say simply “firmament,” but “firmament of heaven.” Perhaps this genitive construction is meant to signify that ‘firmament’ and ‘heaven’ in the proper sense is not the same thing. The Hebrew word *shamayim* (“heaven”) means primarily “high,” “what exists in a high place.” The phrase “firmament of heaven” means therefore “the high firmament” as opposed to the firmament of human buildings. Now Scripture uses the phrase “heaven of heaven” (lit. “the high of the high” “the highest”) as well. This must refer to the heavenly spheres, for nothing higher than the heavenly spheres can be conceived. However, in Genesis 1: 17 we do not read “heaven of heaven,” but “firmament of heaven.” This signifies that the intention is not the highest heaven but the air separating the lower waters from the upper waters.

In Genesis 1: 8 God names the firmament “heaven.” Thus, Ibn Ezra concludes, “heaven” can be the name of the firmament as well. Consequently nothing prohibits interpreting the “heaven” of Genesis 1: 1 as another name of the “firmament,” that is to say, the air separating the lower waters from the upper waters.

This argument does not exclude the possibility that heaven in Genesis 1: 1 actually refers to the heavenly spheres. But Ibn Ezra prefers to attribute terminological consistency to the text he is commenting on. If *shamayim* refers to the firmament in other places of the creation narrative we should assume that it means the same in the first sentence as well.

Ibn Ezra adduces further grammatical arguments in defense of his position. He argues that *be-reshit bara elohim* means in fact “In the beginning of God’s creating…” (Or, to put it more precisely: “In the beginning of God’s creating through the angels [*elohim*]…”) Consequently, he paraphrases the first two verses of Genesis as “In the beginning of the creation of the firmament and the dry land there was no inhabitant on the earth since it was covered with water.” In other words, the first sentence is not an independent statement about the origin of the universe but a subordinated clause referring to the beginning of the process that resulted in the emergence of the “firmament” and the “dry land.” Consequently, *ha-shamayim ve-ha-arets* cannot mean “the heaven and the earth” in the first verse either. They must refer to the firmament and the dry land.

Thus the first verses describe in Ibn Ezra’s opinion the primordial state of the sub-lunar world being the starting point of subsequent meteorological processes. The light of the heavenly bodies entering to the sub-lunar world (“Let there be light! And there was light”) and a strong wind sent by God (“… and God’s wind [*ruah*] was hovering over the surface of the waters”) dried up the waters from a portion of the surface of the earth. The vapors entering the air were condensed into clouds (this is the creation of the firmament), and as a consequence the air became transparent and the heavenly bodies became clearly visible (this is God’s “placing” the Sun and the Moon and the stars on the firmament). Thus the ground was prepared for the more complex beings to be generated out of the mixture of the elements.

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396 Cf. his comment on Gen 1: 1 s.v. “ha-shamayim” Ibn Ezra refers to Arabic parallels to support his interpretation.
Ibn Ezra referred to Psalm 104 as a further evidence of the correctness of his interpretation. David was the most authoritative commentator of Moses; and Psalm 104 was David’s interpretation of Genesis 1 in Ibn Ezra’s eyes. In this Psalm the creation of the light is mentioned before the creation of heaven. From this fact Ibn Ezra concluded that King David must have been of the same opinion as himself, namely, the “heaven” of Genesis 1: 1 was not the heavenly spheres and bodies but the air holding the clouds that indeed came into being after the “creation” of light.

It is worthy of noting that Abelard’s Latin commentary on Genesis recalls at a point an element from Ibn Ezra’s comment that cannot be traced back to earlier Christian sources as far as I can judge it. Commenting on Genesis 1: 1 Ibn Ezra mentions an opinion according to which “heaven” means the two upper elements – fire and air – whereas “earth” means the two lower elements, namely, water and earth. Abelard writes at the beginning of his *Expositio in Hexameron* that he composed for the benefit of Heloise and her fellow nuns:

*In principio creavit Deus coelem et terram.* Coeli et terrae nomine hoc loco quatuor elementa comprehendi arbitor, ex quibus tamquam materiali primordio caetera omnia corpora constat esse composita. Coelum quidem duo levia elementa, ignem videlicet atque aerem dicit. Reliqua vero duo quae gravia sunt terram generaliter vocat.397

Abelard uses the phrase “arbitor” which signifies probably that his explanation is not taken from a traditional authority but based on his own reflection. Hugh of Saint Victor mentions a similar, although not identical interpretation in his *Adnotationes elucidatoriae in Pentateuchon*, chapter seven: “*In principio creavit Deus coelem et terram.* Tria superiora elementa coelum vocant.”398

Moreover, Abelard emphasizes in the introduction of the *Expositio* that Moses’ purpose was the instruction of simple (“carnal”) people; therefore, the biblical creation story concerns only the visible reality not mentioning the creation of angels:

Intentio vero est ea quam praemisimus, horum videlicet narratione vel doctrina carnalem adhuc populum ex visilibus saltem operibus ad cultum allicere divinum, ut ex his videlicet homo intelligat quantam Deo debeat obedientiam.399

Commenting on Genesis 1: 2 Abelard explains that Moses skipped the creation of angels and turned to the creation of earthly world instead because a description of the angelic worship might have discouraged the people from worshiping God:

*Terra autem erat inanis et vacua.* Quoniam ad hominis creationem de terra formandi et in terra conversaturi specialiter iste spectat tractatus, quo propheta, ut diximus, ad cultum allicere intendens, ad terrena opera styllum convertit, coelestis et superioris naturae, id est angelicae creatione praeterita; ne forte, si eam perscrutaretur et ad Creatoris sui laudem ejus excellentiam ostenderet, minus hominem ad amorem Dei alliceret, qui sibi aliam praeferri naturam conspiceret.400

397 PL 178: 733.
398 PL 175: 35. However, in his *Summa sententiarum* Hugh interprets “heaven” as “angels” and “earth” as all the four elements in a confused state (tract. III, cap. 1; PL 176: 89). I am unable to determine the chronological relationship between Abelard’s and Hugh’s works.
399 PL 178: 733.
400 PL 178: 734.
A couple of lines before Abelard remarks: “Non enim angeli, cum incorporeae sint naturae, inter mundanas creaturas comprehenduntur.”

Despite the obvious differences, Abelard’s exposition of this topic recalls Ibn Ezra’s remark in the Long Commentary on Genesis:

And now I tell you a principle. Know that Moses our lord did not give the Torah only to the wise but to everybody. And not only to his own generation but to all the generations. And he spoke only about the creation of the lower world that was created for the sake of man. That is why he did not mention the holy angels.

Both Abelard’s and Hugh’s commentaries predate Ibn Ezra’s works. Abelard and Hugh died in 1142 whereas Ibn Ezra composed the short commentary in Northern Italy around 1145 and the long commentary in England or in Northern France circa 1157-1164. It is certain that Ibn Ezra had some information about Christian biblical exegesis. He mentions an “error” of the Latin translator (identified correctly as Hieronymus in one supercommentary) at Genesis 37: 35 in the short commentary and criticizes the Christians at Genesis 18: 1 and 27: 40.

Perhaps, his remark, “and others say that ‘earth’ includes water and ‘heaven’ includes air” (Short Commentary on Genesis 1: 1 s. v. “ha-shamayim”) indeed refers to Abelard or to some other Christians influenced by him. It is also possible that he meant some Jewish source unknown to us today. The quoted evidence suggests that interactions might have taken place between Jewish and Christian exegesists in twelfth century Western Europe. However, it is difficult to prove anything. In any case, Ibn Ezra was definitely not the only twelfth-century biblical commentator who tried to understand the first days of the creation narrative in terms of physical processes taking place among the four elements. His traditional image as a solitary genius in a dark century reflects not so much historical reality but the limits of our historiography: as a result of the loss of other twelfth-century commentaries in Hebrew and the difficulties about establishing his relationship to contemporary Christian authors any attempts at reconstructing the intellectual context of Ibn Ezra’s exegesis in his own time rest on rather shaky grounds.

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401 Ibid.
402 Ibn Ezra, Long Commentary on Genesis 1: 1 ed. Friedlaender, Essays, Hebrew part, 20; cf. Short Commentary on Genesis 1: 2; s.v. va-bohu: “For Moses did not speak about the world to come, that is the world of the angels; [he spoke] only about the world of generation and corruption.”
403 He criticizes “the one who translated for [those who hold] erroneous [views]” for interpreting sheol as “hell” [gehinom]. The long recension of Shlomo Ibn Yaish’s supercommentary identifies the translator as שֶּׁרְנוֹמִישׁ (yeronimush), and claims that the criticized translation was שֶׁהֶלָּת (infernesh). Cf. Oxford, Bodl., MS Hunt. 293 (Neub. 232), fol. 14 r. The phrase “in infernum” does appear in the Vulgate ad loc. In the shorter recension of Shlomo Ibn Yaish’s supercommentary Jerome’s name is corrupted into nogmosh (MS Cambridge, Add. 510.2, fol. 16 v) or rogmish (MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 9 v).
404 The latter passage has been censored from the printed editions by sixteenth-century Christian censors.
405 I find this hypothesis convincing because the sentence quoted from Ibn Ezra seems to imply that “heaven” refers primarily to the element “fire,” and not to the quinta esseentia. This was definitely not Saadyah gaon’s opinion as Ibn Ezra himself points out in the passage preceding the quoted one. The gaon thought that “heaven” referred to the fifth element; therefore, the creation of heaven did not imply the creation of fire for him. Consequently Saadyah looked for another interpretation concerning the creation of fire. It seems to me that it was a common assumption of Jewish commentators that heaven is not composed of fire but of the fifth element. As for Abelard, he uses “ignis” and “aether” as synonyms. Moreover, he supposes that the heavenly bodies were created out of the element ignis/aether that was created in the first day. He does not mention the fifth element at all. Abelard’s explanation fits perfectly the words of Ibn Ezra, and it is not very probable that any Jewish exegete would have been of the same opinion. However, the latter possibility cannot be excluded either.
The second dramatic moment of the narrative in Ibn Ezra’s interpretation is the creation of man. This event cannot be simply explained in terms of more and more complicated compounds of elements. Human beings have intellects that must come directly from the divine world. However, Scripture uses the word *elohim* in this context as well; therefore human intellect must have come through the intermediary of angels.

In spite of this fact, the creation of man is definitely not a purely physical process in Ibn Ezra’s opinion. Therefore, commenting on Genesis 1: 26-27 Ibn Ezra had to treat a topic that was systematically avoided in the interpretation of previous verses: the relationship between God and the created word. This is the point where the *doctrinal* aspects of creation enter Ibn Ezra’s *exegesis*:

And now I shall explain. Know that that the whole creation of the lower world [*maase bereshit*] was created for the sake [lit. “honor”] of man by the ordinance of God. Earth brought forth all the plants and water made all the animals [for this purpose]. After that God said to the angels, “Let us make a man; we ourselves shall be engaged [in this work], not earth and water.” And we know that Torah speaks human language since the speaker is human, just like the listener, and a man cannot talk about things that are above him or below him expect according to human images. That’s how we say ‘the mouth of earth,’ ‘the hand [=bank] of Jordan,’ ‘the head of the dust of the earth’ (cf. Proverbs 8: 26),

God forbid [to think] that God has a likeness. Thus [Scripture] says: “to whom shall you liken Me?” (Isaiah 40: 25). And since the upper soul of man [*nishmat ha-adam ha-elyona*] is immortal, it is compared regarding its life to God. And that it is not body, and it is full in its entirety, and the body of man is like a microcosm – blessed be the Name who started with the great one and finished with the small one! And the prophet also said that he saw the glory of God “as the figure of a man.” And God is the One; and He forms everything; and He is everything; and I am unable to explain it. And Adam was created first with two faces [*partsufin*] and his power [*hono*] is one and he is also two. And behold there is an angel on the image of God, and he was created male and female.

And the words “multiply and procreate” are words of blessing [and not commandment] for the man just like [it is a blessing and not a commandment] for the animals. The commandment [of procreation] was transmitted by the ancients of blessed memory [not by Scripture] who ordained this verse as a mnemonic sign of it.

This is a highly enigmatic text, typical of Ibn Ezra when he discusses metaphysical or theological issues. In the present context I will summarize only the most important points.

Ibn Ezra reveals to us that the physical processes described in the previous verses had a *telos*, an ultimate aim: the generation of human beings. Due to their intellect they are the noblest creatures in the sub-lunar world. Man is a microcosm: his body mirrors the corporeal reality; his mind reflects the spiritual one. Man was created both on the likeness of God and the cosmos – what seems to imply that the cosmos was also created on the likeness of God; therefore the universe, the “everything” is modeled on God who is also “everything” in one sense of the world. These formulas lead us to the center of Ibn Ezra’s mystical theology.

‘Man is a likeness of God;’ ‘God has no likeness’ – Scripture definitely teaches both propositions in Ibn Ezra’s opinion. Needless to say the two statements are self-contradictory. How to reconcile them? Ibn Ezra enlists a couple of points that can justify calling man a likeness of God at least in a weak sense of the word. The upper soul of man is immortal just like God is immortal. The upper soul of man is incorporeal just like God is incorporeal. The upper soul of man is “full in its entirety” – whatever these words mean – just like God. So far
it is the upper soul, i.e. the intellect of man that bears the analogy with God. However, at the end of the list we find the following item: “and the body of man is like a microcosm.” Perhaps, Ibn Ezra thought, that the relationship between God and creation was similar to the relationship between human intellect and body. The “upper soul” would correspond to God and the human body – being a microcosm – to the created cosmos. In this way God created man on His own image.

This is a daring image of creation. It seems to me that Ibn Ezra wanted to suggest exactly this image in the quoted paragraphs. This is why the glory of God appeared in “the figure of a man” for the prophet. Although Ibn Ezra obviously rejects the crude form of anthropomorphism (claiming e.g. that God is a corporeal being) man serves as a basic model for understanding God for him, and in this sense his theology is profoundly anthropomorphic.

Still, nonetheless, Ibn Ezra tries to maintain the notion of divine transcendence. This result is achieved by applying not a clear-cut conceptual and argumentative analysis to determine the points of similarities and dissimilarities between God and man, Creator and creature but by using enigmatic language and alluding to theological imageries of the Bible and rabbinic commentaries and also to philosophical formulas inspired by the neo-Platonic tradition. Thus the impression is made on the reader that we are facing here the ultimate mysteries of reality and whatever we say will fall short of describing precisely the relationship between Creator and creature. The speculation defeats human language itself (cf. the exclamation “I am unable to explain it” in the middle of the text).

Ibn Ezra points out that God started the creation with the macrocosm and finished it with the microcosm (i.e. man), thus the creation of the two cosmoses make up the beginning and the end of the process. This idea can be traced back to Philo of Alexandria and needless to say to Plato’s Timaeus; although it is not clear to me through what channels it reached Ibn Ezra.407

Maimonides’ Interpretation of Genesis 1

For the Ibn Ezra supercommentators Maimonides’ authority in both doctrinal and exegetical matters was unquestionable. Differences between Maimonides’ and Ibn Ezra’s opinion in certain exegetical points constituted a most important topic of the discourse of the supercommentaries. Therefore, a brief characterization of Maimonides’ contribution to the topic cannot be avoided.

The basic source of our knowledge concerning Maimonides’ interpretation of the creation narrative is a long chapter from his The Guide of the Perplexed (hence GP) written around 1190 in Egypt. This chapter – GP II, 30 – was read not in the Judeo-Arabic original but in Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s Hebrew translation by most of the Ibn Ezra supercommentators.408 We shall see soon the significance of this fact.

Maimonides’ general approach is very similar to Ibn Ezra’s one. He also believes that the story of the six days concerns basically the sub-lunar world and it is to be understood in terms of sub-lunar physics. He points explicitly to Aristotle’s Meteorology as a key text for understanding what is taking place in the first chapter of Genesis. He identified the rabbinical rule concerning the transmission of the secrets of creation (maase bereshit) as referring to

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408 The only supercommentator who possibly consulted the Judeo-Arabic original is Eleazar ben Mattityah. See on this later.
physics. Unlike Saadyah gaon he does not try to prove *creatio ex nihilo* with arguments while commenting on the biblical text. He keeps the doctrinal and exegetical issues apart as far as it is possible similarly to Ibn Ezra.

He also interprets the phrase *ruah elohim* in Genesis 1: 2 as a strong wind drying the water from the surface of the earth. The “upper waters” in his vision are also the clouds that emerged as a result of the disappearance of the waters from the surface of the land. Thus he posits a similar meteorological process as Ibn Ezra to explain what happened “in the beginning.”

These similarities raise the question of possible influences and/or common sources. As far as we know today Maimonides was not familiar with and influenced by Ibn Ezra’s Pentateuch-commentary at the time he composed the *Guide*. The similarities might be due to a common intellectual tradition that might have originated in the Muslim Spain in the eleventh or early twelfth century. Many biblical commentaries from this period are lost to us – in fact, Ibn Ezra is often the chief source of information about them. A good candidate is Solomon Ibn Gabirol, whose interpretation is quoted by Ibn Ezra twice in his Pentateuch-commentary, although it is not clear whether Ibn Gabirol commented on the creation-story as well or not. It is also possible that the key elements of this exegetical tradition appeared already in the commentaries of the geonic period. We have pointed out the similarities between Abelard’s and Ibn Ezra’s interpretation of Genesis 1: 1 in the previous section. The possibility that Christian authors also had their share in the formation of this exegetical tradition cannot be excluded either.

Despite the similarities, Maimonides’ interpretation is fundamentally different from Ibn Ezra’s one in two respects. The first concerns the interpretation of the opening sentence: *be-reshit bara elohim et ha-shamayim ve-et ha-arets*.

In GP II, 30 Maimonides makes a distinction between two kinds of ‘beginnings.’ I will quote the text according to Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s Hebrew translation:

Know that there is a difference between ‘first’ and ‘principle.’ A ‘principle’ exists either in the very things which it is the principle of or with the thing – even if it does not precede it in time. In this way we say that the heart is a principle for the animal and an element is a principle for the thing it is the element of. And indeed, even to this [notion] the [name] ‘first’ is applied accidentally. Still, nonetheless, ‘first’ is said [primarily] of the thing that precedes [something else] only in time irrespective of the fact whether the thing preceding the other one is its cause or not. In this way we say that first X lived in this house, and then Y; but we do not say that X is the principle of Y.

Now the word that means ‘first’ in our language [i.e. Biblical Hebrew] is *tehilla*; e.g. “first God spoke to Hoshea [tehilla ]” (Hoshea 1: 2). And the word that means ‘principle’ is *reshit*, which is derived from ‘head’ [rosh] which is the principle of the animal according to its position.

And the world was not created in time as has been proved already, since time belongs to the number of the created things. That is why [Scripture] says, *be-reshit*, and the [Hebrew preposition] *be-* is like an instrumental/spatial *be-* [ve-ha-be ”t ke-be”t keli].

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410 Sarah Stroumsa points to a possible Syriac source of Maimonides’ interpretation of Genesis 1: 1. See on this later.

411 Maimonides probably means by this that the head is a “beginning” of the body of an animal, because it is on the top of the body, and at the same time it is a part of the body.
Therefore, the correct interpretation of this verse [i.e. Genesis 1:1] is the following: “In/With a principle God created the upper things and the lower things.” This is the interpretation that accords with the [doctrine of] creation out of nothing [hiddush ha-olam].

As for those [sentences] that we find in the writings of some [Jewish] sages about the existence of time before the creation of the world, they are quite doubtful – for this is the opinion of Aristotle that I have already explained to you – because [the words of those sages] seem to imply that time has no beginning [tehilla].

In Maimonides’ opinion the first sentence of the Bible does talk about creatio ex nihilo, about the origin of everything. That is exactly the reason why be-reshit (“in the beginning”) cannot refer to temporal beginning in the ordinary sense. When we say that x takes place in certain time, we normally mean by this that x is “bracketed” by time: there was a time both before and after the event. This is the way how Aristotle fixed the meaning of “in time” in his Physics. However, time itself is a created thing according to Maimonides. Consequently it could not have existed before creation. Therefore creation could not take place in time properly speaking, since it is impossible to suppose that it was “bracketed” by time.

Had be-reshit been interpreted as referring to the temporal beginning of the universe the conclusion that time was pre-eternal would have been unavoidable. Such an interpretation would accord more to the doctrine of Aristotle than to the thesis of creation out of nothing.

Maimonides has already made it clear in GP II, 25 that his main reason for rejecting the eternity of the world and accepting the idea of creation out of nothing a finite amount of time ago was not the literal sense of Genesis 1:1. He was led in his decision by doctrinal considerations. Eternity of the world would exclude the possibility of divine free will according to Maimonides. Miracles, direct divine revelations, and Mosaic prophecy, and the Torah as a definite and unchangeable revelation of God would also be impossible as a consequence. In other words, if the world is eternal, it is extremely difficult to find any justification for Judaism as a religion. Maimonides applies his doctrinal conclusions to the exegesis of Genesis 1:1. Those Jewish authors who permit the existence of time before the moment of creation – or who propose interpretations of Genesis 1:1 that imply the pre-existence of time – commit very serious doctrinal mistake in Maimonides’ opinion.

Maimonides highlights the nature of this mistake in GP II, 13 (he refers probably to this chapter in the last quoted paragraph). Time is an accident of the movement of the heavenly bodies according to Aristotelian natural philosophy, and Maimonides accepts this point from Aristotle. Consequently, if time existed before the creation of the world, then the heavenly spheres must have existed as well. In this case it makes little sense to talk about creation at all. We have seen in the previous section that the same argument is attested in Ibn Ezra’s introduction to the Pentateuch-commentary as well. The Spanish cultural background common to Ibn Ezra and Maimonides might work here as well.

It has also been mentioned that some modern scholars confuse Ibn Ezra’s exegetical position concerning Genesis 1:1 with his doctrinal position concerning creation out of nothing. Ironically enough, a similar mistake is even more widespread concerning Maimonides despite the fact that he did interpret Genesis 1:1 according to creatio ex nihilo and underlined again and again that his intention was to exclude the possibility of an interpretation implying the eternity of the world.

These scholars argue that Maimonides rejects the idea of temporal creation in GP II, 30. From this fact they conclude that Maimonides accepts the notion of eternal creation. That

is to say, the world is pre-eternal and it is being created continuously by God. All the statements to the contrary effects in the Guide or in other works of Maimonides are explained away as “noble lies,” “exoteric language,” etc. Maimonides true, esoteric opinion was not the “vulgar” doctrine of creation out of nothing, but the “philosophic” notion of eternal creation.

No matter how great scholars have subscribed to this theory, in my opinion it is based on a rather elementary misunderstanding of Maimonides’ words and thoughts. Certainly, Maimonides denied the notion of temporal creation. However, by this he simply meant that the divine act of creation had not been “bracketed” by time. It was not temporal in the sense that time would have flowed both before and after it. Obviously, this statement does not imply by any means the pre-eternity of the world. The question, whether the past time of the universe is finite or infinite, is treated separately by Maimonides in GP II, 13-19. Needless to say, he does all his best to prove that it is finite.413

To return to the quoted passage from GP II, 30, Maimonides tries to establish here that the literal sense of Genesis 1: 1 does not imply the existence of time before the creative act. Scripture uses the word reshit instead of tehilla to underline the point that the “beginning” of creation is not a temporal beginning, i.e. not a beginning within time.414 At the same time Maimonides definitely intends to say that the world (and time) started at a certain moment a finite time ago. Therefore he translates be-reshit into Arabic as fi bad’a.

The choice of the word bad’a (for Hebrew reshit) is a bit surprising. In the previous paragraphs Maimonides claimed that Hebrew reshit corresponds to Arabic mabda’ (“principle”) and emphasized that it does not necessarily imply temporal precedence. Therefore, one would expect him to translate be-reshit as fi mabda’ (“in a principle”). The word actually chosen by him (bad’a) does imply temporal beginning normally in Arabic usage. Hence it seems as if he reverted to the view that Hebrew reshit means “first” instead of “principle.” The Straussian readers are greatly tempted to see in the apparent flaw in Maimonides’ vocabulary a further sign that Maimonides has some secret doctrine concerning creation.415

I think the flaw is only an appearance, and Maimonides’ words can be understood in a simple and coherent way.

The divine creative act preceded the whole world – higher and lower existents, heaven and earth. This is the intention of Genesis 1: 1 according to Maimonides. The question is what

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413 In a recently published monograph Kenneth Seeskin points out correctly the basic steps of Maimonides’ reasoning: cf. his Maimonides on the Origin of the World (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005) I fully agree with the following comment of the author to be found on page 24, note 56: “Harvey (“A Third Approach to Maimonides’ Cosmogony-Prophethology Puzzle,” p. 77) takes GP 2.30 to rule out a temporal creation. This is true if ‘temporal creation’ refers to a process that occurs over time and takes place in time. It is not true if it means that both time and motion began with creation.”


415 Cf. Klein-Braslavy, Perush ha-Rambam le-sippur beriat ha-olam, 114-123. In later studies she argues on the basis of minor features of Maimonides’ phrases in explaining the verb ‘to create’ that the esoteric message of GP is scepticism: Maimonides was unable to decide whether the was created or eternal. Thus Klein-Braslavy seems to follow the conclusions of Shlomo Pines: “The Limitations of Human Knowledge According to al-Farabi, Ibn Bajja and Maimonides,” in Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature, ed. Isadore Twersky, vol. 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979), 82-109. Thus Klein-Braslavy concludes that according to Maimonides the sense of Genesis 1: 1 tolerates any of the doctrinal positions including the eternity of the world. This is the opposite of what Maimonides actually attempts to do in GP II, 30. Cf. Sarah Klein-Braslavy: “Perush ha-Rambam le-foel ‘bara’ u-sheelat hiddush ha-olam,” (Maimonides’ interpretation of the verb ‘bara’ and the problem of the creation of the world) Daat 16 (1986): 54.
sort of precedence the creative act has in relation to the world. If it is mere temporal precedence – as in the example “X lived first in this house, then Y” – then there is no causal relationship between the creative act and the existence of the world. In this case it makes hardly any sense to talk about creation.

One might say that there is causal relationship between the creative act and the world but there is also temporal precedence. In this case the precedence of the creative act is both causal and temporal. In other words, there was time at the creation of the world and some amount of time passed between the creative divine act and the world’s coming into being.

This opinion is the proper target of Maimonides’ criticism. The opinion presupposes the independent, uncreated existence of time at the moment of creation. As we have seen, the implications of this opinion destroy the very idea of creation out of nothing as well. (If there was uncreated time, then there must have been uncreated heavenly spheres as well, etc.)

Therefore, Maimonides concludes, the precedence of the divine creative act over the world is only causal. No time passed between creation and the coming into being of the world. To use the jargon of Latin scholastics creatio activa and creatio passiva must have been simultaneous. This is another facet of Maimonides’ denial of temporal beginning. The “beginning” was not a temporal extension.

Moreover, as we have seen, the beginning was not temporal, that is to say, was not ‘in time’ in another sense either, namely, it was not “bracketed” by time. This had to be pointed out by Maimonides because Aristotle defined “being in time” as “being bracketed by time.”

However, by this Maimonides does not deny temporal beginning in another sense of the word, namely that the world was created a finite amount of time ago. On the contrary, all his intention was to establish and maintain consistently the idea that Genesis 1: 1 refers to creation out of nothing a finite amount of time ago. Therefore, translating be-reshit bara elohim etc. into Arabic Maimonides had to choose an Arabic word expressing both aspects of the “beginning,” namely, that it implies a purely causal precedence of creatio activa to creatio passiva, and at the same time it refers to an event that took place a finite amount of time ago. Arabic mabda’ failed to carry out this task in his opinion. Consequently, he chose another – etymologically related – phrase for translating the be-reshit of Genesis 1: 1. I would not call this a flaw or inconsistency in terminology or argument.

The textus receptus of Ibn Tibbon’s Hebrew translation translates bad’a as hathala, ‘principle’ as if the original were mabda’. Therefore, the Hebrew text makes another interpretation possible.

One can suppose that Maimonides tacitly assumes that be-reshit means “in the beginning of time.” Therefore the question is what sort of beginning we can assign to time at all. Attributing temporal beginning [tehilla] to time would imply the existence of a meta-time which measures time’s generation. However, this meta-time could exist only as an accident in the heaven’s movement; therefore its pre-existence would also imply the pre-existence of heaven. Therefore, Maimonides argues according to this interpretation, “in the beginning” refers to a principle of time that exists together with time or as a part of time – but not to a meta-time existing independently of time. Just like heart is generated first within the animal body or the fundament is build first of a house time started in a moment, for moment is the principle of time. It is no part of time strictly speaking but it exists together with time just like geometrical points exist with the line. Therefore, according to Maimonides, the point of be-reshit ‘in a principle’ was to exclude the existence of a meta-time measuring the beginning of time. This was probably Aquinas’ reading of GP II, 30 as well.416

416 Cf. his Super libros Sententiarum II, d. 1, q. 1, a. 6, ad 4: “sicut numerus non numeratur alio numero, ita nec tempus alio tempore mensuratur, nec fieri ejus, cum suum esse totum sit in fieri: unde incipit in principio temporis non sicut in mesurante esse ejus sed sicut in eo a quo incipit ejus productio, ut animalis a corde, et domus a fundamento, et linea a puncto.” In the Judeo-Arabic original Maimonides speaks about ‘heart’ and
What is happening in GP II, 30 is not making allusions to secret doctrines by putting forward inconsistent statements. It is rather a philosopher’s struggle with a natural language in order to find the best way for expressing his ideas. The problem for Maimonides was not how to hide his philosophic ideas but how to find the linguistic vehicles for expressing them. I have argued elsewhere that the point of esoterism according to Maimonides was not to hide his secret heresy but to safeguard philosophy from the unprepared readers who are unable to overcome the difficulties in expression and interpretation of philosophic ideas and as a consequence would misunderstand the author and even attribute heresy to him.

In the continuation of the quoted passage from GP II, 30 Maimonides emphasizes that creation took place in one moment. Everything was created simultaneously. This event is described in Genesis 1: 1. Other events of the six days refer to natural processes that can be analyzed in terms of Aristotelian meteorology. In other words Maimonides makes a clear distinction between the senses of Genesis 1: 1 and the rest of the narrative. The first sentence reveals the miracle of creation whereas the rest gives an account of physical processes within the framework of the created world. Consequently, Maimonides could not agree with Ibn Ezra who thought that Genesis 1: 1-2 formed a single grammatical unit.

To sum up, Maimonides’ first significant difference from Ibn Ezra is that he takes Genesis 1: 1 to refer to the creation of the world out of nothing a finite time ago. Before we proceed to the second main point of difference a characteristic of Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s translation of the passage quoted from GP II, 30 has to be discussed.

“And the world was not created in time as has been proved already, since time belongs to the number of the created things. That is why [Scripture] says, be-reshit, and the [Hebrew preposition] be- is like an instrumental/spatial be- [ve-ha-be”t ke-be”t keli],” says Ibn Tibbon’s Hebrew text.417

The phrase be”t keli is a grammatical terminus technicus defining the sense of the preposition ‘in’ appearing in Genesis 1:1 (“In the beginning…”). It is a Hebrew translation of Arabic zarf (“vessel”) used to signify spatial and temporal expressions in medieval grammars of the Arabic language. The Arabic term zarf appears in Abulwalid Merwan Ibn Ganah’s Hebrew grammar. Judah Ibn Tibbon, the father of Samuel Ibn Tibbon, translated Ibn Ganah’s grammar into Hebrew under the title Sefer ha-rigma around 1171.418 He decided to render the Arabic terminus technicus as keli in Hebrew. Samuel Ibn Tibbon probably followed the practice of his father by using the same term.419

Unfortunately, the terminus technicus is ambiguous. The Hebrew word keli means ‘instrument,’ especially ‘weapon’ and also ‘pot, pan, dish.’ Therefore, one might be inclined to render Ibn Tibbon’s ve-ha-be”t ke-be”t keli as “and the [preposition] ‘in’ is an instrumental ‘in’” lead by the sense ‘instrument’ of keli.

On the other hand, one can translate the Hebrew phrase be”t keli as “spatial-temporal ‘in’” as well. This solution is inspired by the meaning ‘pot, pan, bottle’ of the Hebrew word

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418 Cf. Steinschneider, CB, 1416-1417.

keli. According to this interpretation the terminus would refer to such usage of the preposition as 'the water is in the pot.'

The Arabic original simply says: ‘The [Hebrew] be”t preposition is like [Arabic] fi.” But the Arabic preposition fi is used most often in spatial-temporal sense. Therefore, the original text of GP suggests that the second interpretation was Maimonides’ actual view. The most convenient hypothesis is that Ibn Tibbon understood very well the Arabic original and he intended the same meaning by the term bet ha-keli.

However, the ambiguity of the Hebrew word keli opened the possibility for those medieval readers of Maimonides who could not access the Judeo-Arabic original of the work to interpret Maimonides as speaking about an “instrument” by which God created the universe. Thus, for many medieval readers Maimonides’ paraphrase of Genesis 1: 1 read “With a principle God created…” Consequently, they started to speculate about what kind of “principle” Maimonides had in mind that could be used by God in creation.

In fact, the interpretation of be-reshit as referring to a principle of creation was a deeply rooted intellectual tradition in both Judaism and Christianity. A famous passage from the book of Proverbs (8: 22) speaks about the personified Wisdom as the reshit of God’s way. Thus the Wisdom of God could easily be associated with the “beginning” of Genesis 1: 1 and be identified as the Logos or the Torah or the ten se’firot or Jesus Christ depending on the commentators’ confessional and doctrinal preferences. Rabbinic tradition usually identified Wisdom with the Torah. Medieval commentators could find traces of this doctrine in sources that they considered most authoritative: the Bereshit rabba, the Targum Jonathan on the Pentateuch, and in the Sefer Yetzira. Usually they interpreted the sources, just like Maimonides’ “principle,” to talk about the separate intellects.

Ibn Tibbon’s be”t ha-keli had also a tremendous influence on the way Ibn Ezra’s commentary on Genesis 1: 1 was read by thirteenth and early fourteenth-century supercommentators as will be shown in the subsequent sections.

The second fundamental difference between Maimonides’ and Ibn Ezra’s interpretation of the creation-story concerns a basic tenet of Maimonides’ exegetical technique. Maimonides accepts the existence of mental language. The words of natural language can be homonymous or ambiguous; the same word of the natural language can refer to different words in the mental language. Understanding of the biblical text must take place at the level of the mental language. Therefore, it is of central importance in Maimonides’ methodology of biblical exegesis to identify correctly the different meanings of homonymous terms; one has to – so to speak – translate the Bible from Hebrew to the mental language. To a considerable degree interpretation is simply identical with this process of translation.

In accordance with this principle Maimonides concentrates his efforts on identifying the possible homonymous uses of the key terms of the creation-story. We learn in GP II, 30 that the recurring phrase “And God named X as Y” is meant to signify for the intelligent


421 For example Judah ben Shlomo ha-Cohen Ibn Matqah writing in Tosca around 1245 is of the opinion that be-reshit refers to the angels / separate intellects / “spiritual world” (ha-olam ha-ruhani). He quotes Proverbs 8: 22 as a proof-text and adds further speculations about the virtues of the Hebrew letters of be-reshit in the style of the Sefer Yetzira; cf. MS Oxford, Bodleian, MS Mich. 551 (Neubauer 1321), fol. 124 r-v. The same line of interpretation is followed by Abba Mari ben Abigdor / Eligdor who was active in Southern France at the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (he was an opponent of Joseph Caspi); cf. MS Oxford, Bodleian, MS Opp. 572 (Neubauer 2282), fol. 83 v – here the reference is to Proverbs 3: 19 and to the famous opening words of Bereshit rabba about God’s creating the world through Torah (identified as the separate intellects by Abba Mari ben Abigdor). Moses Narboni (Southern France, middle of the fourteenth century) joins this tradition in his commentary on GP II, 30 rejecting explicitly the alternative view, namely that be-reshit means ‘in the first moment of time.’ Narboni’s text will be analyzed in the section on Jedaiah’s theory of the first moment.
reader that X is a homonymous word used in a different sense before God’s naming something than after. Thus the word “earth” refers to the “lower world” of the four elements in the first verse, whereas it refers only to the element earth later on after God’s naming the dry land “earth” in Genesis 1: 10. “Darkness” refers to the elementary fire in the second verse (since elementary fire is dark by its nature), whereas it refers to normal darkness, i.e. the absence of light later on. “Water” means the element water in the second verse. Later a distinction is made between “lower waters” and “upper waters” in the text: the former means the salty water of the sea, the latter refers to the clouds. “Light” in Genesis 1: 3 refers to the heavenly bodies and to normal light later on.

This is in contrast with Ibn Ezra’s method who assumes that the words are used consistently in the same sense throughout the creation-story. (Thus, “heaven” cannot mean the heavenly spheres in Genesis 1: 1 once it is clear that it means “air” in Genesis 1: 6-8.) As a result Maimonides’ and Ibn Ezra’s explanations of individual phrases in the text differ to a considerable extent even if their general approach is very similar.

The Ibn Ezra supercommentators were quite sensitive both to the similarities and the differences between the contributions of the two great twelfth-century masters. Maimonides and Ibn Ezra were both respected as the exponents of an intellectual tradition to which the supercommentators themselves wanted to belong. This is why the treatment of their differences became an important topic of the supercommentaries.

Samuel Ibn Tibbon and the Theory of Cosmic Cycles

Although Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s authority never competed with that of Ibn Ezra and Maimonides, his books were widely read by the supercommentators, one of them, Moses ben Samuel Ibn Tibbon being actually his son. The Hebrew translation of The Guide of the Perplexed was a basic reading for virtually every Jewish philosopher in the subsequent centuries. He was responsible to a very considerable degree for the creation of the terminology and language register of post-Maimonidean Hebrew philosophical discourse. The supercommentators learnt how to express philosophical ideas in Hebrew by reading Ibn Tibbon’s translations and writings.

No matter how deeply he admired Maimonides, Samuel was far from being a slavish follower of his master. In the Maamar yiqqavu ha-mayim (“A Treatise concerning “Let the waters be gathered!” [Gen 1: 9] written in the 1220s in Provence) Samuel intended to assert himself as an independent and original philosopher. The work showed the way for the Ibn Ezra supercommentators how to combine Maimonides’ and Ibn Ezra’s ideas concerning the creation narrative.

In chapter 20 of the Maamar yiqqavu ha-mayim Samuel contrasts sharply his own view with that of Maimonides:

And I have already explained the great difficulties in which the Rav of blessed memory [Maimonides] is caught concerning the interpretation of the first three verses of the Torah. And I am not persuaded by his interpretation concerning them just like I am not persuaded by his apparent view that the whole Torah’s chief intention was to [present] interior meanings and mysteries for the instruction of the wise men concerning the true [nature] of reality. In fact this [principle] was the great reason for

Maimonides’ interpreting those verses [in the way he did] and also concerning other verses of the Torah.

I myself think the opposite. The intention of the Torah was solely to benefit the multitude, although no doubt that concerning those things that were necessarily presented for the multitude and concerning which the literal meanings were far from the [opinion] of the wise men, who know the truth, Moses had to write those things in a double way. That is to say, the first way has to cover the second one and the upper one is for the needs of the multitude whereas the inner one is for the wise men. And to this fact Solomon alluded, namely, how the two ways, the external and the inner one should be posited, as the Rav [Maimonides] said [as well].

I have already explained all these things in the first part of the Sefer ha-ner ha-hofes, and I have brought strong arguments that the chief intention of the Torah concerns the obvious [sense]. And indeed, it seems on the basis of the words of some of the [talmudic] rabbis of blessed memory and from the words of most commentators that the “heaven” mentioned in the first day [of creation] is the “firmament” created on the second day.\footnote{Samuel Ibn Tibbon: Maamar yiqqavu ha-mayim, ed. Mordecai L. Bisliches (Pressburg: Anton Edlen v. Schmid, 1827), 132.}

Samuel Ibn Tibbon strongly disagrees with Maimonides’ interpretation of Genesis 1: 1 in the quoted passage and prefers Ibn Ezra’s solution although Ibn Ezra is not named explicitly. What is even more interesting is that he puts the debate into a larger context. He claims that Maimonides’ own exegetical decision was motivated by his general vision concerning the mission of the Torah. This is exactly the point where Samuel directs his daring criticism of the master.

Samuel refers to the first part of another work of his where he brings further arguments for the correctness of his view. Unfortunately this work is lost to us. The title Sefer ha-ner ha-hofes means “The book of the searching lamp” being an allusion to Proverbs 20: 27: “A lamp of God is the soul of man: it searches through all the inner chambers.” In chapter three of the Maamar Samuel talks about this book as a future project. He intended to examine all the traditional literature of rabbinic Judaism in order to find the traces of the lost philosophy of the ancient Jewish masters.\footnote{Samuel Ibn Tibbon, Maamar, 9.} We do not know whether the book was ever finished, and I am not aware of the existence of any surviving fragment.

Although it is clear from the quoted passage that Samuel perceived his own approach as diametrically opposed to Maimonides’ one, the reader might be confused what exactly the matter at stake is. Samuel argues that the Torah has an external and an esoteric sense as well and the first is intended to the multitude whereas the second to the intellectual elite (“wise men”). This was apparently Maimonides’ view as well, and Samuel himself refers to Maimonides at the end of the second quoted paragraph. It seems that they differed only in a minor issue: which of the two senses was the principal intention of the Torah? The reader might ask why this question is important at all.

In order to determine the relationship between Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s and Maimonides’ position I will summarize first briefly Samuel’s arguments. Samuel points out that Maimonides’ interpretation is based on a grammatical presupposition which he finds unacceptable. Maimonides takes Genesis 1: 1 to be an independent sentence. Samuel prefers the view of Ibn Ezra and Rashi who interpreted Genesis 1: 1 as a subordinate clause governed by Genesis 1: 2 (“In the beginning of God’s creating heaven and earth the earth was empty and void etc.”). He even goes a step further claiming that both Genesis 1: 1 and 1:2 are subordinate clauses governed by Genesis 1: 3. Therefore, he paraphrases “the first three
sentences of the Torah” in the following way: “Before God created heaven and earth, and when the earth was empty and void, and there was darkness over the deepness and God’s wind was hovering on the surface of the waters, then God said, ‘Let there be light!’ and there was light.” This paraphrase simply excludes the possibility that Genesis 1:1 announces creation out of nothing. On the contrary, it speaks about a primordial state of the universe, when the earth was still tohu va-bohu; nonetheless, it doubtlessly existed. Consequently, the biblical creation story cannot refer to creation out of nothing, for the existence of earth is presupposed at the very beginning.

Samuel adduces an exegetical argument as well. Genesis 1:1 mentions the creation of “heaven” and “earth.” Genesis 1:2 describes the primordial state of the earth before the creation of the light. ‘What about heaven?’ Samuel asks. One would expect that Scripture will describe the primordial state of heaven as well. However, Scripture fails to do so. Therefore, Samuel argues, it is more convenient to suppose that the “heaven” of Genesis 1:1 was not the heavenly spheres pace Maimonides, but the air that was to separate the clouds from the lower waters as Ibn Ezra thought. The description of this heaven in its primordial state is included in Genesis 1:2 in the phrases about darkness and ruah elohim hovering over the waters. In conclusion Samuel subscribes to Ibn Ezra’s opinion that the creation of “heaven and earth” mentioned in Genesis 1:1 does not refer to the creation of the whole cosmos out of nothing but to the beginning of a meteorological process within the sub-lunar world.

For the sake of clarity let us call Samuel’s “external” or “upper” or “obvious” sense ‘popular’ and his “inner” or “covered” or “esoteric” sense ‘scientific.’ Maimonides and Samuel agree that the Torah has both a popular and a scientific message. The key problem is how the two senses relate to the literal sense. Usually the pair ‘popular’ / ‘scientific’ corresponds to ‘literal’ / ‘non-literal.’ However, in Maimonides’ opinion, literal sense and scientific sense are in a fortunate coincidence in cases when some fundamental doctrines of Judaism are at stake – otherwise everything in the Torah should be interpreted in a non-literal way which is a “crazy imagination” for Maimonides (cf. GP II, 25). If the multitudes fail to understand that, for example, Genesis 1:1 announces creation out of nothing, then they fail to understand the literal sense of the biblical verse.

This is the idea that seems unacceptable to Samuel. Creation out of nothing is a subtle concept that is very far from the imagination of the multitude. Is it possible to imagine that Moses started instructing the people with such a difficult notion?! Was it the main intention of the Torah to teach theoretical truth to few elected individuals? Was it not rather to improve the life of the multitude? Samuel prefers the assumption that the chief intention of the creation-story was to teach only a vague notion of creation that everybody can understand without scientific preparation. What the multitude should get out of the text is the vague idea that the world is dependent somehow on God who is the only lord of the universe. The reservations “out of nothing,” “a finite amount of time ago,” “by divine free will” are subtleties that people do not understand and are not interested in. On the contrary, they are satisfied with a cosmological imagery that suggests creation out of pre-existing matter – as is the case with Genesis 1:1-3 – and their simple mind should not be bothered with more sophisticated ideas.

Samuel thinks that the literal sense is the popular sense in Genesis 1:1. This does not exclude the possibility that Moses also wanted to give an esoteric teaching for the wise individuals as well. However, this esoteric, scientific doctrine does not concern the metaphysical concept of creation according to Samuel. It concerns only sub-lunar physics.

Probably the ‘imperative of literal interpretation’ is the deep structure that determines Samuel’s thought. If the esoteric sense of Genesis 1:1 were creation out of nothing then the esoteric sense would “abandon” the literal sense. Genesis 1:1-3 taken in its literal sense presupposes the pre-existence of earth explicitly and the pre-existence of the heavenly spheres
implicitly. Consequently the scientific interpretation must operate within this framework as well. Scientific interpretation may show how the words of Moses contain “hints” and “allusions” to physical principles and it may reconstruct the events described in the Bible in terms of Aristotelian meteorology. However, it may not abandon the basic framework set by the literal / popular sense. This is why Maimonides’ interpretation is unacceptable for Samuel even on the esoteric level. Not only the literal / popular but also the non-literal / scientific meaning of Genesis 1: 1 must refer to something else than creation out of nothing.

Having established the original intentions of Moses – both popular and scientific – Samuel could proceed to outline a broader scientific theory as a context for the scientific sense of the creation narrative. To his own surprise he discovered the theory partly in Avicenna’s Kitāb aš-Šifā and partly in Solomon’s Ecclesiastes.

In the first three chapters of the Maamar Samuel summarizes the different views of Averroes and Avicenna about the possibility that water floods the earth completely. Water is a lighter element than earth; therefore natural order would require that water covers completely the surface of earth. What forces keep water away from doing so? This question is intimately connected to the interpretation of Genesis 1: 9: “And God said, ‘Let the waters be gathered into one place under the heaven and let the dry land be visible!’”

Both Averroes and Avicenna accept Aristotle’s basic line of argument: it is due to the movement of the heavenly bodies that the elements leave their natural places. The withdrawal of water from earth must be for this reason as well. In a famous passage of the Meteorology (I, 14) Aristotle claims that dry land can become sea and vice versa: “a place does not remain land or sea throughout all times but where there was dry land there comes to be sea and where there is now sea there one day comes to be dry land.”

Averroes imagines this process as a gradual one. The borders of the sea and the dry land are continuously changing. However none of them ever disappears completely. Samuel reports an argument of Averroes apparently not attested in Averroes’ surviving works. Interestingly enough the argument follows the pattern of Avicenna’s famous cosmological proof for the existence of God. If it ever happened that the sea completely flooded the dry land then no terrestrial animal (including humans) would survive this event. Now animals are generated out of animals; therefore if all the terrestrial animals died at a certain moment of time no animal could live today on the surface of earth – which is obviously false. Therefore this event did not happen in the past.

Averroes accepts the pre-eternity of the world; thence he concludes that the great flood did not happen for an infinite amount of time. Referring to a famous passage of Aristotle’s De Coelo (I, 10) – exposing what is called “principle of plenitude” by modern scholars – Averroes claims that whatever does not happen for an infinite amount of time is impossible. Therefore it is impossible that the sea ever floods the earth completely.

Samuel explains that Avicenna accepted the possibility of proto-genesis; therefore Averroes’ argument had no demonstrative force for him. Avicenna saw nothing impossible in the hypothesis that from time to time water covers completely earth, and all the terrestrial animals and humans die consequently. After the disappearance of the water life can start again on the dry land by a series of proto-genesis.

Avicenna mentions this only as a possibility. However, for Samuel Ibn Tibbon this passage of Avicenna was one of the greatest discoveries of his life. This passage provided him the keys for understanding chapter 3 of the Ecclesiastes – a chapter the meaning of which no commentator had any idea before according to our author:

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This is what comes out of the words of Avicenna. And this is the belief of the creation of [many] words and their destructions mentioned by the [talmudic] rabbis, and it seems that this is to what Solomon alluded concerning the “times” saying: “There is time for everything and time for all business.” The meaning of ‘there is time for everything’ is that there is a time for the whole universe […] and this is what he [Solomon] said: “Time for birth and time for death, time for planting and time for uprooting the planted, time for killing and time for curing, time for destruction and time for building.”

Samuel explains that the pairs of opposites in King Solomon’s sentence allude to different kind of beings that pass away at the time of the flood and regenerate when water withdraws from the surface of the earth.

Identifying Avicenna’s hypothesis concerning the cyclic destruction of the dry land as the esoteric sense of Ecclesiastes 3 enabled Samuel Ibn Tibbon to put his exegesis of Genesis 1:1-3 into a larger scientific context. The primordial state of the sub-lunar world described in the first three verses of the Torah referred to exactly such an event when the waters flooded completely the dry lands. The “beginning” of Genesis 1:1 was not the beginning of the universe in general but the beginning of the cosmic cycle in which we presently live.

Did Samuel Ibn Tibbon deny creation out of nothing? Explicitly, he did not. Even implicitly, his statements about the sense of the creation story do not necessarily exclude the possibility of creation out of nothing. In a remarkable passage at the end of the Maamar Samuel clearly implies that hiddush ha-olam, “creation of the world” is the literal meaning (peshat) of the creation narrative – contradicting his arguments summarized above to the opposite effect. A Straussian reader may happily take it as an instance of intentional self-contradictions with the purpose of concealing an esoteric message – the eternity of the world in this case. However, it is possible that Samuel meant only a vague idea of creation by the phrase hiddush ha-olam that is suitable for the needs of the masses. In this way Genesis 1:1-3 in its literal sense could teach a notion of creation to the vulgar without expounding the doctrine of creation out of nothing pace Maimonides. Four centuries later Spinoza was also of the opinion that the Bible taught only a vulgar notion of creation, not the subtle idea of creatio ex nihilo; he practically accepted Rashi’s aggadic interpretation of Genesis 1:1.

From a Foucauldian perspective the question is not what Samuel Ibn Tibbon really believed about creation out of nothing but what he actually stated about it and what the value of his statements in the specific discursive formation they belonged to actually was. One should not forget about the following passage in Judah ha-Levi:

The question of eternity and creation is obscure, and the arguments are evenly balanced. The theory of creation is outbalanced by the prophetic tradition of Adam, Noah, and Moses, which is more deserving of credence than speculations founded on analogies. But if, after all, a believer in the Torah finds himself compelled to admit an eternal substance and the existence of many worlds prior to this one, this would not affect his belief that this world was created at a certain epoch, and that Adam and Noah were the first human beings.

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426 Samuel Ibn Tibbon, Maamar, 174.
Judah ha-Levi, a fierce opponent of philosophy in the twelfth century, did not think that it was completely impossible to reconcile a theory of cyclic creations – something comparable to Samuel’s interpretation of Avicenna and King Solomon – with “belief in the Torah” even if this theory implied the existence of an “eternal substance” besides God.430

Perhaps, for Samuel Ibn Tibbon it was not necessary to decide the problem of creation at all: more than one position was acceptable within the tenets of Judaism and a philosopher could simply avoid declaring a clear-cut opinion concerning this question.

At the very beginning of the Maamar Samuel carefully distinguishes the discourse of Aristotelian philosophy accepting the eternity of the world and the discourse of monotheistic theology accepting the free will of God. He calls the attention of the reader to the differences between the two approaches again and again. In this context he refers to an old aggada from Bereshit rabba according to which Scripture determines the possible subjects of human speculation. This was actually the reason why Samuel needed the verse “Let the waters be gathered” (Genesis 1: 9) so much. Had this sentence not appeared in Scripture it would have been forbidden to speculate about the whole problematics of the natural order of the elements within the framework of monotheistic, Jewish thought.

Therefore, to use Foucault’s terminology, Scripture functioned as a principle of rarification for Samuel Ibn Tibbon in monotheistic discourse: what Scripture mentions, you can speak about, what Scripture does not mention, you should avoid. Now Genesis 1: 1 did not happen to talk about creation out of nothing in his interpretation. Therefore, Samuel was quite consequent in being silent about the topic of creation out of nothing.

But things were about to change. Moses of Salerno, a disciple of Jacob Anatoli, Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s son-in-law, criticized Samuel for not accepting Maimonides’ interpretation of Genesis 1: 1 already in the middle of the thirteenth century:

And even if the sage Rabbi Samuel Ibn Tibbon followed this view [i.e. that God “created” many worlds before the present one] in his treatise that he wrote about “Let the waters be gathered,” at the beginning of the text, and he says that he found a pearl among many things [i.e. he understood the esoteric meaning of a midrash], you should know that the way of Moses, the son of Maimon is the way of Moses, the son of Amram, that is to say, the creation of the world after complete nonexistence and its creation concerns its entirety, both the upper and the lower worlds, and not only the elements as some people think.431

As time passed on it was more and more difficult to avoid the problem of creation out of nothing. And silence about it could easily be taken as a sign of disbelief or serious mistake in philosophy. Nonetheless, Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s theory about the cosmic cycles had a future. In the following chapters we shall see how his proposal was further developed in the Ibn Ezra supercommentaries.

430 See on this: Svhwartz, Central Problems of Medieval Jewish Philosophy, 180.
431 Moses of Salerno ad GP II, 30; MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 687, fol. 220 v.
I. Bereshit

Introduction

Ibn Ezra’s comment on Genesis 1:1 starts as follows:

IN THE BEGINNING:*

Our sages said:

The ‘in’ is superfluous similarly to the ‘in’ of ba-rishona [“in first”], since the later can be found [in the Holy Scripture without the ‘in’ preposition at the following passage]: “first they traveled” (Num 2:9).

Had this been the sense, the preposition would have been vocalized with a [instead of e; thus *ba-reshit instead of be-reshit].

Some say that ‘in the beginning’ always means ‘in the beginning of something.’ Thus the sense must be ‘in the beginning of the evening or night or darkness’ or something like this.

But look, they have forgotten [about the following passage:] “And he saw a beginning for him” (Deut 33:21) [where ‘beginning’ is an independent noun].

And some others say that the ‘in’ carries no sense [lit. “without sense” she-ha-be’t nose beli taam] and the sense according to them that it should not come to anybody’s mind that heaven and earth have no beginning, this is why [Scripture] says be-reshit, “in a beginning…”

My own opinion is that it is governed by [the verb ‘create;’ thus “in the beginning of God’s creating heaven and earth’] similarly to “In the beginning of king Yehoyaqim’s rule…” [Jeremiah 26:1].

And don’t be surprised that it is governed by a finite verb since this is also the case with “first God spoke to Hoshea.” (Hoshea 1:2) and “the town where David lived” (Isaiah 29:1).432

And the sense will be explained to you in the second verse.

This comment deals only with the meaning of the first word of the Bible: be-reshit ‘in the beginning.’ Ibn Ezra enlists four possible interpretations; two of them he rejects by explicit arguments; the third one is neither refuted nor embraced; the fourth one he declares to be his own.

Interestingly enough not Ibn Ezra’s own solution but the third alternative received the most attention from the supercommentators. The reason for this is probably the fact that this solution is the closest to the one suggested by Maimonides in GP II, 30. Moreover, Ibn Ezra himself does not object explicitly to it; thus the supercommentators might have thought that Ibn Ezra also accepted this interpretation as well at least as a possibility.

A further reason for the supercommentators’ attention to the third interpretation is the uncertainty about the text. The Hebrew phrase she-ha-bet nose beli taam found in most manuscripts and editions makes little sense. It can be translated to English as “the preposition ‘in’ carries [something; a meaning?] without sense.” Textual emendations were explicitly proposed or tacitly assumed by some of the supercommentators and needless to say it is also possible that some of them worked with an Ibn Ezra text different from ours.

* SMALL CAPS indicate that a certain phrase is a quotation from the text commented on. Such excerpts are often the grammatical subjects of the sentences in the supercommentaries.

432 Ibn Ezra’s argument is correct; in the Hebrew original the words rendered by ‘first’ and ‘town’ are governed by finite verbs.
Chapter 1: Joseph Caspi

Joseph Caspi comments on this passage:

Some say that the ‘in’ carries no sense [beli taam]⁴³³ – This is a copying mistake. The [correct reading is] keli taam that is to say, “instrumental ‘in’ [bet keli].” This is like the issue of ‘principle’ [hathala]: “with a creation out of nothing [be-hiddush yesh me-ayin] God created heaven and earth” as Rabbi Moses [Maimonides] wrote. And this is the sense according to them, to keep away [the idea of] the eternity [of the world].

Caspi proposes to correct beli taam to keli taam. At first sight this is a quite plausible emendation: the graphical similarity between the letters ‘b’ ב and ‘k’ כ of the Hebrew alphabet can easily explain the emergence of the supposed textual corruption. In accordance with Caspi’s emendation Ibn Ezra’s sentence is to be translated in the following way:

And some others say that the ‘in’ carries instrumental sense [she-ha-be”t nose keli taam] and the sense according to them that it should not come to anybody’s mind that heaven and earth have no beginning, this is why [Scripture] says “with a beginning…” [“…God created heaven and earth.”]

The reader can easily see that this translation makes more sense out of the text than the one given above based on the reading beli taam. If the ‘in’ is “instrumental,” that is to say, a synonym of ‘with’ in the present context, then the biblical verse can be paraphrased as “with a beginning God created heaven and earth” emphasizing the fact that heaven and earth do have a temporal beginning. Thanks to Caspi’s correction Ibn Ezra makes a clear and understandable point whereas the text without the emendation seems to be quite dim. This counts as an argument for the correctness of the emendation.

At the same time, Caspi’s correction does not solve all the textual difficulties either. The phrase nose keli taam translated as “carries instrumental sense” still sounds quite awkward in Hebrew: one would expect rather nose taam ha-keli. Moreover, I am not aware of any evidence for Ibn Ezra’s using the word keli as a grammatical terminus technicus referring to “instrumental” usage of ‘in’ preposition or to anything else. Wilhem Bacher and Leo Prijs’s classics on Ibn Ezra’s grammatical terminology contain no entry or reference to this supposed grammatical term.⁴³⁴

However, the word does appear as a grammatical terminus technicus in Ibn Tibbon’s Hebrew version of GP II, 30. As we have seen, Ibn Tibbon makes Maimonides say that the be- of be-reshit is bet ha-keli, “instrumental ‘in’” or “spatio-temporal ‘in’” depending on how the Hebrew word keli is understood. Caspi himself refers to Maimonides in his comment and the reference is presumably to GP II, 30. Therefore, we can conclude, Caspi’s emendation could have been inspired exactly by this passage of the Guide. It is possible that Caspi anachronistically attributed the usage of keli as a grammatical term to Ibn Ezra, and consequently, his emendation is based on an erroneous assumption.

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⁴³³ This is the reading of MS Paris, hebr. 184, fol. 4 v. In MS Vat. ebr. 106 fol. 1 r and MS Vat. ebr. 36 fol. 51 r the reading is be-lo instead of be-li.
The second part of his comment is difficult to understand. A laconic sentence reveals us that Ibn Ezra’s point is like the “issue of ‘principle’ [hathala] with a reference to an undefined work of Maimonides.

The Maimonidean text in question can hardly be anything else than GP II, 30. As we have seen, in this chapter Maimonides draws a difference between ‘first’ (rishon) and ‘principle’ (hathala). (Needless to say, rishon and hathala are Ibn Tibbon’s Hebrew renderings of the corresponding Arabic terms.) Furthermore, he claims that the ‘beginning’ of Gen 1:1 is to be understood as ‘principle’ rather than ‘first.’ Thus, the first sentence of the Bible is to be paraphrased as “In a principle/with a principle God created…”

If our hypothesis, namely that Caspi refers to GP II, 30 in the quoted passage, is correct – and I cannot imagine any alternative to it – then his supercommentary evidences a rather interesting reading of Maimonides’ chapter on creation. Caspi wrote:

…“with a creation out of nothing [be-hiddush yes me-ayin] God created heaven and earth” as Rabbi Moses [Maimonides] wrote.

This is probably meant to be a paraphrase of Maimonides’ “In a principle [ba-hathala] God created heaven and earth.” Thus for Caspi, the intended meaning of ‘principle’ in Maimonides’ text is ‘creation out of nothing.’ Caspi probably was of the opinion that by ‘principle’ Maimonides meant something concerning the origin of a thing or the generation of the thing. Thus the point of the biblical “in the beginning” is to assert that heaven and earth are not just caused by God eternally but they were generated some time ago. In other words, “in the beginning” is meant to emphasize the doctrine of creation out of nothing in order to “keep away” from the reader’s mind the idea of the eternity of the world.

It is worthy of noting at this point that Caspi composed his supercommentary on Ibn Ezra at the age of seventeen. Some evidences suggest that later in his life his reading of Maimonides became fundamentally different. Barry Mesch argues that in his Maskiyyot kesef, a commentary on GP finished probably at the end of his life, Caspi identified Maimonides true position not with creation out of nothing but with a theory of eternal creation. The word be-reshit does not signify temporal beginning but logical priority. There is no difference whatsoever between Aristotle’s and Maimonides’ true opinion.435

At the same time Caspi also used formulas implying or explicitly claiming creation out of nothing even in his latter writings.436 Barry Mesch has offered the following explanation. Caspi himself – just like Maimonides – used equivocal language and “esoteric style” in his works. In other words Caspi was not honest in professing a belief in creatio ex nihilo. He meant these passages to be ‘noble lies’ in order to conceal his “real, esoteric” view from the sight of the vulgar. His honest opinion is revealed only in the passage from his commentary on GP referred to in the previous footnote.437

The following passage of Caspi’s Sefer ha-musar composed in Valencia, 1332 qualifies Caspi’s statement about Maimonides and Aristotle’s agreement in the question of creation:

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436 A good example is Shulhan kesef, chapter 6 where Caspi explains the meaning of Genesis 1:1 in accordance with Maimonides, GP II, 30 as has been interpreted above. Cf. Joseph Caspi: Shulhan kesef, ed. Hannah Kasher (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 1996), 61.
Against these famous Saints of the Gentiles [hasidey ummot ha-olam] we have no possible complaint, and therefore our Sages asserted concerning them, that they have a portion in the world to come. And note further how Aristotle, who at first derived his theory of the eternity of the world rationally, afterwards adopted the belief in Creation, expounded as it is in the Torah by those possessed of the prophetic soul, which is higher than rational faculty.\(^{438}\)

In my opinion Caspi’s position in this question needs reconsideration independently of the assumptions of Straussian dogmatics. Unfortunately, this task cannot be undertaken here.\(^{439}\)

Caspi’s supercommentary on the passage quoted from Ibn Ezra above ends with the following remark:

**AND THE SENSE WILL BE EXPLAINED TO YOU IN THE SECOND VERSE.** Namely, he says that in the phrase “and the earth...” (Gen 1:2) the ‘and’ is superfluous. And the meaning is: “Before God’s creating heaven and earth, the earth was void and empty.”

Caspi’s paraphrase differs from Ibn Ezra’s one (see above) in two respects. Ibn Ezra spoke about the *beginning* of God’s creative activity whereas Caspi speaks about what was *before* God’s creation. Ibn Ezra explains also ‘heaven,’ ‘earth,’ ‘void’ and ‘empty,’ whereas Caspi leaves them unexplained. Substituting “before” instead of “in the beginning” Caspi was probably motivated by Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s *Maamar yiqqawu ha-mayim*.\(^{440}\) He read Ibn Ezra in the light of Samuel Ibn Tibbon.

**Enunciative Functions**

What enunciative functions are put into operation by these short remarks? First, we can identify a field of textual criticism. We have seen in Part One that Caspi complained about careless and incompetent scribes who corrupted Ibn Ezra’s text. He starts the actual supercommentary with a textual emendation. He does not refer to any manuscripts; he just declares the correct reading as something obvious.

There are two clearly distinguishable subjective positions presupposed by the text: the incompetent copyist, who makes mistakes, and the competent reader, who can correct the textual corruptions solely on the basis of the sense. The competencies (or incompetencies) involved in these subjective positions do not concern access to old manuscripts or the

\(^{438}\) Transl. Israel Abrahams, *Hebrew Ethical Wills*, 147-148. Steinschneider (HÜ, 271-272) traces back the history of this legend to the 1360s. There was probably a Pseudo-Aristotelian epistle relating Aristotle’s “conversion” after his discussions with a Jew called Shimeoni, identified with the pre-Maccabean highpriest, Simon the Just mentioned in rabbinic literature (e.g. Avot 1:2). Steinschneider refers to Gedaliah ben Yahya’s chronicle (*Shalshelet ha-qabbala*, ed. Venice, 1587, fol. 103; ed. Amsterdam, 1697, fol. 83 v) referring to Hayyim of Briviesca (flourished around 1370), Abraham Ibn Zarbal (probably a physician of Don Pedro of Castillie [1350-1369]), and a Muslim scholar, who was the ultimate source, identified by Steinschneider with the famous scholar and statesman, Lisan ad-Din ibn al-Khatib (died in 1374). Caspi’s testimony is at least three decades earlier.

\(^{439}\) My impression is that in the referred passages of *Maskiyyot kesef* Caspi suggests that the idea of eternal creation is a theologically acceptable position, that is to say, it does not contradict necessarily the doctrine of divine free will and omnipotence. Thus, Caspi’s position in this question is comparable to Thomas Aquinas’ one in his *De aeternitate mundi*. Just like Aquinas, Caspi does not claim that the world is actually eternal; he only claims that “eternal creation is possible,” that is to say, God could have created a world with eternal past time if He wished to do so.

application of historical methods. They concern the *sense* of the text. If you are a competent reader, you will be able to copy the text correctly and even to correct the mistakes of the incompetent copyists.

There are two objects that can be identified: the sense and the text. The ‘sense’ is tested; a ‘margin of tolerance’ belongs to it: certain “senses” are no longer tolerable, they are non-senses, and the competent reader of Ibn Ezra will rather correct the text than to attribute nonsense to the master, Ibn Ezra. The ‘text’ is subordinated to the ‘sense.’ Thus a ‘margin of tolerance’ is put into action; it judges both the sense and the text together. The competence of the reader functions through the margin of tolerance.

There are examples when the ‘margin of tolerance’ does allow more than one senses and consequently, more than one readings. In Part One we have seen an example from Moses Ibn Tibbon’s supercommentary on Exodus 2:11. Moses Ibn Tibbon emended the text – not on the basis of manuscripts, but on the basis of the sense. At the same time he also offered an alternative interpretation that did not change Ibn Ezra’s text itself; it only vocalized the consonants in an unusual way.\(^{441}\)

The ‘margin of tolerance’ makes the difference between plausible and non-plausible interpretations and readings. It is dependent on one’s general understanding of Ibn Ezra and all the subjects that form the overall horizon of Ibn Ezra’s interpretation. Thus the ‘margin of tolerance’ *integrates* textual criticism into the more comprehensive project of interpretation.

In the second place, a field of co-textuality can be observed. Ibn Ezra’s text recalls a passage from Maimonides. And Ibn Ezra’s text contains a self-reference that is identified in the supercommentary. The objects that appear in this field are *textual relations*. Some texts belong together because they are about the same topic and/or contain the same word or phrase or because one refers explicitly to the other.

The field of co-textuality grounds the field of exegetical themes. Once the relationship between Ibn Ezra and Maimonides’ statement concerning *bet ha-keli* is pointed out Caspi proceeds to expound the subject matter itself. The exegetical theme is situated at the intersection of many other fields: Hebrew grammar, Aristotelian philosophy, Jewish theology, biblical exegesis, Ibn Ezra-exegesis, and Maimonides-exegesis. All of the fields have a textual-exegetical and a doctrinal ‘pole’ that exercise a critical function about the possible statements. If you say that Maimonides’ position is X, it is expected that (1) X can be derived from a text by Maimonides and (2) X is meaningful, consistent and relevant enough to be the opinion of such a great man. Thus both the ‘textual’ and the ‘doctrinal’ poles have their own ‘margins of tolerance.’

**Chapter 2: Eleazar ben Mattityah**

Eleazar ben Mattityah’s supercommentary represents similar interpretation of Ibn Ezra’s text on a more sophisticated level. The reader should recall the fact that Caspi intended his works for teenagers whose main interest was in mastering the rules of Hebrew grammar, not philosophy. On the other hand, Eleazar’s supercommentary was probably the chief work of his life: he tried to summarize all kind of knowledge what he gained in his long life on the pages of his supercommentary.

Eleazar’s supercommentary reads:

> Some say that the ‘in’ carries instrumental sense [*keli taam* כָלֵי תַּאָם] that is to say ‘in a beginning [*be-hathala*] God created heaven’ not like the words of Aristotle that the world exists of necessity but that God is the cause and the world is caused.

\(^{441}\) For a similar example in Caspi, where he first proposes an emendation, and then offers an alternative interpretation of the uncorrected text, see MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 184, fol. 44 v [ad Exodus 20:1].
And Rabbi Moses [= Maimonides] has already explained this sentence in The Guide of the Perplexed, Part Two, Chapter Thirty:

Now the word that means ‘first’ in our language is tehilla; “first God spoke to Hoshea [tehilat dibber h’ be-hoshea]” (Hoshea 1:2). And the word that means ‘principle’ is reshit, which is derived from rosh ['head'], what is the principle of animal according to its position. And the world was not created in time, since time belongs to the number of created things. That is why [Scripture] says, be-reshit, and the [Hebrew preposition] be- is like a temporal/spatial be- [ve-ha-be”t ke-be”t keli]. And the correct interpretation of this verse is the following: “First [sic!] God created the upper things and the lower things [ba-tehilla bara yyy elyonim ve-tahtonim].”

The preposition be- is found in the keli sense in connection with time; e.g. ‘in that time,’ ‘in that day’ [ba-et ha-hi, ba-yom ha-hu]. And be- can be keli concerning space; e.g. ‘in this house’ [ba-bayit ha-ze].

The reading of keli instead of beli in the manuscript seems probable although the text is a bit faded on the copy I am using.\(^{443}\) In any case the fact that the comment ends with a remark on the possible senses of be”t keli makes it probable the Eleazar – just like Caspi – also associated Ibn Ezra’s keli taam to the grammatical term appearing in GP II, 30 (according to Ibn Tibbon’s Hebrew version).

Eleazar does not suggest the keli reading as an emendation; therefore it is possible that his manuscript actually contained this reading.

Eleazar’s quotation from Maimonides also contains a very interesting variant. The last sentence reads ba-tehilla bara… instead of be-hathala of textus receptus. Due to the consonantal character of Hebrew script the difference is only one letter בתחלה versus בהתחלה. The two words in medieval Hebrew are more or less synonyms; nonetheless, in this context their meanings are opposite. The reader should recall the fact that Ibn Tibbon’s Hebrew translation makes Maimonides contrast the meanings of tehilla and reshit in Biblical Hebrew. The former means rishon, ‘first’ signifying a merely temporal consequence without causal relationship, whereas the later means hathala ‘principle’ referring to a causal subsequence. The following table may orient the reader:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Arabic</th>
<th>Tibbonide Hebrew</th>
<th>Biblical Hebrew</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘first’</td>
<td>awwal</td>
<td>rishon</td>
<td>tehilla</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘principle’</td>
<td>mabda’</td>
<td>hathala</td>
<td>reshit</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Thus in the textus receptus Maimonides says, “In a principle [= in a causal subsequence] God created…” while in Eleazar’s quotation he says, “First [= in a merely temporal subsequence] God created…” In other words, Eleazar’s reading turns the meaning of the sentence into its opposite.

At first sight it seems that Eleazar’s variant must be a textual corruption. In the quoted paragraph Maimonides argues that be-reshit means ‘in a principle’ not ‘first.’ Therefore in Eleazar’s text the last sentence is obviously inconsistent with the previous sentence. Maimonides suddenly changes his position and claims the opposite what he was arguing for before. It is justified to call this a flaw in the argument. But it is more convenient to suppose a corruption in the text. Therefore the hathala of the textus receptus is to be preferred to Eleazar’s tehilla.

\(^{442}\) MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 166 v.

\(^{443}\) Berliner read beli taam in MS Vat. ebr. 249; cf. his “Super-Commentare zu Abraham Ibn Ezra,” 146.
However, as we have seen, the Arabic original of GP contains a similar “flaw” in the wording. Maimonides unexpectedly uses the word *bad’a* which is derived from the same root as *mabda’*. Nevertheless, it cannot mean ‘principle;’ it definitely refers to temporal beginning and can be translated as “originally” or “first” or even “in the beginning.” This semantic field was associated with *awwal / tehilla* before. Thus, the Arabic original of GP also seems to be inconsistent.

Therefore, seen from the perspective of the Arabic original, Eleazar’s reading definitely has some justification. The relationship between Hebrew *tehilla* and *hathala* is analogous to the relationship between Arabic *mabda’* and *bad’a*. Both words are derived from the same root and the meaning though similar in general is different in one respect: *hathala* is a possible term for elements whereas *tehilla* is not. The same is true of Arabic *mabda’* and *bad’a*.

It is possible that Eleazar could read GP in the Arabic original and corrected the textus receptus accordingly. It is also possible that Eleazar’s reading does represent the original, authentic text of Ibn Tibbon’s translation which was later changed by copyists attempting to eliminate an apparent terminological inconsistency from the text. Needless to say, the solution of the problem needs further manuscript studies that I am unable to carry out presently.

The supercommentator credits Aristotle with the view that the world is “a necessary existent” (*mehuyyab ha-metsiut*), whereas according to a rival view “God is cause [il]a and the world is caused [alul].” This sentence can be interpreted in two ways. The world is a necessary existent – that is to say, its existence follows necessarily from the existence of God. It is caused by God but not created by divine free will. Maimonides attributes this view to Aristotle; it is convenient to suppose that Eleazar learned the lesson from GP. On the other hand, in this case we have to interpret the Hebrew words *ila* and *alul* as “a cause by free will” and “something caused by free will.”

This interpretation of the terms *ila* and *alul* seems to be far fetched. I am not aware of the existence of any proof for such a special use of these words. Therefore it seems to me more probable that Eleazar has in mind a Farabian-Averroan interpretation of Aristotle, not an Avicennan-Maimonidean one. In the former Aristotle is made to teach that the world does exist independently of God. The First Cause is only responsible for the movement of the heavenly bodies, but not for their very existence. Thus the world is a necessary existent in a stronger sense: it is necessary since its existence does not depend on any cause. Avicenna criticized severely the Christian disciples of Al-Farabi in Baghdad, most notably Abu Bishr Matta, for holding this view. Refuting their views Avicenna formulated his famous contingency argument for the existence of God: the world could not *exist* without God.445 Eleazar’s text reads better if we suppose that he had this controversy in mind, not the one appearing in Maimonides’ GP. This is a very remarkable, unexpected fact.

In MS Vat. ebr. 249 a further note is added to the explanation: “as I find in the epitome of the Almagest” according to a publication by Berliner.446 The reference is certainly to al-Fargani’s astronomical compendium that was translated into Hebrew by Jacob Anatoli.447 However, the phrase is missing from the manuscript; Berliner’s transcription is incorrect.

Eleazar’s comment ends with a note on temporal and spatial uses of the Hebrew preposition *be*- (*in*). This shows that he did not interpret the grammatical term *be”t ha-keli* as “instrumental ‘in’.” His decision might have been motivated by his Arabic knowledge and

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444 In a lemma of Moses of Salerno’s commentary on GP II, 30 (written around 1250-1260) the reading *bi-thilla bara h’ ha-elyonim ve-ha-tahtonim* indeed appears although Maimonides’ text within the same manuscript is in accordance with the textus receptus (MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 687, fol. 220 r).
447 Cf. Moritz Steinschneider, HÜ, 554-556.
consulting the original of GP where Maimonides does not use any grammatical term but simply says “Hebrew be- [preposition] corresponds to Arabic fi.” It is certainly more natural to take Arabic fi in a spatio-temporal rather than instrumental sense.

Thus, Eleazar was probably of the opinion that Maimonides assigned a sort of temporal sense to the be- of be-reshit. God created the world in a moment some finite time ago, though this moment did not exist independently of the divine action itself (therefore creation did not take place “in time” in the same sense as e.g. the Olympic Games in 2004 did).

Eleazar comments also on the last sentence of the passage quoted from Ibn Ezra:

AND THE SENSE WILL BE EXPLAINED TO YOU IN THE SECOND VERSE. This is what he says: “In the beginning of the creation of the firmament and the dry land there was no inhabitant on the earth since it was covered [with water – ki hi hayta mekussa].” In his opinion light was created on the first day, and it is one matter, a transparent hyle and both heaven and earth was contained in it, and on the second day the firmament was made and the earth was uncovered.

Unlike Caspi, Eleazar quotes verbatim Ibn Ezra’s paraphrase from his comment on Gen 1:2 with a minor difference from the textus receptus. Moreover he tries to reconstruct briefly Ibn Ezra’s view on what happened on the first day. His words closely follow two passages from Ibn Ezra on the topic. Nonetheless the comment is not dispensable since the two passages in questions are far from each other and from the present passage in Ibn Ezra’s commentary. A “naïve” inexperienced reader might confront very serious difficulties in finding out Ibn Ezra’s actual interpretation from his scattered notes.

The two sources on which Eleazar’s interpretation is founded are the following. At the end of the comment on Genesis 1:1 Ibn Ezra writes:

In my opinion these heaven and earth [i.e. the ones referred to in Genesis 1:1] are the firmament and the dry land since only one thing was created every day: On the first day – light; on the second – the firmament; on the third – the vegetation; on the fourth – the shining bodies; on the fifth and sixth – the living souls. The aforementioned psalm [i.e. Psalm 104] is the proof for this.

Now it is impossible that the circle exists before its centre or vice versa. Therefore they [i.e. the talmudic rabbis] say that heaven and earth was created at the same time […]

The second source is to be found in Ibn Ezra’s comment on Gen 1:3: “And God said, Let there be light! And there was light.”

And this light is situated above the “wind [ruah].”

From Ibn Ezra’s commentary on Gen 1:2 we learn that the phrase ruah elohim (“the spirit of God”) refers to a wind sent by God to dry up the inhabited land covered by water (tohu va-bohu) at the beginning of creation. This wind was above the water covering the surface of earth.

On the basis of this information Eleazar reconstructs Ibn Ezra’s opinion. Ruah is situated over water. Water is situated over earth. “Light” mentioned in Gen 1:3 is situated over ruah. This light was created on the first day. Therefore this light can hardly be anything

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448 His reading is ki hi hayta instead of the vulgate ki hayta.
else than what Maimonides calls “elementary fire”: a transparent material that encircles the three other elements – air (ruah), water, and earth – capable of receiving and transmitting the light of the heavenly bodies; hence the name “light.”

Now this sphere of transparent body was “created” in one sense or other of the word on the first day when “heaven”, i.e. the air separating the upper waters and lower waters (“firmament”), and “earth,” i.e. inhabited land still did not emerge out of elementary water and earth. The firmament and the inhabited land were “created” only in the second day. Consequently, Ibn Ezra paraphrases the beginning of the creation-story as “In the beginning of God’s creating the firmament and the dry land, earth was [still] covered by water.”

**Figure 1: Eleazar’s interpretation of Ibn Ezra on Gen 1:1-5**

The reader can observe that such a brief and apparently simple comment on Ibn Ezra can be the result of a rather complicated series of intellectual operations.

Enunciative Functions

The primary referents that appear in these statements are ‘opinions,’ such as the opinion of Aristotle, the opinion of Maimonides, the opinion of Ibn Ezra. It is possible to distinguish another set of objects that function as the building blocks of the “opinions:” the Hebrew word be-reshit and its sense; the universe, and God.

The subjective position assumed by the author can be called ‘the advocate of authorities.’ Eleazar speaks on behalf of Ibn Ezra, Maimonides, and Aristotle and refrains to separate his own voice from the voice of the authorities in this passage. The “opinions” of the authorities are represented by the ‘advocate’ who bring them together into one discursive space. Needless to say, the historical Aristotle probably never had the intention to contradict the biblical creation narrative, nor did the biblical writer formulate Genesis 1:1 with the intention to refute Aristotle; however, in Eleazar’s text “Aristotle’s” opinion concerns the same topic as the biblical statement; they are comparable to each other, they are commeasurable, differences and similarities can be pointed out, and their claims can be evaluated against each other.

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449 Although there is no explicit reference to Maimonides neither to the very term “elementary fire.”
In this way a theoretical surface is constructed by Eleazar onto which several opinions can be projected and where the opinions become comparable to each other. This theoretical surface can be identified as the general enunciative field of the statements: a “space” where they exist together.

The repeatable materiality of the statements is complex. The “projection” to the theoretical surface means transformation in terms of repeatable materiality: long texts are summarized into short theorems applying a technical vocabulary that is not necessarily the same as in the original texts. “Aristotle’s” opinion is reproduced by a concept that he actually never used in this context (“necessarily existence”) and Genesis 1:1 is reformulated in Aristotelian conceptual language.

By transforming the statements and making them inhabit the same theoretical surface Eleazar actually invents a theme of ‘creation’ or ‘origins of the universe.’ It is not obvious and not necessary by itself that a discussion about the origin of the universe should be connected to such topics as the semantics of the Hebrew preposition be- or even the meaning of the Hebrew word be-reshit. Christian or Muslim theologians could invent themes of creation that were not related to the particular problems of Hebrew semantics.

Eleazar’s theme of creation can be modeled as a “cultural field” where objects of Hebrew linguistics can co-exist with objects of natural philosophy, metaphysics, and monotheistic theology.540 Eleazar tries to unfold the implications of his sources relevant to this theme; the statements are “moved” or “translocated” to that cultural field.

It is this cultural field (the “theme” creation) where such objects as “Aristotle’s opinion,” “the Bible’s opinion,” “the Bible’s opinion according to Ibn Ezra / Maimonides” are located. Just like a mathematician abstracts the inessential corporeal features of sensual perception in order to arrive at ‘circle’ as a Euclidean object, Eleazar abstracts from those aspects of his sources that are not relevant for the topic of creation. This is not to say that the “umbilical cord” of these objects to the actual texts from which they are abstracted are cut completely: the texts, even if not quoted or referred to, remain in the background and can offer further starting points for abstraction.

A similar process of abstraction can be observed concerning Eleazar’s interpretation of Ibn Ezra’s paraphrase of Genesis 1:1. A model is extracted from Ibn Ezra’s text that is capable of being represented in the form of a diagram (see figure 1).

To sum up, the repeatable materiality of Eleazar’s statements can be called “paraphrase:” a term that implies change, for example, conceptualization and condensation, but, on the other hand, it also implies the idea of subordination to an original text. The original Aristotle, Maimonides, etc. are not replaced completely by the paraphrase: they can exercise a critical function over the paraphrase (is it faithful enough?) and they can be the starting point of alternative paraphrases.

This category applies even to the verbatim quotation from Maimonides. Although as a literary genre it is not paraphrase, but verbatim quotation, as a type of repeatable materiality,
it is paraphrase, since it depends on an original document that has a critical function over it. Even if a quotation is verbatim a critic may object that this is not the relevant quotation or the beginning and the end should be elsewhere, and then the whole passage would read differently etc. Moreover, a gloss added at the end of the text (about the grammatical term be ’t ha-keli) modifies the statement made by the quoted text: it excludes, for example, to interpret be- as an instrumental preposition in the way Narboni and others understood Maimonides (see above). The verbatim quotation functions in the same way as the short summaries.

Discursive Practices

We can observe in this short text an intricate process of constructing discursive objects. First, there is a textual level, a field of co-textuality that is divided into authors, such as Aristotle, Maimonides, etc. and titles, such as The Guide of the Perplexed, etc. These units, namely the authors and the titles, are non-conceptual. Their unity is based on non-conceptual cohesions, analogous to the unity of the body or the flesh. The field of co-textuality has a “flesh” in Merleau-Ponty’s sense of the word: the texts that make up the units (authors and titles) interfere with each other, because they use the same or similar words, phrases, arguments and talking about the same or similar referents.

Thus, the initial unity of the ‘authors’ and ‘titles’ is blurred by the “flesh” of the texts themselves: it requires special intellectual efforts to sort out in which ways the ‘authors’ and ‘titles’ agree with each other and in which ways they differ. This work is necessary for the subjective position “advocate” to individualize the voices of the authors: Aristotle cannot be simply the name of an agglomeration of texts; he has to be the holder of certain opinions, more or less consistent with each other. In other words, constructing discursive objects, such as “Aristotle’s opinion” includes a replacement of the initial, non-conceptual unity of an ‘author’ or a ‘title’ with a transparent, conceptualized unity, which is no longer a contingent unity of texts that happen to coexist under the same title or happen to be ascribed to the same human person but which is the unity of a theory, or approach, or style of thinking. “Aristotle” translocated from the co-textual to the thematic field is no longer the name of a human person who lived in the fourth century BCE but a catchword for a certain style in thinking.

The objects of the thematic field are partly enlaced and partly exclude each other. No matter what the correct interpretation of the terms ila and alul is on the level of the proposition, it is clear that their function on the level of the statement is to exclude “Aristotle’s opinion”. And the point of ascribing the concept “necessary existent” to Aristotle is to exclude the Biblical/Maimonidean idea of creation. However, the objects are not completely fixed either. It is not always clear what is the difference, if any, between the Bible’s opinion, Maimonides’ opinion and Ibn Ezra’s opinion, although it is clear enough that Ibn Ezra and Maimonides are not in complete agreement and consequently, the Bible’s opinion cannot agree with both of them. Eleazar’s text is open to various interpretations on the level of the proposition and to further specifications on the level of the statement. Thus the thematic field also has its “flesh” that requires further conceptualization.

This conceptualization is strikingly limited within the passage quoted from Eleazar. I will examine the forming of the concept “necessarily existent” in this context. This concept is likely to appear in two types of statements that measure and evaluate reality: the first does it in terms of temporal endurance, and the second in terms of the dependence versus independence of existence often expressed in the form of counter-factual conditionals (“the world would exist even if there was no God”). Such statements establish a hierarchy of things. This hierarchy is the place where a concept like ‘necessarily existent’ can be formed. The
criteria of application concern these two types of statements (what exists for ever is a
necessarily existent and/or what exists independently is a necessarily existent).

The primary field of presence of this concept is Aristotelian metaphysics; however, in
Eleazar’s text, it is made to co-exist with statements of Hebrew grammar, biblical exegesis,
and Jewish theology. The concept functions at the intersection of these fields. The
interpretation of the Hebrew word be-reshit in Genesis 1:1 in Ibn Ezra and in Maimonides has
implications concerning the temporal endurance and ontological dependence of the world.
This is how the concept “necessarily existent” happens to enter the field of Hebrew grammar
and biblical exegesis.

And finally, there is a procedure of intervention which is theological in nature.
‘Eternal endurance’ and ‘ontological independence’ are taken as divine properties. It belongs
to God to exist for ever and by Himself. Consequently, the statement “the world is a
necessarily existent” amounts to a deification of the world which is intolerable in
monotheistic theological discourse. Such a statement in monotheistic theology can be
formulated only in a field of memory, only as belonging to a pagan philosophical discourse
that contradicts some of the basic tenets of monotheistic theology and cannot be valid without
further specifications and other transformations.

This is the 'system of formation’ that operates in Eleazar’s conceptualizing Aristotle’s
“opinion” by attributing the statement “the world exists out of necessity” to him. We have
seen that the propositional content of the statement can be interpreted in more than one ways
and it is not clear which of interpretations, if any of them, was actually Eleazar’s intention.
However, these differences do not affect the description of the discursive practices. All the
alternatives could emerge within the framework of a single ‘system of formation.’
Chapter 3: Sen Bonet de Lunel / Avvat Nefesh

A different line of interpretation is evidenced in Bonet’s Avvat Nefesh:

AND SOME OTHERS SAY THAT THE ‘IN’ IS SUPERFLUOUS WITHOUT ANY SENSE [she-ha-be”t nosefet be-lo taam] ETC.: according to this exegetes the word [“beginning”] is not governed by anything and the ‘in’ is added superfluously and it is there to inform [the reader] that heaven and earth does have a beginning/principle [hathala].

The most remarkable aspect of this comment is the lemma itself. Bonet read nosefet be-lo taam instead of nose be-li/ke-li taam. His reading is not attested in Ibn Ezra manuscripts and other supercommentaries (independently of Bonet) as far as I can judge it today. It is possible that he emended the text although it is a bit strange that he does not recommend explicitly the proposed correction like, for example, Caspi did.

Due to Bonet’s different reading, the sense of be’’t ha-keli is not discussed in this comment neither Maimonides’ opinion in GP II, 30. However, that does not mean that Bonet is unwilling to use the occasion for expounding his ideas concerning this important chapter of the Guide. After finishing his supercommentary on Genesis 1:1 Bonet quotes Maimonides’ opinion from GP II, 30 and comments extensively on it. This part of his work has been incorporated into Asher Crescas’ commentary on the Guide. For the sake of convenience I will summarize Bonet’s interpretation in the next section.

In the continuation of the paragraph Bonet outlines briefly Ibn Ezra’s general strategy in interpreting the creation-story:

He said: MY OWN OPINION IS THAT IT IS GOVERNED BY ETC.: The sage [Ibn Ezra] means that Scripture speaks explicitly only about [the creation of] sensible things. And the ‘heaven’ and the ‘earth’ mentioned in this verse are the ‘firmament’ that has been generated out of the air by the reflection of the radiation from the heavenly bodies, as he says, <THAT>: THE HEAT WAS REFLECTED AND THE FIRMAMENT WAS MADE. And the ‘earth’ is what was disclosed of it. Therefore he says [fol. 50 r] in the second verse that MOSES SPOKE ONLY ABOUT THE WORLD OF GENERATION AND DESTRUCTION. That is why he says that IT IS GOVERNED BY [the verb ‘to create’], as if [Scripture] said, “before God determined the borders of the firmament” – which are

451 I.e. not the beginning of something is at stake as in the other alternatives mentioned by Ibn Ezra.
452 MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 49 v.
454 hu nehefakh ha-lahat ve-naase raqia. The hu makes little sense in the quotation. It is possible that Jedaiah originally quoted a longer passage from Ibn Ezra: „[and this firmament] is the air [hu ha-avir] because as soon as the light became strong on the earth and the wind dried up the earth the heat was reflected, etc.” (Ibn Ezra on Gen 1:6) and the words between hu and nehefakh were omitted in textual transmission. MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 5 v reads hu nehefak la-lahat „it was transformed into heat and the firmament was made.” This variant probably reflects an attempt of a scribe to make sense out of the hu.
455 Ibn Ezra ad Gen 1:6.
456 This rather laconic remark is probably to be understood as “that part of the earth which is not covered with water.”
457 The quotation (ad Gen 1:2) is not exact. In Ibn Ezra the word for ‘destruction’ is hashtaha whereas in Jedaiah’s quotation it is hefsed. The latter is the Tibbonide term, which must have been natural for Jedaiah but not known to Ibn Ezra.
connected to the borders of the ocean, as he says in another place – “BECAUSE the whole earth WAS COVERED WITH WATER” as he says in the second verse.

Bonet’s interpretation of Ibn Ezra on the details of creation is similar to Eleazar ben Mattityah’s interpretation: creation of heaven and earth is a meteorological process: the wind and sunshine dry up the water from the surface of a part of the earth and the vapors entering the air form clouds – thus the atmosphere as we know it comes into being. The atmosphere is called ‘firmament’ and also ‘heaven;’ dry land is called ‘earth’ in the biblical narrative. (The differences between Bonet’s and Eleazar’s versions will be discussed in the next section.) Maimonides chose a different approach:

After having explained the intention of the sage, Abraham Ibn Ezra, and his interpretation of the topic we shall explain the perfect intention of Rabbi Moshe ben Maimon of blessed memory and his opinion concerning the creation of the world. So we say:

He means that the ‘heaven’ and ‘earth’ mentioned in this verse are the spheres and the element “earth.” Now since these two are created, everything what is in between must be created as well. And the word be-reshit is not governed by anything, and the preposition be- is not superfluous but has a meaning similar to be”t ha-keli as we shall explain. Now we shall cite his words from chapter thirty, part two of his magnificent book and we shall explain it according to the capacity of our intellect.

Bonet does not say that the ‘in’ of “in the beginning” is instrumental / temporal ‘in’ but that it is similar to it. This distinction is based on a minor feature of Ibn Tibbon’s Hebrew translation: “the ‘in’ is like an instrumental/spatio-temporal ‘in’ [ke-be”t ha-keli].” In the next section we shall see the significance of this for Bonet’s interpretation.

In his own comment on the creation narrative Bonet prefers Maimonides’ interpretation of Genesis 1: 1 to Ibn Ezra’s one.

Bonet on the First Moment of Creation

Bonet’s long commentary on the first paragraph of GP II, 30 is printed in the “Warsawa” edition of the Guide as a part of Asher Crescas’ commentary with minor variants from the manuscript text. Therefore I will only summarize the main points and quote only a couple of key passages.

Bonet rejects the “standard” interpretations of GP II, 30. By a “standard interpretation of GP II, 30” I mean an interpretation that is based on the assumption that Maimonides identifies the meaning of reshit in Genesis 1: 1 as ‘principle.’ (Thus, the interpretation outlined above in the introduction to the present part is also a “standard” one.) Maimonides starts the discussion in GP II, 30 by contrasting the concepts of ‘principle’ and ‘first.’ He continues by claiming that the Biblical Hebrew word reshit means ‘principle,’ whereas the word for ‘first’ is tehilla. Therefore, it seems self-evident that be-reshit in Genesis 1: 1 must have meant ‘in a principle’ for Maimonides.

This interpretation is challenged in Bonet’s supercommentary. He pays lip-service to Maimonides’ text by admitting that Maimonides interpreted be-reshit as ‘in a principle.’

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458 Exceptionally the reading of Vat. ebr. 54 (hu) is better than Vat. ebr. 104 (hine) in this case.
459 MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 49v-50r.
460 MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 50 r.
However, in a good scholastic fashion he claims that ‘principle’ has to be understood in a very special way in this context.

Building on a nuance of expression in Maimonides’ text Bonet establishes two types of ‘principles’ (hathalot). Maimonides wrote: “A ‘principle’ exists either in the very things which it is the principle of or with the thing.” Thus it seems Maimonides introduces a distinction between principles ‘with’ the things and principles ‘in’ the things. This theme is not developed further in the Guide. Bonet takes on himself the task of expounding the Master’s opinion. He will show that be-reshit refers neither to a ‘principle in the thing’ nor to a ‘principle with the thing’ but to a third sense of principle that he calls a ‘principle for the thing.’

Heart is a principle of animals that is situated in the animals. Similarly the foundation [yesod] is a principle of the building and it is also ‘in’ the building. It is easy to find examples for the first type of principles. What about the second type?

And when he [Maimonides] says OR WITH THE THING he means that there are beings that are principles and causes of [other] things but even if they are causes of the things they are not parts of them. For example, the sun is not a part of the day, since day is a certain part of time and the sun is not a part of the time but it causes/makes that part of time that is called ‘day.’ And it is not prior to it in time [i.e. the sun to day] although it is its cause since as soon as it starts [to shine] on the horizon it is called day.

Bonet argues that God needed no ‘principle’ in order to create the world. He was not helped by anything in creation neither by a principle that was part of the world or by a principle that existed with the world.

In Bonet’s eyes it is evident that Maimonides must have been of the same opinion. When Maimonides writes (in Ibn Tibbon’s translation): “the world was not created in a temporal principle [hathala zemanit],” he meant by this that time or a temporal extension was not a principle of creation besides God in any of these two senses of the word ‘principle:

“And the world was not created in a temporal principle,” that is to say, that time should be a principle and a cause of the world either as (1) a principle that is part of the thing it is the principle of not preceding it in time as far as it acts as a principle as is the case with the heart that is a principle of the animal or with the foundation that is a principle of the building as has been explained or (2) that time should be a principle for a thing without being a part of it but being together with it and not preceding it in time as far as it acts as a principle in the way [fol. 51 r] we have explained the rising of the sun at daylight. In these cases time would be prior in existence to the other parts of the world.

The alternative interpretation, namely, that creation took place in a “temporal principle” is rejected since it implies the pre-existence of time, which in turn implies the pre-existence of the heavenly bodies. Bonet recapitulates the argument that we encountered already in Ibn Ezra and Maimonides.

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461 Jedaiah – just like many medieval commentators mislead by Ibn Tibbon’s translation – misunderstands here Maimonides’ original example. Maimonides talks about an element that is both a part and a principle of a thing that is composed of it – he uses an Arabic word that is ultimately derived from Greek stoikheion. Ibn Tibbon used the Hebrew word yesod (meaning ‘foundation’ in Biblical Hebrew) as a terminus technicus for ‘element.’ However, many commentators took the word in its Biblical meaning in the present context.

462 MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 50 v. This example is repeated almost verbatim in Profiat Duran (“Efodi”)’s commentary and Shem Tov’s commentary on GP as well. See the “Warsawa” edition.
A novelty is that he tries to make an implicit premise of Maimonides explicit. If the “beginning” is a “temporal principle” i.e. a temporal extension, then time precedes creation, says Maimonides according to Bonet. Now the question is in what sense time precedes creation. Bonet does not say that time must have existed before the process of creation started. So in his interpretation the point of Maimonides’ argument is not to exclude the possibility that the creative act was “bracketed” by time, as a “standard” interpretation would suggest. He rather argues that if time is a “principle” of creation, then time has an ontological primacy over the creative act. In other words, the temporal principle in which creation takes places cannot be the object of the creative act itself. It must be an uncreated existent. Bonet makes Maimonides argue that the existence of an uncreated temporal principle implies the existence of uncreated heaven. This is why the “beginning” of Genesis 1:1 cannot refer to a temporal principle.

And if we suppose that the creation of the world takes place in such a way, I mean, in a temporal principle, namely, that time would be prior in existence to the rest of the things, then the [doctrine of] eternity could not be avoided since time is the counting of the ‘before’ and ‘after’ of motion and it does not posses a separate reality independently of motion. And as for motion, it has no reality except in the moved object what “makes” it. From this it follows that as soon as we suppose time, there is also motion and the moved object, so the spheres and everything contained by them will be eternal. <and he escapes> This is the doctrine of Aristotle and not the doctrine of our Torah/religion, I mean, that everything is created [mehuddash]. This is the teaching of the sage [Maimonides] when he says that “the world was not created in temporal principle” since time belongs to the number of created things, that is to say, it was created when the spheres were created.

The key element of Maimonides’ position – according to Bonet’s interpretation – is the statement that the world was created in one moment, in the first moment of time. Moment is a ‘principle’ of time – hence the word be-reshit in the Bible – without being a part of time. Therefore, Maimonides is justified in saying that the world has no temporal beginning in a sense (since it was not created in a part of time); nonetheless, Maimonides honestly believed that the past time of the universe was finite.

In fact, the Hebrew word hathala (meaning ‘principle’ in Ibn Tibbon’s translation of GP II, 30) is interpreted by Bonet in a very special way. It means “principle” not in the sense of ‘cause’ or ‘element’ but in the sense of ‘start’ or ‘beginning.’ However, this ‘start’ or ‘beginning’ is not the same type of precedence in time that is explicitly rejected by Maimonides in GP II, 30 as a possible sense of be-reshit. (“If this house is inhabited first by A and then by B, then A precedes B in time.”) Bonet discovers a further type of precedence that cannot be deduced from the types of precedence we have encountered so far.

He attributes this third sense to the Hebrew word hathala when he interprets Maimonides’ statement according to which be-reshit means be-hathala. God created the world in a principle; Bonet admits that this is Maimonides’ opinion; however the reader should be careful not to take the word “principle” for “cause” or “element.” There is a third sense of “principle” and Maimonides has this third sense in mind according to Bonet.

In order to express his ideas in a net way Bonet invents a terminological device to make difference between the several types of principles. He calls hathala qaviit, ‘linear principle,’ what is part of a line. He denies that point is a “linear principle” since it is no part

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463 Reading naniah with MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 6 r against ad of MS Vat. ebr. 104.
464 This phrase (ve-yirdof) makes hardly any sense although testified by all the mss known to me.
465 MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 51 r.
of the line but he maintains that point is a “principle for the line” (hathala la-qav). The second formula does not imply that point is a part of line. It only means that a point is the border, the “beginning” or the “end” of a line.

What is even more important, if my interpretation is correct, is that the relationship between the line and its first point is the paradigm of the third type of “principle” in Bonet’s thought. I believe Bonet was lead by the following considerations or similar ones not made explicit in his text: The first point of the line does not add anything to the length of the line. It does not “precede” the line in the dimension of length. The distance between the first point and the rest of the line is zero. Thus the first point does not precede the rest of the line in space.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hebrew name</th>
<th>English name</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>hathala 1</td>
<td>principle in the thing</td>
<td>Both a cause and a part of the thing.</td>
<td>heart, elements, foundations of buildings, etc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hathala 2</td>
<td>principle with the thing</td>
<td>A cause without being a part of the thing.</td>
<td>the Sun producing daytime</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hathala 3</td>
<td>principle for the thing</td>
<td>The beginning of a continuum (being neither a cause nor a part of the thing and having no temporal or spatial precedence to it).</td>
<td>the first point of a line, the first moment of time.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rishon</td>
<td>“first”</td>
<td>Pure temporal precedence.</td>
<td>“This house was inhabited first by A and then by B.”</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Therefore, the first point has a very special precedence to the rest of the line. It is not “before” the rest of the line as a part of a line can be “before” another part. Nor is it a cause or an element of the line that generates it or composes it. Thus a separate category has to be invented for the precedence of the first point. This is what Bonet calls hathala la-qav, ‘principle for line.’

The same considerations can be made concerning moment and time. The first moment does not precede the rest of the time in time. Zero temporal extension passes between the first moment and the rest of the time. Therefore, the first moment has no temporal precedence to the rest of time – no matter how paradoxically this might sound. It cannot be assimilated to the case of A’s staying first in the house preceding B’s stay where a temporal extension separates the two stays. Moreover, the first moment is neither a cause nor an element of time. Therefore, it is a perfect candidate, at least in Bonet’s opinion, for being an orthodox interpretation of be-reshit. If be-reshit means ‘in the first moment’ then both the Scylla and Charybdis of interpreting Genesis 1: 1 is avoided: creation does not precede the world in time, nor does it require a pre-existent principle besides God.

Following the analogy between point / line and moment / time Bonet claims that moment is a principle for time [hathala la-zeman] but it is not a temporal principle [hathala zemanit]. It is very difficult to render these phrases into English; a term like pre-Socratic arkhe should be used for hathala. In fact, it is more convenient to translate hathala la-zeman as “beginning of time,” for this is what Bonet actually means:
And the sage [Maimonides] says that the be- of be-reshit is like a be”t keli since the world was not created in a temporal principle [hathala zemanit] as we have explained above. On the contrary, it was created in a moment that is a principle / beginning for time [hathala la-zeman] but not a part of time, just like the point [fol. 51 v] is not a linear principle but a principle / beginning for line. This is why he says, “In a principle / In the beginning [ba-hathala] [God] created the upper things and the lower things.” That is to say, within a principle / the beginning – that is a principle for time – everything was created simultaneously. […] This is why he says, “In the principle God created…” that is to say, in a thing that is a principle for time – i.e. moment – not in a part of time – i.e. temporal beginning/principle [hathala zemanit].

Bonet anticipates a possible objection against his interpretation. ‘Moment’ is defined in Aristotelian natural philosophy as a border between past and future, or in other words, “the end of past and the beginning of future.” Therefore, if we claim that the world was created in a moment, i.e. in a “border” between past and future, then we also imply by this the pre-existence of the past time that preceded the moment of creation. The moment of creation was not only the beginning of future. It must have been the end of a certain past time as well. Thus, it seems, Bonet’s own proposal is by no means better than the rejected alternative. It also implies the pre-existence of time, and consequently, the pre-existence of the heavenly bodies.

Bonet offers a simple solution. The Aristotelian definition of moment should not be applied to the moment of creation in a mechanic way. The fundamental analogy between the relationship of lines and points on the one hand and time and moment on the other hand is a more relevant idea of Aristotle in the present context. There are finite lines that start with a particular, first point. Due to the analogy between lines/points and time/moment nothing prohibits us to suppose the existence of a finite time beginning with a first moment that is a beginning of a future without being the end of any past. Maimonides (according to Bonet) claims that the time of the universe is comparable to such a line.

There is a further possible objection not pointed out and not answered explicitly by Bonet; although, as we shall see, both the objection and the answer are clearly indicated in the text. The problematic aspect of the rejected alternative (“in the beginning” as temporal principle) was the fact that it presupposed the independent existence of the time in which creation took place. In other words, the temporal principle of the creative act cannot be the object of the creative act itself. This assumption lead to the absurd conclusions that time must have been uncreated, and consequently, heaven must have been uncreated too. Now the same line of argument can be applied to Bonet’s “first moment.” Can the first moment in which God created the universe be itself an object of the same creative act? Or rather God created the first moment “before” the rest of the universe? Or is the first moment uncreated? This would mean that there was something besides God participating in creation – a conclusion that was to be avoided according to most Jewish theologians.

Bonet’s implicit reply to this objection can be learned from his discussion concerning the notorious be”t ha-keli in GP II, 30.
According to the grammarians the preposition ‘in’ [be"t] has two senses: spatio-temporal ‘in’ [be"t ha-keli] and instrumental ‘in’ [be"t ha-ezer]. Spatio-temporal ‘in’ is [used] when something is to be found inside something else, and it is said that the container is a ‘pot’ [keli] for the contained thing, for example, when we say that the wine is in the barrel.

[...]

We also have to explain why [Maimonides] used the word “similar” when he said, “[the ‘in’ of “in the beginning] is similar to spatio-temporal ‘in’ [ke-be"t ha-keli] instead of saying simply, “it is spatio-temporal ‘in.’”

So we say:

The sage means that everything was created in a moment as have been explained. And his saying, “it is similar to spatio-temporal ‘in,’” – namely, [the ‘in’ of] “in the beginning” – alludes to the moment everything was created in, I mean, inside of it. And it cannot be an instrumental ‘in’ that God would have been helped by it as an artisan is helped by the instruments [keli] of his art. The Name – blessed be He – is not helped by any instrument [keli]! And he [Maimonides] says, “similar to” and does not say “it is temporal ‘in’” [be"t keli] because moment has no reality except in time, and it is not apprehended except in the intellect [ka-assher ha-atta en lo meciut ki im ba-zeman ve-lo yussag ki im ba-sekhel]. Now, had he said “it is temporal ‘in’” he would have implied by this that [moment] belonged to the parts of time. As if [Scripture] said, “in a day” or “in an hour God created heaven and earth.” In order to avoid this misunderstanding he used the word “similar to” and said “similar to be"t ha-keli” instead of “it is be"t ha-keli.”

The last paragraph might seem a bit complicated at first sight. In fact, Bonet is making a simple point here although in condense and slightly enigmatic way. The argument can be summarized in the following way:

(1) What exists “in” time is usually taken to be a part of time; that is to say, a temporal ‘in’ usually refers to a part of time.
(2) Moment is no part of time.
(3) Therefore an ‘in’ referring to a moment does not refer to a part of time.
(4) Consequently an ‘in’ referring to a moment is not a temporal ‘in’ taken in the usual sense.
(5) The ‘in’ of “in the beginning” (Gen 1: 1) refers to a moment.
(6) Therefore the ‘in’ of “in the beginning” is not a temporal ‘in’ taken in the usual sense.
(7) This is why Maimonides says, “it is like temporal ‘in’” instead of saying “it is temporal ‘in.’”

However, this reconstruction of the argument fails to account for the role of an interesting segment of the text: “moment has no reality except in time and it is not apprehended except in the intellect.” What is the meaning of this clause? And what is its function within the argument?

I think, Bonet is influenced here by the preceding sentences of the text: “And it cannot be an instrumental ‘in’ that God would have been helped by it as an artisan is helped by the instruments [keli] of his art. The Name – blessed be He – is not helped by any instrument [keli]!”

470 MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 51 r.
471 MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 52 r.
The Hebrew word *keli* is used twice in these sentences in the sense ‘instrument.’ After all, the ambiguity of the grammatical term *be’er ha-keli* that we have already pointed out many times in this chapter is by no ways a pure chance. *Keli* can mean both ‘container’ [lit. ‘pot’ or ‘dish’] and ‘instrument’ in Hebrew; therefore, *be’er ha-keli* can be interpreted as “spatio-temporal ‘in’” and “instrumental ‘in’” respectively. But pots and dishes and other containers are instruments: they are used for containing and preserving things. If God created the world in time, that is to say, if a temporal extension was a sort of container for the divine creative act, then God was “helped by an instrument,” namely, by time, in his creative act. This is exactly the conclusion that Maimonides wants to exclude by denying that creation took place in a temporal extension according to Bonet.

The following passage of Averroes’ *Middle Commentary on Physics* in Kalonymos ben Kalonymos’ Hebrew translation (second decade of the fourteenth century) is quite illuminating:

In Averroes’ imagery ‘to be in time’ seems to imply ‘to be encompassed by the heaven.’ One should imagine time as a real existent that is inherent in the heaven, for time is an accident of the movement of the heavenly bodies. Had Maimonides said, “the ‘in’ of ‘in the beginning’ is a temporal in” he would have implied by this that God indeed used a ‘container’ or an ‘instrument’ [*keli*] for creating the world, namely the heaven, that contains what is in time similarly to a pot’s containing water or some other material. In Bonet’s opinion the point of the qualification “like a temporal ‘in’” is to exclude this interpretation: whatever the phrase *be-reishit* means it does not imply the pre-existence of a “container” helping God in creation.

Therefore, Bonet had to point out that by saying “God created the world in the first moment” it is not implied that the “first moment” is a “container,” a *keli*, of creation. I think this is exactly the task assigned to the clause “moment has no reality except in time and it is not apprehended except in the intellect.” Bonet’s point is that the first moment of creation is not a real container and not a real existent at all.

Therefore, Bonet’s implicit answer to the question “when did God create the first moment in which He created the world?” is probably that the question hardly makes any sense. God created real things with real accidents. The first moment is neither a real thing nor a real accident: it is conceived only in the mind. God did not have to create anything like “first moment” in order to create the world. Bonet’s remark about God’s not being helped by

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472 MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 942, fol. 75 v – 76 r.
473 Averroes distinguishes between time as existing outside of the mind and time as constructed by the human mind. Time as a consisting of past, present, and future is only a mental concept, because past and future does not exist simultaneously outside of the mind. However, in a “potential” or “material” way time would exist even if there were no human mind. The movement of the first heaven (“primum mobile”) is the measure of all other movements, this is why time is defined by Aristotle as the “number of the movement of the heaven.” As we shall see at the end of this section, Averroes insists that the word ‘number’ in the definition of time does not refer to abstract, mathematical entities but to numbers that are inherent in the physical reality. On Averroes’ theory of time see Udo Reinhold Jeck: *Aristoteles contra Augustinum: Zur Frage nach dem Verhältnis von Zeit und Seele bei dem antiken Aristoteleskommentatoren, im arabischen Aristotelismus und im 13. Jahrhundert* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: B. R. Grüner, 1994), 114-151.
anything in creation is obviously meant to exclude the possibility that the “first moment” would be any real existent besides God partaking in creation.

If this interpretation is correct then Bonet departed from that model of time that was usually assumed in post-Maimonidean Jewish philosophy. This becomes evident if we compare his interpretation of GP II, 30 to Moses Narboni’s interpretation of the same passage.

Narboni argues that “in the beginning” cannot mean “in the first moment” in Maimonides’ opinion. His argument is based on the definition of moment: it is the end of past and the beginning of future. Therefore the very idea of first moment is self-contradictory: a moment in the strict sense cannot be a “first” one. Therefore, it is not correct to say that creation took place in the beginning of time even if it is true that the divine act of creation involved the creation of the beginning of time [hathalat ha-zeman]:

Even if we suppose that the world was created all at once it is not possible that the word be-reshit would refer to the beginning of time, which is the [first] moment, for past time must have preceded it as has been explained from the definition of moment. And the moved object’s existence is prior to its being in the point that is the moment, not vice versa that the moment would be prior to the thing that generates time continuously in which [the moment] is generated. Therefore, the matter should be conceived in the following way: Time was created together with the creation of [other] creatures, and so the beginning of time was; nonetheless, [the creatures] were not created in temporal beginning. Understand this distinction.474

At first sight Narboni’s words seem to be inconsistent: he maintains that the first moment of time must have been preceded by past time (so how could it be the “beginning of time”?!?) but he maintains that the “beginning of time” was created together with the rest of the creatures. Nevertheless, the same point is repeated a couple of lines later:

And the beginning of time [tehillat ha-zeman] was created together with the creatures but the creatures were not created in temporal beginning [tehillat zemanit] which is the end of past and the beginning of future. Understand this for this is the [conclusion] the truth of which was desired [to be proved].475

It is assumed sometimes in the secondary literature that Narboni “esoterically” accepts the eternity of the world and his inconsistent words are meant to indicate this fact.476 I think there is no need for Straussian esotericism in order to understand Narboni’s point. The inconsistency is only an appearance; Narboni has in mind a simple argument.

Narboni has a premise that he tacitly assumes – and Bonet does not share the same premise as will be shown. To say that God created the world in a moment is to perceive creation as a natural process in Narboni’s opinion. What happens in a moment cannot be but a natural change. Aristotle has shown in the sixth book of his Physics that natural processes cannot start in a moment; they can only terminate in a moment. When we speak about the beginning of a natural process we mean by this in fact the end of a previous process that is a prerequisite of the former one. Thus the statement “Socrates started to live in the moment X” means in fact “the generation of Socrates terminated in the moment X.” If we say “an arrow started to fly at a certain moment” then we mean “the process putting all the parts of the arrow

474 Narboni on GP II, 30; Hebrew text from MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 699, fol. 94 v is printed in Maurice R. Hayoun: Moshe Narboni (Tübingen: J. C. B. Mohr (Paul Siebeck), 1986), 158-159 [38b-39a in Jacob Goldenthal’s old edition].
475 MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 699, fol. 95 r; printed in Hayoun, Moshe Narboni, 159 [Goldenthal, 39a].
into motion terminated at a certain moment.” Aristotle emphasizes that it is not possible to define the moment when the smallest part of an arrow started to be moved. Since time is intimately connected to change in Aristotle’s thought, moment is more emphatically an end of the past time than the beginning of the future in his theory.\(^{477}\) A moment must be the termination of a previous temporal extension.

Narboni’s position can be formalized in the following way:

1. If God created the world in the first moment / beginning of time then creation was a natural change.
2. A ‘moment’ of a natural change is always the end of a previous temporal extension (“past”) and the beginning of a subsequent one (“future”).
3. Therefore, if God created the world in the first moment then the first moment must have been preceded by time (and from this fact the eternity of the world can be inferred in the usual way).
4. Therefore, the statement “God created the world in the first moment” is self-contradictory and must be false.
5. Nonetheless, time did have a beginning, and this beginning was a moment. But God did not create the world in the first moment, for creation was no natural change; He rather created the first moment together with the rest of the creatures.

Moreover, Narboni points out the ontological inferiority of moment in the passage quoted already above:

And the moved object’s existence is prior to its being in the point that is the moment, not vice versa that the moment would be prior to the thing that generates time continuously in which [the moment] is generated.

In other words, we cannot say that the heaven was created in a moment because moments are ontologically inferior to the former: the existence of a moment depends on the existence of the heaven. A moment could not form the natural framework of such a great event as the birth of the world due to its ontological inferiority.

However, for Bonet such arguments were not conclusive. He did not refrain from interpreting be-reshit as “in the first moment.” He did not care about the “ontological inferiority” of moment. The proposition “in the first moment God created heaven and earth” did not imply for Bonet that creation was a natural process realized in the framework provided by time and the movement of the heavenly bodies. Narboni’s objection was valid only for temporal extensions: to suppose that God’s creating the world out of nothing took an hour was to imply the existence of an independent clock measuring the event. But the phrase “in a moment” obviously did not have the same implication for Bonet.

The reason for this is probably stated in the passage quoted above: “moment has no reality except in time and it is not apprehended except in the intellect.” In my opinion the easiest way for understanding Bonet’s position is to suppose that he has in mind an Ockhamist notion of time.\(^{478}\)

\(^{477}\) This is pointed out by Gersonides, Milhamot ha-Shem, VI, 1, 21, (ed. Leipzig, 1866), 389; cf. Charles Touati: La pensée philosophique et théologique de Gersonide (Paris: Les Editions de Minuit, 1974), 221-225.

In Ockham’s view ‘time’ is a connotative term that denotes the prime mobile (identified as the extreme sphere of the heaven) and connotes the soul’s activity of comparing changes of sub-lunar world to the positions taken by the Sun and other heavenly bodies on the sky. There is no need for supposing the existence of a real accident “time” or “moment” inhering in the heavenly bodies or in anything else. It can be explained how temporal expressions and statements concerning time can be true without the assumption of ‘moment’ or ‘time’ as real accidents.

Ockham applies his usual strategy of paraphrasing terms in order to prove that in fact, human beings do not name any object in the extra-mental world, which would be different from the heaven when they use the word “time”, or when they use temporal expressions. When I say, “Lucie cooked the diner for an hour,” I mean by this that the Sun was in a certain place on the sky when Lucie started her activity of cooking the diner and the Sun was in a different place when she accomplished her activity. Moreover I also imply that the distance between the two places roughly amounts to what is called “an hour” by human convention. But I do not mean by this that in the Sun or in Lucie or in the dinner there are real accidents like “moment,” “an hour,” or “time.”

“Moment” is paraphrased by Ockham as the Sun’s being in a certain place where it was not before and it will not be after when something is happening. “Lucie finished cooking in that moment” means that the Sun was here or there when Lucie finished here activity. “Moment” denotes the Sun itself and connotes Lucie’s activity. The sentence does not imply that the Sun or its being in a certain place were necessary prerequisites or causes for Lucie’s activity.

As for the first moment of creation Ockham provides the following paraphrase: “[…] nam secundum idem est dare instans quod non est finis praeteriti, id est, quandoque verum fuit dicere ‘tempus nunc est et prius non fuit’.”

For Narboni (and for many other Aristotelians) this statement must have appeared self-contradictory; “tempus nunc est” cannot but be equivalent to saying “a temporal extension is terminated just now.” If no time passed before the “nunc” then “tempus nunc est” is false. “Tempus nunc est et prius non fuit” is a patently absurd statement. In order to save the idea of creation Gersonides rather admits that there was no time at the first moment. However, for Ockham the existence of heaven at the first moment was sufficient for rendering the statement “tempus nunc est” true.

If we suppose that Bonet accepted Ockham’s theory then his position makes sense. “In the first moment God created heaven and earth” means that God created the heaven and the sub-lunar world out of nothing by divine free will. The phrase “moment” refers to the Sun’s being created by God in a certain place on the sky or, more precisely, to the fact that the

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480 William Ockham: *Brevis summa libri Physicorum* VIII, 1 cf. his *Opera Philosophica*, vol. 6, ed. Stephanus Brown (St. Bonaventure, NY: St. Bonaventure University, 1984), 120.

481 CF. Gersonides: *Milhamot ha-Shem*, VI, 1, 21; ed. (Leipzig, 1866), 386-387; cf. Charles Touati: *Gersonide*, 234. About Thomas Wylton (who wrote his commentary on Physics around 1304-1305 in Oxford) and Walter Burley (who wrote his commentary in the period 1324-1337) Cecilia Trifogli writes the following: “Wylton and Burley more generally maintain that for any successive thing there is no first or last instant in which such thing exists. Since time is a successive thing, the initial or final instant of a period of time plays no role in accounting for its existence.” (Trifogli, “The Case of Wylton and Burley,” 243.) Cf. also the following article from the same author: “Thomas Wylton’s Question ‘An contingit dare ultimum rei permanentis in esse,’” *Medieval Philosophy and Theology* 4 (1994): 91-141. I owe these references to Pavel Blažek (Philosophical Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences).
heavenly bodies were created in a certain arrangement. The adjective ‘first’ added to ‘moment’ signifies the fact that the sky did not exist before. The whole expression ‘first moment’ does not imply the existence of any cosmic framework determining God’s creative activity.

Narboni’s worry about the ontological inferiority of moment is also out of place: it is an error to think that the phrase “in the first moment God created the heaven” implies the existence of an extra-mental being called moment in which the creation of the heaven would be situated somehow. ‘Moment’ belongs more to human speech than to the ontology of extra-mental world.

On the other hand, “In an hour God created heaven and earth” would mean that the Sun passed from this place to that place while God created heaven and earth including the Sun. It is very difficult to tell how this sentence can make sense. If the creation of the heaven was accomplished only at the end of the first hour than how could it be measuring the process of its own creation? If it was created at the beginning of the first hour then it was created in the first moment. If it was not created at all, then the whole sentence is self-contradictory. If we suppose a meta-time measuring the event then the movement defining this meta-time will be provided by an uncreated being besides God – a conclusion to be avoided.

Thus, Bonet could conclude that no heresy is implied by taking be-reshit as “in the first moment” and all other solutions are highly problematic. Narboni’s point was that the temporal qualification “in a moment” cannot mean the same thing in the following two propositions without heretical implications:

(1) God created heaven and earth in a moment.

(2) Lucie finished cooking the dinner in a moment.

Bonet’s point, in my interpretation, is that “in a moment” can mean exactly the same thing in (1) and (2) without implying anything contrary to faith. Consequently, Narboni claims that be-reshit cannot mean “in the first moment” in the proper sense, whereas Bonet insists that it can.

We have argued in the previous part that Sen Bonet de Lunel was probably familiar with Jedaiyah ha-Penini’s teachings. Jedaiyah’s reliance on Ockhamist doctrines is well documented in his Treatise on Opposite Motions, and especially the Book of Confutation.482 Ruth Glasner argues that Jedaiyah was connected to the circle of Gersonides.483 The latter was invited sometimes to the papal court in Avignon, the city where Ockham resided at the papal court in the 1320s. Through Jedaiyah, if not otherwise, Bonet could get information about “Ockhamist” doctrines.

Therefore, the hypothesis that Bonet’s interpretation of the first moment of creation is based on Ockham’s theory of time is plausible.

However, Ockham is far from being the only candidate for being the possible source of Bonet’s ideas. In fact, many elements of Ockham’s approach to the problems of time,
moment, and continuum is already present in the works of Peter John Olivi (cc. 1248 – 1298) who is being recognized today as a major innovator of scholastic thought. He was active for many years in Montpellier, the town that became the “intellectual capital” of the Jews in Languedoc during the thirteenth century.

Olivì criticized a theory current in the second half of the thirteenth century according to which only the present moment exists of time in the extra-mental reality. He argued that time is not the flow of a “now” but rather the flow of the things themselves. The most important exposition of the thesis rejected by Olivì is to be found in Henry of Ghent’s Quodlibeta III, 11. Thomas Aquinas also proposed a similar solution in his commentary on the Physics. Olivi objects that this view implies that time, that is to say, a continuum, is composed of moments, that is to say, of indivisible units. The absurdity of this consequence is evident enough within the framework of Aristotelian natural philosophy; nonetheless, Olivi devoted a separate quaestio to prove this point in his Summa.

Olivi faces the following objection:

7. Item, constat quod quolibet mane sol incipit esse in oriente et initio nostri horizontis, constat etiam quod ibi incipit esse in instanti ; ergo illud instans est tunc actu in tempore mensurante motum solis, quod utique est continuum sicut et eius motus; sed qua ratione est actu , eadem actione et omnia praecedentia et sequentia in quibus sol coepit et incipiet alicubi esse ; sed hoc esse non potest nisi ex ipsis instantibus sibi per continuam successionem continuatis componatur, ergo et cetera.

The objection is based on the same example (the sun appearing on the horizon and causing the beginning of daytime in a moment) that was referred to by Bonet as an illustration of the concept of ‘principle with the thing.’

Olivi’s reply reads as follows:

Ad septimum dicendum quod sicut punctus vel linea orientis su horizontis est cuiusdam corporis sphaerici et continuo ac per consequens non est secundum rem ibi actu distincta nisi secundum nostram imaginationem et significacionem: sic nec initium solaris adventus ad punctum illum est secundum rem actu distinctum et

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487 The text of this quaestio is printed and discussed in details in Jeck: Aristoteles contra Augustinum, 468 – 480.

488 Quaestiones in Secundum Librum Sententiarum, ed. Bernardus Jansen S. I., vol. 1, Quaestiones 1-48 (Quaracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1922), 76-86: Quaestio III Appendix: An continuum ex individis constet. – This work is in fact, Olivi’s Summa and it should be distinguished from his (unedited) Commentary on the Sentences; therefore, I will refer to it as “Olivi’s Summa,” vol 1.

489 Olivi, Summa, vol 1, 77.
Olivi claims that a moment does not have a separate and actual existence “nisi secundum nostram imaginationem vel significacionem.” However, someone might object that this opinion is highly counter-intuitive. If moment does not exist in reality then how can we account for our everyday experiences of past, present, and future? Olivi anticipates this objection and replies to it:

– Sed forte obicies, sicut et quidam aliquando mihi obiecit, quod si illa punctalis mutatio et instans sibi correspondens non sunt ibi tunc in actu sed solum in potentia: ergo non plus sunt facta per solum motum vel adventum quam reliquae mutationes adhuc ab ipso fiendae et peragandae. Item, omne praeteritum aliquando fuit actu praesens et omne necessario futurum erit aliquando actu praesens; sed hesternus adventus solis ad initium nostri horizontis est secundum rem vere praeteritus; ergo vere fuit here actu; eius etiam adventus est vere futurus; ergo cras erit vere actu. –

Dicendum quod hic distinguendum est de esse actu et consimiliter de esse in potentia, quia punctum vel instans quod sumitur ut continuitur continenter partes sui totius est uno modo actu in toto, alio modo non; sumendo enim actu pro actualitate totius et partium eius unum sumpta, secundum scilicet quod per eam sunt unum totum et unum ens actu: sic omnes punctales seu indivisibles sive simplices continuationes partium sunt actu in toto sicut et omnes partes; sumendo vero actu pro actualitate in se et secundum se distincta et determinata: sic non sunt ibi actu, nisi essent partes heterogeneae vel certam distinctionem a natura habentes, quod non est alium quam dicere quod sunt quidem actu ut unum cum toto, sed non sunt actu distinctae, hoc est, quod earum entitas, ut est aliquid sui totius, est vere ibi actu, sed non earum distinctio et distinctiva determinatio nec earumentitas tanquam secundum se distincta et distincte existent;igitur respectu primi modi non sunt ibi in potentia, sed solum respectu secundi. Et per hoc patet ad primam objectionem: quia secundum suam actualitatem primo modo sumptam vere sunt facta, quod non sunt ceterae simplices mutationes solis adhuc secundum illum modum fiendae. Patet etiam ad secundam: quia sicut solo primo modo fuerunt actu, sic somum respectu illius sunt praeterita et fuerunt futura; et si deberent fieri in esse distincto, sicut sunt initiales et finales terminis quantitatum actu terminatarum: tunc essent futura et tandem aliquando praeassentia respectu istius modi secundi.

Olivi claims that a moment does not exist actually in a sense but it does exist actually in another sense. As a distinct and separate border between past and future moment exists only in the human mind or only as the actual beginning or end of time. However, in our normal experience of time moments do not exist actually; they exist only indifferently within the whole continuum of time as “simplices continuationes partium.” What are these “simple continuations of the parts of time”? And how do they differ from the “distinct” and “separate” nows?

In another context Olivi describes moment as the limit of a series of temporal extensions that are ever shorter and shorter and “bracketing” the moment closer and closer. What exists outside of the mind is not the moment as an indivisible and separate unit but the flow of time which is in fact the flow of the created things. One might wonder whether Olivi’s

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491 Olivi, Summa, vol. 1, 84.
492 Olivi, Summa, vol. 1, 84-85. Italics are mine.
493 See on this Richard Cross: “Absolute Time…,” 290-291.
argument leads in fact to positing infinitely small units of time that are still continuous and not punctual and thus they can perform the task of being what is present of time without implying that time is composed of punctual nows. Richard Cross remarks that Aristotle’s denial of the existence of actual infinity blocked the way for Olivi to develop his ideas into that direction.\(^{494}\)

At the same time, Olivi repeatedly claims that the first moment of time has a separate and distinct existence insofar it marks the beginning of time. However, by this Olivi did not mean that the first moment was a real entity, a “container” of creation. The “separate” existence of the first moment implies only that it did not “continue” a previous temporal extension. Olivi’s opinion about the extra-mental existence of moment is quite similar to Ockham’s one and might be easily Ockham’s ultimate source: “Instans nihil aliud est quam presencia mobilis et ideo nihil aliud ponit in re nisi mobile presens esse vel non esse.”\(^{495}\)

Similarly, Olivi denied that time would be something different from the things that are in time. Everything that is created (including the angels) has a “flowing,” successive being: we refer ultimately to the created things themselves when we use temporal expressions.

In his commentary on Genesis Olivi rejects the idea that the phrase ‘in principio’ in the Latin version of Genesis 1: 1 means ‘in causa.’\(^{496}\) He is of the opinion that it refers to the beginning of time: “firmiter credimus ex hoc loco sumit que deus ab initio temporis simul condidit utrumque naturam, spiritualem scilicet et corporealem.”\(^{497}\) At the same time he rejects the idea that the everything related in the first chapters of Genesis was created in the first moment for that would imply that the waters were both separated and mixed in the first moment, that Adam and Eve were both inside and outside of Eden at the same time, etc.\(^{498}\) However, Olivi does not deal with the problem of the first moment in a way comparable to Bonet’s account in this text.

A closer parallel to Bonet can be found in the Sentence-commentary of a Dominican monk, Durandus of Saint Pourçain (1270/5 – 1334). Influenced partly by Olivi’s thought Durandus opposed, criticized and rejected many points in the teachings of Thomas Aquinas who was made the official theologian of the Dominican order in Durandus’ lifetime and was to be called Saint Thomas Aquinas from 1323 on. As a consequence Durandus was criticized and censured by the authorities of his order several times; nonetheless, his questions on Petrus Lombardus’ Sentences widely circulated. He was active in Avignon between 1314 and 1317 where he could meet Gersonides and Bonet.\(^{499}\)

Durandus points out that contrary to a widespread opinion based on human imagination a point (and a moment) is not an indivisible positive unit that builds up a line (and time); neither it is a positive existent at the beginning and the end of a line (and time). A continuum is finite due to its own nature, not because of the existence of an indivisible, punctual thing that hinders it from extending further. Such imagination, Durandus underlines,

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\(^{494}\) Cf. Cross, “Absolute Time…,” 297-300.


\(^{496}\) MS Paris, BNF, lat. 15559, fol. 5 vc: “… primum notandum non potest bono modo stare pro causa sed solum pro inicio mundi; preterea, non est communitur dicere mos scripturae in causa fecit deus hoc.” Olivi’s further arguments has interesting trinitological aspects that are not relevant in the present context.

\(^{497}\) MS Paris, BNF, lat. 15559, fol. 5 rb.

\(^{498}\) MS Paris, BNF, lat. 15559, fol. 6 vd – 7 ra.

should be completely abandoned. A point is in fact a privation of the continuum – in this sense it is proper to call it 'indivisible' as opposed to the continuum that is divisible. However, a point (and a moment) is by no way an "ens positivum" not even as a border:

12. Ob hoc quidam putant punctum esse quid positivum et indivisibile realiter terminans lineam quamvis non sit de essentia lineae. Istud autem non potest esse verum: quia praeter terminum extrinsecum oportet lineam ponere esse finitam: quia lineae quae de se esset infinita terminus extrinsecus non poneret finitatem. Item excluso puncto si sit terminus extrinsecus adhuc linea remaneret in se tanta quanta prius erat et non maior nec minor. Quid igitur facit ad finitatem lineae punctus si sit terminus extrinsecus? non appetit imo omnino latet, quod oporteat ponere propter finitatem lineae talem terminum, fatuum enim esset imaginari quod nisi essent puncta terminantia lineam, linea ex utraque parte fluere in infinitum. Omne enim quod finitur, finitur se ipso vel alio sibi intrinseco, unde Aris. 3 Phy. contra illos qui probabant infinitum esse in entibus pro eo quod esse finitum, ut dicebant, finitur ad aliud et illud ad aliud et sic semper: dicit quod aliud est finiri et aliud tangi, quod enim tangitur ab alio tangitur, quod vero finitur non finitur ab alio sed se ipso, nullo ergo modo credendum est quod punctus sit aliqua natura positiva indivisibilis terminans lineam, sed terminatur linea seipsa inquantum tantum extenditur et non plus, ita quod terminatio lineae includit privationem ulterioris continuationis. Et quia privatio continui et divisibilis videtur habere rationem indivisibilis, imo idea imaginatur punctum esse quid indivisibile cum tamen nihil indivisibile positivum sit intrinsecum lineae nec ei adiunctum.

Olivi did not go so far in denying the real existence of points and moments. As we have seen, he attributed “separate” and “actual” existence to the beginning and the end of a continuum. On the other hand, for Durandus a point terminating a line is by no way a separate or actual entity; it is only the privation of the continuum.

Durandus draws the conclusions in the following passage:

14. Tenendum est ergo quod linea non se habet ad punctum sicut divisibile ad indivisibile positivum, sed sicut ad privationem ulterioris continuationis, et sic dicitur actu terminari per puncta inquantum privatur ulteriori extensione. Quod autem dictum est de linea et puncto intelligendum est de motu et mutato esse […] Et quia in tempore (quod est idem realiter cum primo motu) non est dare talem terminationem quae sit privatio ulterioris continuatio, ideo non est ibi dare nunc in actu, sed solum in potentia, nisi continget tempus finiri, et tunc illud nunc non esset quid indivisibile positivum, sed privatio ulterioris continuatio, ut de alis dictum est. Et si opponatur quod tempus non habet esse nisi per nunc: quare ut videtur apparat nunc actu esse et esse quid positivum: quia tempus est aliquid positivum, et positivum non habet esse privativum. Dicendum quod tempus non habet esse per nunc sed per existentiam suarum partium quae vere et realiter habent esse quamvis non simul, nec istud esse requiritur ad esse reale, sed solum ad esse permanentium quorum conditio est simultas, non autem requiritur ad esse successivorum.

500 Durandi a Sancto Porciano in Sententias theologicas Petri Lombardi commentariorum Libri Quatuor (Lyon: apud Gulielmum Rovillium, 1586), 299; (lib. 2, dist. 2., qu. 4 : utrum nunc aevi sit idem quod aevum). Cf. also the discussion in Maier, Metaphysische Hintergründe, 62.

501 Durandus of Saint Pourçain, In Sententias, 299.
Durandus believes that the putative last moment of time is not a real indivisible unit of time but simply the cessation of time. He insists that the reality of time is not dependent on the reality of the present moment, of the “now,” but on the successive reality of temporal extensions. True, the parts of time do not exist simultaneously; however, simultaneous existence of parts is not a condition for the existence of successive things, such as time and motion. Therefore, Durandus feels entitled to deny any reality to moment except for the fiction of human imaginations (“sola fictio imaginationis”).

I think, Bonet’s sentence – “moment has no reality except in time and it is not apprehended except in the intellect” – reads best against this background. The first moment of time was not an “ens positivum,” because moment is only a privation of time. It has “reality in time” in the same way as a privation, for example, blindness, has “reality” in the thing which lacks something. Time is a positive existent outside of the mind in a sense, moment is not. It is only invented by the intellect when the intellect represents time as a line. The first moment of time is simply the absence of time. Consequently, “in the first moment God created…” means that there was no time when God created the universe. The word be-reshit in Genesis 1: 1 signifies the fact that strictly speaking nothing existed besides God at the creation of the world.

It is impossible to prove that Bonet in fact read Olivi, Durandus or Ockham or that he had access to any of these persons’ teachings in some other ways. Nonetheless, the sources quoted above establish the point that for a Jewish philosopher living in Montpellier and Avignon during the first half of the fourteenth century there were a number of possibilities to meet new ideas concerning the nature of moment and time that were certainly based on Aristotle’s account of time in the fourth book of Physics and on Averroes’ standard interpretation of it but also contained new elements that could not be simply inferred from Aristotle and Averroes.

Analyzing Robert Kilwardby’s treatise De tempore (ca. 1260-1265) Alain Boureau points to the emergence of a new approach to time in the second half of the thirteenth century that had not only theoretical but technical, social, and economic aspects as well. Mechanic clocks were invented that did not measure time by the analogous flow of water or sand but rather constructed an artificial and “digitalized” time that could be directly numbered according to human conventions. Kilwardby dissolved the problematic of time from the context of Aristotelian natural philosophy and treated time as an abstract measure not

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502 In an other context Durandus talks about moments as it they were positive existents. However at the end of the passage he adds the following explanation: “[…] Et sic patet primum; horum autem aliqua dicta sunt assertive aliqua autem tantum recitative secundum opinionem quae communiter currere consuevit, videlicet quod nunc temporis vel mutatum esse in motu sit aliquod indivisibile positivum in motu vel tempore, hoc enim non est verum sicut in praecedentibus probatum est, sed est sola fictio imaginationis.” Cf. Durandus of Saint Pourçain, In Sententias, 302 (lib. 2, dist. 2., qu. 6: utrum esse generabilis et corruptibilis mensuretur tempore).

503 Durandus was many times criticized for not following the opinio communis of the Dominican order; probably he refers to this fact in the text quoted.

504 According to Sylvain Piron, Durandus’ is the best candidate from another point of view as well: his ideas were widely known and discussed in Southern France during the 1320s, which was not the case with Olivi and Ockham. (Oral communication).

505 A further possible candidate is Peter Aureol, who was also close to Jedaiah in time and place and whose ideas concerning time have resemblances to that of Olivi and Ockham. Cf. Pierre Duhem: Le système du monde, vol. 7, 370-372. Duhem summarizes Petri Aureoli Commentarium in Secundum Librum Sententiarum, vol. 2 (Rome: Aloysi Zanetti, 1605), 37-38. I could not consult the original so far.

necessarily connected to motion. Boureau refers to Olivi as Kilwardby as the only contemporary theologian who had similar ideas of time.\footnote{Boureau, “La construction ontologique…” 38. Further penetrating remarks concerning the relationship between “naturalism,” philosophical innovations, and escatological expectations can be found in Alain Boureau: \textit{Théologie, science et censure au XIIIe siècle: Le cas de Jean Peckham} (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1999), 63-70. On p. 68 Boureau writes: “Là encore, nous repérons une des raisons de la collusion entre les naturalistes et les disciples de Bonaventure: d’un même mouvement, l’autonomie du cours naturel des choses prête son appui à une économie historique du salut, marquée fortement de notes eschatologiques, chez le dernier Bonaventure, et plus encore chez ses disciples, dont Olivi.”}

Olivi, Ockham, Bonet, and Gersonides rejected Aristotle and Averroes’ inference from the definition of moment (the end of the past and the beginning of future) to the eternity of time with rather simple arguments. Olivi claims that moment can be defined in a different way as well: nothing prohibits us to invent a definition that can cover the first and the last moments as well.\footnote{Olivi, \textit{Summa}, vol 1, 119 [qu. 5: an mundus ab aeterno fieri potuerit, solutio ad 17].} Ockham rejects the argument as a \textit{petitio principii}; if time is eternal \textit{then} it is true that every instant is an end of past.\footnote{William Ockham: \textit{Brevis summa libri Physicorum} VIII, 1 cf. his \textit{Opera Philosophica}, vol. 6, ed. Stephanus Brown (St. Bonaventure, NY: St. Bonaventure University, 1984), 120.} Gersonides asserts that dividing past from future is only one of the functions of instants. They also define temporal extensions by being their beginnings and ends: if this role could be reduced to the first one then absurdity would follow such as one year is not longer than one day.\footnote{Gersonides: \textit{Milhamot ha-shem}, VI, 1, 21; ed. (Leipzig, 1866), 386-388. Cf. also Pines, “Scholasticism after Thomas Aquinas…,” 11-12 where Pines compares Gersonides’ argument to \textit{Quaestiones super Libros Physicorum}, cap. 8., qu. 10 (p. 207 in Delhaye’s edition) attributed to Siegert of Brabant.} In a similar spirit Bonet argues from the analogy between line $/$ point and time $/$ moment. Just like there can be a first point in the line, there can be a first moment in time.

At the same time, as we have seen, Moses Narboni was not convinced by these objections. For him Aristotle and Averroes’ argument from the definition of moment was conclusive, because he perceived time not as an abstract measure that can be immediately compared to mathematical and geometrical objects but as a natural force that obeys the rules of natural changes. Therefore, the Aristotelian argument from the definition of moment in Narboni’s reading was not a mere sophistry but a valid argument of natural philosophy. To refute the doctrine of eternity he had recourse to the good old principle that creation is not a natural process at all. This principle is attested already in John Philoponus and plays central role in Maimonides’ GP (II, 17). Thus Narboni rejects the doctrine of eternity, but at the same time he implicitly admits – just like Maimonides did – that Aristotle’s argument within the context of natural philosophy is valid and irrefutable. This was not the way taken by Olivi, Durandus, Ockham, Gersonides, and Bonet.

Commenting on Averroes’ epitome of Physics Gersonides rejected Averroes’ claim that time is not a species of the genus “pure number.” Time is a number according to Aristotle’s famous definition of time, but according to Averroes the word “number” should not be understood as a mathematical object in the definition. Averroes wanted to keep a distance between the concepts of natural philosophy and mathematics.\footnote{For example, in the \textit{Epitome of Physics} (MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 962, fol. 15 r in Hebrew translation) Averroes argues that no analogy can be drawn between time and straight line. Jedaaiah’s argument for the possibility of a first moment violates Averroes’ theory.} Gersonides saw no reason for this. “Pure numbers” exist only in the human mind; therefore their application on the extra-mental reality is artificial and conventional in any case. There is no need to posit a sort of “natural numbers” that would be governed by different rules than the abstract numbers.
Time as existing “actually” in the human mind is simply counted movement and we use abstract numbers when we count movement. Bonet definitely follows the same track as Gersonides as opposed to the conservative Aristotelianism of Narboni. Bonet’s interpretation of Genesis 1:1 and GP II, 30 is a further document of the attempts of various Jewish and Christian scholars of the age to find out new ways of thinking of time.

Enunciative Functions

Bonet’s text is centered on two great statements:

(1) Maimonides and Ibn Ezra disagree in the interpretation of Genesis 1:1 but agree in the doctrine of creation out of nothing.

(2) Maimonides interpreted \textit{be-reshit} as ‘in the first moment.’

The referents of these statements are similar to the referents of Eleazar ben Mattityah’s comments. A textual and a doctrinal pole can be identified: Bonet speaks about texts and “opinions” of authorities, namely, the Bible, Ibn Ezra, Maimonides, Aristotle.

Turning the non-conceptual units of texts into conceptualized units of “opinions” is a basic task for Bonet as well.

The subjective position is also similar to Eleazar’s case: the speaker appears as an ‘advocate’ of the authorities speaking on their behalf. However, the repeatable materiality of the statements is slightly different: Bonet takes much more pain in establishing the “opinions” of Ibn Ezra and Maimonides by a close reading of their texts, disclosing the implications of particular words and phrases, sometimes offering subtle conceptual divisions and arguments pro and contra in order to determine the exact positions of the authorities. There is move towards or more technical and complex exegesis in Bonet’s work.

The enunciative field of the statements differs in a quite remarkable way from Eleazar and Caspi’s ones. The first statement belongs to the domain of Jewish orthodoxy. Bonet emphasized that creation out of nothing is a fundamental principle of Jewish faith. He was concerned to prove that Ibn Ezra’s orthodoxy in this question was blemish less. The image of Ibn Ezra as a great and respectable scholar could not be reconciled with the possibility that he denied creation out of nothing in Bonet’s opinion.

Neither Caspi nor Eleazar worried about Ibn Ezra orthodoxy in such a way. There is no sign that they actually attributed a doctrine of eternal creation to Ibn Ezra; still, nonetheless, they did not care to point out Ibn Ezra’s stance in this question.

Bonet concludes the commentary on Maimonides’ text with the following remark:

This is our opinion about the interpretation of the sage’s [Maimonides’] intention in his explanation of the verse “In the beginning...” in order to exclude the belief in eternity – which cannot be excluded by any other interpretations – and in order to fix the belief in creation [\textit{emunat ha-hiddush}] in our soul, because the former is a

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\textsuperscript{511} MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 962, fol. 14 v: “Levi says: In my opinion there is no need for saying what Ibn Rushd said concerning the sage’s [Aristotle] definition of time, namely that time is the number of movement according to the prior and posterior. For the number that is pure from matter can be assigned to any matter / substrate that happens to be there. For the number is not separate from its substrate in reality; therefore, the number that is assigned to whatever substrate that happens to be there is a genus for that number that is in a particular substrate, just like the geometrical line is a genus for the line that is in fire or the line that is in water or the line that is in the fifth element.”

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fundament of the whole Torah / religion \[yesod kol ha-torah\]. And even if it is difficult to understand it due to the fact that our mind is unable to apprehend and understand it because of the poor quality of the human intellect, we cannot but rely on the prophets who told us those things from the mouth of God that our mind cannot apprehend through [rational] investigation \[be-darkhei ha-haqira\].\(^{512}\)

This text claims quite explicitly that creation out of nothing is an uncontestable principle of Jewish faith. Moreover, it is a sublime mystery that no human speculation can fully apprehend. This failure in understanding actually opens up a space for individual opinions, theories, approaches, where the enquiring human mind enjoys certain freedom. There can be more than one imperfect attempts to understand creation. Nonetheless, the basic formula of creation out of nothing cannot be compromised.

The second statement fits into this structure. There is a remarkable shift in Bonet’s theoretical interest concerning creation as opposed to Caspi and Eleazar ben Mattityah. The theme of creation is not about the origin of the universe for Bonet any more; since it is a “fundamental principle” of Jewish faith that the world was created by God out of nothing a finite time ago no serious discussion is possible about it. The theme of creation becomes a theme about the role of time in creation in Bonet’s hands instead.

A statement like “In the beginning God created the heavens and earth” co-exists with such statements as “time is an accident of motion,” “moment is an end of past and a beginning of future according to Aristotle,” “the relationship between line and point is analogous with the relationship between time and moment.” The field of coexistence of statement (2) is formed by statements about time, continuum and the semantics of temporal phrases in Biblical Hebrew. Statements about the origin of the universe form a separate enunciative field that exercises a critical function over the discussion concerning time. This means that the accepted “orthodox” theory about the origin of the universe, that is to say, creation out of nothing, is treated as a higher authority in the discourse on the role of time in creation. Any interpretation of Maimonides’ “intention” concerning the role of time in creation that implies anything contrary to creation out of nothing is disqualified automatically.

Moreover, statement (2) authorizes a strategic choice by evoking the authority of Maimonides. The statement “be-reshit means ‘in the first moment’ according to Maimonides” legitimates a nominalist approach to time within medieval Jewish philosophy. Bonet simply ignores those ontological and philosophical considerations that excluded interpreting be-reshit as ‘in the first moment’ for Narboni. Thus he practically transposes the whole problematics of time from the context (or field of coexistence) of natural philosophy and ontology to the context of abstract, mathematical entities and the semantics of temporal expressions.

Even though Bonet does not reject the Aristotelian definition of time as a proposition, he transforms it as a statement by relocating it in a different enunciative field. This change concerns more the level of discursive practice than the level of propositional knowledge. After all, Narboni and Bonet agreed in almost everything: the definition of time, the definition of moment, the possibility of a first moment, etc. They differed only in a minute question: whether it is correct to say that God created the world in the first moment.

Narboni was very well aware about the emergence of a new approach to time. In a collection of philosophical notes that survives in MS Paris 988 Narboni writes:

> From this you can see that time can be examined in two ways. The first is the proper [lit. “true”] analysis which concerns the complete essence [of time], namely that time is dependent on motion, and motion on the moved object. And this is the definition of

\(^{512}\) MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 52 r.
time according to truth, namely, the number of the movement as a continuum and as a
[successive entity qualified by] ‘before’ and ‘after.’ [...] And the second analysis is the
abstract idea of time [surat ha-zeman ha-mufshetet] which is the continuity of the
existence of a thing without examining whether the continuity in question is a
continuity of movement in a moved object or the continuity of a thing that has no
[relationship to] motion by its nature. And this is an imagination about time [demut
zman], not time in the true sense [amitat zeman], since time belongs to motion and
motion to the moved object.513

For Narboni the Aristotelian theory of motion and other chapters of natural philosophy
formed a higher authority vis-à-vis the discourse on time that could prohibit certain
conclusions concerning time (cf. Narboni’s argument from the “ontological inferiority” of
moment). Narboni admitted that it was possible to treat time as an abstract thing outside the
domain of natural philosophy but insisted on the superiority of his own approach.

Bonet’s statement about Maimonides’ interpretation of be-reshit should be appreciated
against this background. Bonet made a strategic choice different from Narboni’s one by
treating time as an abstract object. And he justified this choice by interpreting an authoritative
text, Maimonides’ GP, according to these lines. The point of statement (2) was to restructure
the enunciative field and discursive practices concerning time.

Discursive Practices

Bonet’s treatment of the concept ‘principle’ (hathala) reveals some regularities of
forming concepts. First of all, according to Foucault’s methodological instructions, we have to
identify “forms of succession” concerning the statements that are capable of being the starting
points of conceptualization.

Two forms of successions can be identified. The first is a series of paraphrases in
which a sentence is replaced with other sentences conveying more specific meanings (e.g.
“God is great” can be paraphrased as “God has the attribute of greatness;” “God is the same
thing as ‘great;’” “God is not small;” “Great is an alternative name of God;,” etc.). This
practice was quite widespread in exegetical literature. Recurrent elements and strategies in
such paraphrases served as the starting points for making concepts. The various senses in
which the word ‘before’ or ‘beginning’ or ‘in’ are used are likely to be identified through such
paraphrases.

A second form of succession is a practice of abstraction. “God is great” can be
transformed into “A is B.” More complicated sentences can be abstracted in more than one
ways, with different levels of abstraction. For example, “Friday is before Saturday” can be
replaced by “A is before B” and also by “A has the relationship X to B.” Recurrent elements
of such abstraction could be starting points of forming logical concepts.

Secondly, the field of presence has to be defined. This means the set of those
statements where the concept is primarily “present.” But this “presence” does not simply
mean that a designation of the concept indeed appears in the sentences belonging to the
statements. The field of presence is not simple the definition and applications of the concept
but rather those statements on the basis of which the concept – or similar concepts – are
capable of being formed. In the case of ‘principle’ the field of presence is a set of logical
stock-examples, such as “heart is a principle of the animal” “the Sun is a principle of
daylight” or “the foundation is a principle of the house.”

513 MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 988, fol. 96 r.
These statements – in this enunciative function – do not describe an extra-mental reality. They rather disclose a logical state of affairs that requires a theoretical response. In the case of Bonet’s ‘principle’ this response is classifying the various cases of ‘principles:’ ‘heart’ and ‘foundation’ are principles in the same sense whereas the Sun is a principle in a different sense. In the case of other exemplary sentences (for example, “the present king of France is bold.”) the theoretical replies can be much more complex and much more contested. Moreover, a field of concomitance can be determined in this case as well. After all, it does matter that France has no king presently and that heart is indeed a principle of the living body according to Aristotelian natural philosophy. The logical stock-examples could not function without the background of “real” statements about the “real” world. Moreover, changes in natural sciences can modify the value of logical stock-statements: for example, the Sun as the cause of daylight can hardly be an example of ‘causation without temporal precedence’ today, since we believe that light needs time to get from the Sun to the Earth. Nonetheless, the point of Bonet’s statement about the Sun does not concern physics and the notorious statement about the bold king of France does not belong to French history. They belong to logic; but, at the same time, they could not function in logic without the existence of their pairs in biology, physics, history, and other sciences.

Thirdly, we can identify procedures of intervention in which the functioning of the various concepts are individualized. In the present case the basic procedure is paraphrasing authoritative texts. No doubt that both Maimonides and Bonet learnt the lesson about the various senses of “prior,” and “beginning” or “principle” ultimately from Aristotle’s Categories and Metaphysics. Without Aristotle’s “intervention,” if by chance, the relevant passages of the Aristotelian corpus had not been transmitted to the Middle Ages in any form; their conclusions could have been very different. On the other hand, neither Maimonides nor Bonet’s exegesis is a mechanical application of Aristotle’s teaching. Although Aristotle’s conceptualization was definitely a model for both Maimonides and Bonet, the ultimate formulas emerged as reactions to the biblical text in Maimonides’ case and to GP in Bonet’s case.

Etymology is one possible strategy. Reshit is identified as ‘principle’ because it is derived from rosh, ‘head,’ and head is a part of the animal and also its “beginning” according to “its position” as Maimonides writes. The etymological relationship between the biblical word (be-reshit) and the Hebrew name (rosh) of a possible example of a class of “beginning” (‘head’) excludes another class of “beginning” from the range of possible interpretation.

However, Maimonides claims (at least in Bonet’s interpretation) that be-reshit does not refer to that class of “principles” into which “head” belongs. Thus, the whole argument seems to be rather arbitrary: “head” excludes temporal precedence but does not exclude other classes of precedence into which it does not actually belong. Why?

The arbitrariness of the argument is only an appearance. Maimonides (in Bonet’s interpretation) positions the basic distinction between temporal and non-temporal precedence – and ‘head’ clearly excludes the former. Here Aristotle’s influence can be detected: the twelfth chapter of Categories declares that “prior” means most properly temporal precedence and in Metaphysics V, 1 temporal priority is not mentioned among the senses of “beginning.” This suggests – although does not state explicitly – that temporal precedence forms one broad class of priority and all the other classes can be taken as a second broad class. Therefore, it is more important that ‘head’ successfully excludes the first class than the actual subgroup to which it belongs within the second class.

A strategy of intervention is exemplified by Bonet’s subtle distinctions between the senses of hathala. Bonet observes some minor features of Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s translation of

514 Cf. Categories, ch. 12 and Metaphysics V, 1 and 11.
GP that does not seem important in a superficial reading and loads them with sense. First, he fixes the phrases ‘principle with the thing,’ ‘principle in the thing,’ and ‘temporal principle’ as *termini technici* and then renders implicit or explicit definitions to them. He defines these terms in an Aristotelian style but not by a simple application of Aristotle’s own distinctions. The main criteria that make the differences between various classes of ‘beginning’ are temporal precedence, causal relationship, and part-whole relationship just like in Aristotle, but the conceptual network itself is Bonet’s *ad hoc* proposal. Moreover, he augments the network of concepts by adding his own invention, ‘principle for the thing.’

Thus, Bonet restructures the whole conceptual space of the Maimonidean argument. As a consequence, Maimonides’ text reads quite differently from other medieval or modern interpretations. Still, nonetheless, I hesitate to call Bonet’s interpretation “reading in.” Although his conceptualizations profoundly reshape the original account, the concepts themselves are not “poured” into the Maimonidean text from an external source; they are rather fabricated *in situ* as a direct response to both the content and the wording of Maimonides’ argument. Had Ibn Tibbon chosen different Hebrew phrases to render the Arabic original Bonet’s interpretation would have been quite different. Bonet’s exegetical procedure is neither a slavish reproduction nor a ruthless appropriation of Maimonides’ text. It is rather transforming it into a “thinking machine” that can be used to make statements.

Maimonides and Bonet do not quote Aristotle explicitly and they do not use exactly those distinctions that can be found in Aristotle’s works. Nonetheless, their strategies of inventing concepts are clearly indebted to Aristotle. What they learned from Aristotle in this case seems to be more of a style in thinking than of an actual doctrine. We can observe a *fusion* of discursive practices here: Aristotelian-styled conceptualization is practiced in the domain of biblical exegesis.
Chapter 4: “A Great Mystery:” Eleazar ben Mattityah on Moment, Time, and Euclidean Points

On the other hand, ideas concerning the “non-real” nature of moment could come from earlier neo-Platonic sources as well. Eleazar ben Mattityah in his supercommentary on Ibn Ezra ad Numbers 7:72 uses some formulas resembling Bonet’s one, however, in a completely different doctrinal context.

The biblical text in question is a catalogue of the offerings by the leaders of the Israelite tribes on the occasion of the dedication of the Sanctuary. Numbers 7:72 reads:

On the eleventh day was the day of the chief of the sons Asher: Pagiel son of Okhran.

It was not the content of the verse what attracted Ibn Ezra’s (and consequently Eleazar’s) attention but a grammatical phenomenon: the Hebrew numeral ‘eleven’ is not the usual ahat asar (derived from ‘ten’ [asar] and ‘one’ [ahat]) like, for example, in verse 20 of the same chapter but ashtei asar. Now asar means ‘ten;’ but what is the meaning of ashtei and why is it used instead of ahat, ‘one?’

ON THE ELEVENTH DAY:
I have already explained in my Sefer Moznaim why this numeral has different forms. And the sense of ELEVENTH [ASHTEI] is like eshtonotav “his ideas” (Psalms 146:4), i.e. “what has been begotten by his thoughts [mahshavotav]” as if ten had begotten it and that’s a great mystery [sod gadol]!

In the continuation of the comment Ibn Ezra criticizes Abulwalid Ibn Gannah’s grammatical theory concerning the form ashtei asar.

Ibn Ezra claims that ‘eleven’ is a “son” of ten, it was “begotten” by ten. This procreation is connected somehow to “thoughts;” hence the name ashtei derived from the root ‘-sh-t attested by Psalms 146:4 in the sense ‘thought.’ At the same time Ibn Ezra probably associated the root also with Hebrew ashtoret meaning “procreation of animals” (cf. Deuteronomy 7:13 and 28:4) and also the name of an ancient pagan deity, whom the Greeks called Astarte, the goddess of fertility. That is why the topic of procreation enters his explanation.

The full text of Eleazar’s supercommentary on this passage is as follows:

“ELEVENTH” [ASHTEI ASAR] IS LIKE ESHTONOTAV; “WHAT HAS BEEN BEGOTTEN BY HIS THOUGHTS”, AS IF TEN HAD BEGOTTEN IT AND THAT’S A GREAT MYSTERY. You know already his saying in the section “Ki tissa:”
And if you consider the edge of counting, [you will see that] one is the head of everything and all the counting is out of unities [lit. “ones”]. The One has no image since all the images are coming from Him. 515

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515 Cf. Ibn Ezra on Ex 33:21 according to the textus receptus: of “And if you consider [what is] from the edge of counting [you will see] that it is the head of everything [or: head of all {the numbers}] and all the counting is out of unities. This is the One that is Everything. And the mystery of prayers and praises are based on this and also the sense of “and I make myself great and holy” (Ezekiel 38:23) and the sense of “in whom I will make myself glorified” (Isaiah 49:3). And behold, the One has no images, and He belongs to all the images as if in an universal way since from Him they proceed.” Eleazar’s quotation is rather a shortened paraphrase of Ibn Ezra’s text, notwithstanding the possibility that his readings were slightly different from ours.
And we have explained there what we have been able to grasp and we shall speak more about [fol. 216 v] why the eleventh is represented by phrases derived from “idea” [eshton] and “thought” [mahshav]. Euclid said at the beginning of his book:

Point is a thing that has no part and no reality either in the intellect or outside of the intellect.\(^{516}\)

And the sages have called it “mental point” [neqada mahshavit] and it has no representation [tsiyyur].\(^{517}\) Aristotle says in the Physics, sixth part, in the treatise concerning continuity, he says concerning line that is between two points that its two ends are the two points, and this is called continuous in the proper sense [? be-metiv], since the point is the end of the line and it is also a beginning [hathala] of it, and just like it is true of the end that it cannot be divided [from the line], it is true of the beginning as well. For whenever you think of the point as having parts it is not a mental point any more but a part of a line in every respect. And the line is not composed of points just like time is not composed of moments.\(^{518}\)

And just like the One has no reality [composed] of parts in the representation, in a similar way time contains past, present, and future. And this is a very obscure thing, namely, that its parts would have any existence. For it is appropriate to everything composed of parts that all the parts or at least some of them should be found in the thing simultaneously. And these two aspects are not found concerning time, since its parts either has ceased [to exist]\(^{519}\) already – this is past – or they belong to the future and they have not been realized yet. And the moment is the present, which is not a part of time, for it is appropriate to the part to be a measure of the whole and a component of the whole. On the other hand, moment is definitely continuous with/attached to time. We shall say more about this at the end of the book, at the verse “And the deity will look for the passed away” (Ecclesiastes 3:15).\(^{520}\)

And Eleazar says:

There is a sect among the Mutakallimūn [who say] that moment is a part of time standing between past and future. And this is the same as the debate between Rabbi Judah and Rabbi Jose in the chapter “Ba-me madliqin” (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 34 b) concerning the interval between day and night [bein ha-shemashot]: Rabbi Judah

\(^{516}\) Needless to say Euclid’s definition does not contain the clause “and no reality either in the intellect or outside of the intellect.” I cannot identify Eleazar’s source at the moment. The first part of the definition (“point is a thing that has no part”) accords with Moses Ibn Tibbon’s Hebrew translation of Euclid in MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 1013 but differs from the readings of MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 1012 and 1014 that add “and has no place” [ve-lo hannaha].

\(^{517}\) The phrase ‘mental point’ [neqada mahshavit] seems to be a translation of Arabic nuqta wahmiyya appearing in Epistle 4 of the Ikhwān aš-ṣafā’; cf. Alessandro Bausani: L’Enciclopedia dei Fratelli della Purità: Riassunto, noc Introduzione e breve commento dei 52 Trattati o Epistole degli Ikhwān aš-ṣafā’ (Naples: Istituto Universitario Orientale, 1978), 51. In Epistle 2 the “brethren of purity” contrast sensible and intelligible geometry and claim that Euclid’s definition of point is true only of the intelligible point, but not of the sensible point; cf. Bausani, L’Enciclopedia…, 37. The Ikhwān aš-ṣafā’ might have easily been Eleazar’s actual source (he knew Arabic); the idea itself can be traced back to Proclus’ commentary on Euclid’s definition of point; see on this more later. For other definitions of ‘point’ in medieval Hebrew literature see Mauro Zonta: Un dizionario filosofico ebraico del XIII secolo: L’introduzione al “Sefer De’ot ha-Filosofim” di Shem Tob ibn Falaquera (Torino: Silvio Zamorani, 1992), 37 and esp. 93-96.

\(^{518}\) It seems to me that Eleazar recapitulates the doctrine that points cannot touch each other, in other words there must be a line (a continuous entity) between two points. This is certainly the conclusion of Aristotle in Physics VI, 1 (231a21-231b19) although the wording is very different. Does Eleazar rely on his memory in this case as well?\(^{519}\)

\(^{519}\) Reading kalu with MS Vat. ebr. 249, fol. 124 v instead of yakholu of MS Vat. ebr. 54.

\(^{520}\) I could not find any trace of the text referred to at the end of the book. Did Eleazar write a commentary on Ecclesiastes (or a supercommentary on Ibn Ezra’s commentary on Ecclesiastes)?
said, [the interval between day and night takes as much time as] “half mile [walk]” – so Rabbi Judah’s opinion inclines to the aforementioned sect’s one. On the other hand, Rabbi Jose said, “like a wink of the eye, it is impossible to stand by it, this one [night] enters and that one [day] goes away” – So Rabbi Jose, “his depth with him!” (Gittin 67a; Erubin 51a), goes after Aristotle’s opinion. Now the one that is in between the past, i.e. the ten, and the twelve is the mental point what was begotten by the ten in the continuous quantity and it has no parts just like the moment between past and present. Similar is the thin line dividing the surface into two for it exists only in thought [mahshava] not in reality.

Eleazar’s interpretation is inspired by Ibn Ezra’s associating the word “thought” (mahsava) with the number eleven. In a very original way Eleazar understands Ibn Ezra’s enigmatic allusion to number ten “procreating” number eleven in the framework of “mental” objects such as Euclidean points, lines, and surfaces and also time and moment exhibiting certain mysterious characteristics (such as having no parts) that allude to the fact that they were “begotten” by a mysterious “father”, namely, the number ten. Ten is closely associated with the One in Ibn Ezra’s numerology (see his Long Commentary on Exodus 3:15).

The connection between number eleven and Euclidean point is made by Eleazar through the Hebrew word mahshava, Ibn Ezra associated ‘ashtei with mahshava, ‘thought’ in the following sentence: “And the sense of eleven ['ashtei] is like eshtonotav ‘his ideas’” (Psalms 146:4), i.e. what has been begotten by his thoughts [mahshavotav].” That is to say eleven is something which is begotten by “his thoughts.” The pronoun “his” probably refers to God. Accordingly Ibn Ezra concludes the sentence: “as if ten had begotten it and that’s a great mystery!” Thus, ten, standing probably for God, has begotten something with his thoughts [mahshavot], and this something is eleven.

In a further step Eleazar associates ‘thought’ mahshava with ‘mental point,’ nequda mahshavit. Had Ibn Ezra used the word ‘intellect’ sekhel instead of ‘thought,’ mahshava Eleazar would have probably associated the number eleven with the separate intellects and could have made the succession of the intellects from the One the theoretical framework for interpreting the text. However, in the Tibbonide philosophical language, which postdates Ibn Ezra’s commentaries, fixed technical senses were assigned to nearly synonymous words. And Eleazar was guided by the Tibbonide vocabulary when he tried to find out the meaning of Ibn Ezra’s enigmatic remarks.

Here we can observe again how Ibn Ezra’s commentary operates as a “thinking machine:” Eleazar’s interpretation is neither a direct continuation of Ibn Ezra’s line of thought nor an uncritical projection of Eleazar’s own theory into Ibn Ezra’s text. It is rather a series of statements that are constructed in situ, around Ibn Ezra’s ideas and words preferring sometimes one theoretical option to another for such banal reasons as coincidence of names. Eleazar’s own meditation about Euclidean point, time, moment, etc. cannot be simply derived from Ibn Ezra’s “original” ideas on the one hand, but it could not emerge without an encounter with Ibn Ezra’s words on the other hand.

A certain ambiguity characterizes Eleazar’s interpretation that is often to be found with authors standing in both neo-Platonic and Aristotelian traditions. The word ‘mental’ can

521 In the chapter Ba-me madliqin (Shabbat 34b) R. Nehemiah is named as the holder of opinion attributed to R. Judah by Eleazar whereas R. Judah gives a different definition according to the printed editions. It is possible that Eleazar interpreted R. Nehemiah’s comment to be in agreement with R. Judah’s definition. It is also possible that Eleazar had a different reading – the attribution to R. Judah is missing in the Munich ms according to Rabbinovicz, Diqduqey sofrim, vol. 7, Shabbat, 71. Since in Shabbat 35a-35b and in Berakhot 2b in fine Rabbi Judah and Rabbi Jose’s positions are contrasted it is possible that Eleazar quoted the passage from memory and assumed that R. Judah was R. Jose’s main opponent in this case as well.

522 MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 216 r-v.
be opposed to ‘real,’ i.e. ‘extra-mental.’ In this sense ‘mental’ means something less than real, something that exists only in the mind, a human abstraction, whereas real things and properties, such as stones, trees, and animals having colors, weights, and other physical qualities, exist in an ontologically stronger sense: “outside of the mind.” Aristotle chose this direction in describing the ontological status of mathematical objects. They exist only in a weaker sense of the word, not in the same way as the substances of the physical and metaphysical world.

On the other hand, ‘mental’ can mean something more than ‘real,’ i.e. more than ‘material.’ Euclidean points and surfaces transcend the physical world; the fact that they do not belong to the sensible reality can be taken as a proof that they belong to a higher, metaphysical realm. Consequently, mathematical knowledge can be considered as forming a higher level in the hierarchy of knowledge than natural sciences preparing the way for the knowledge of immaterial beings. Plato takes this position in a famous discussion in the seventh book of the Republic (535a-545b).

Such an interpretation of the “non-real” character of mathematical objects is nicely represented by a neo-Platonic author from Late Antiquity:

Omnia corpora superficie finiuntur et in ipsam eorum pars ultima terminatur. hi autem termini cum sint semper circa corpora quorum termini sunt, incorporei tamen intelleguntur. nam quosque corpus esse dicetur necdum terminus intellegitur: cogitatio quae conceperit terminum corpus reliquit. ergo primus a corporibus ad incorporea transitus offendit corporeum terminos, et haec est prima incorporea natura post corporea; sed non pure nec ad integram carens corporate, nam licet extra corpus natura eius sit, tamen nos nisi circa corpus appareat. cum totum denique corpus nominas, etiam superficies hoc vocabulo continetur: de corporibus eam tamen etsi non res sed intellectus sequestrat. haec superficies, sicut est corporum terminus, ita lineis terminatur, quas suo nomine θραμμάς Graecia nominavit: punctis lineae finiuntur. et haec sunt corpora quae mathematica vocantur, de quibus sollerti industria geometriac disputatur.523

The non-corporeal nature of surfaces and lines are admitted in one of the sources used extensively by Eleazar: the Ruah hen a philosophical compendium in Hebrew believed to be written by a Provencal author from the Tibbonide school around 1240. The aim of this work was to summarize the available information concerning philosophical terms and ideas necessary for understanding Maimonides’ Guide.

It is certainly justified to call this treatise a ‘compendium.’ However, this fact should not mislead the reader about its intellectual quality. Ruah hen is a highly interesting contribution to philosophy treating the fundamental topics of medieval Jewish physics and metaphysics in a clear, straightforward and illuminative way. Ruah hen is attested by a great number of manuscripts; it must have been a quite popular book, and it was probably a basic reading for many medieval Jewish philosophers. Eleazar refers to it quite a few times in his supercommentary. For example, when the ten categories are mentioned, Eleazar sends the reader to Ruah hen for further information, not to Aristotle, Averroes, or Al-Farabi.

Unfortunately, a ‘compendium’ of this sort receives much less attention from modern researchers than it would deserve for its originality and influence. A study on the sources and reception of this work would reveal a lot about medieval Jewish philosophy.

523 Macrobius, Commentarii in Somnium Scipionis, 1.5.5-7; ed. Jacob Willis (Leipzig: Teubner, 1970), 15-16.
Surprisingly enough, the topic of geometrical knowledge comes up in the context of the theory concerning prophecy. In order to understand the reasons for this it is necessary to summarize briefly the Ruah hen’s discussion concerning human intellect and imagination.

In chapter three, the anonymous author enlists four degrees of intellectual knowledge. The order signifies the hierarchy between them; lower grades are pre-requisites for attaining the higher grades:

1. Knowledge of first principles (muskalot rishonot).
2. Knowledge of propositions proved by demonstration.
3. Apprehending the forms of natural substances abstracted from their matter.
4. Apprehending the Active Intellect.

The author also makes a distinction between “theoretical” and “practical” intellect. The above mentioned four degrees are the degrees of theoretical intellect. Practical intellect concerns arts and morals. What is more important, practical intellect cannot work without the cooperation of the imaginative faculty:

The first type [of practical intellect] is the one by which man discovers concerning a thing, which he wants to realize, how to produce it, e.g. the [activity] of the carpenters, mariners, and cultivators of the land and the rest of the arts. No doubt, that this faculty is to be found only with humans and not with the rest of animals, even if it belongs to the activities of the imaginative faculty of man as we shall explain in the next chapter.524

The problem is the following: On the one hand, operations involved in jobs like agriculture, industry, etc. require refined technical knowledge and mental abilities. It is difficult to deny that these are distinctively human activities. Now since intellect is the specific difference of humanity, the aforementioned activities must be based on the intellect. On the other hand it is also difficult to deny that imagination plays a decisive role in them as well. (“Imagination” does not mean only “creativity” but also “representation of sensual data” in this context.) And imagination is a distinctively animal activity according to Aristotelian natural philosophy. Intellect and imagination are sometimes juxtaposed as mutually exclusive categories since imagination concerns sensual reality whereas intellect abstracts from sensual data. Nonetheless, the conclusion that both of them are involved in human arts cannot be avoided.

The next question to be asked is how the aforementioned cooperation between intellect and imagination can be conceptualized. The author proposes the idea of “perfected imagination.” Human imagination is “perfected” by the presence of intellect; that is why it is able to carry out tasks involving intellectual procedures. And this fact also counts for the difference between human and animal imagination. In the “next chapter” the author writes as follows:

Know that the activity of the vegetative soul in man is very different from the activity of vegetative soul in animals and in plants. Indeed, the activities performed by the vegetative soul [fol. 12 r] of man are better and nobler than that of the vegetative soul of animals, and how much more than that of plants!

Similarly, the activity of the imaginative faculty of man – it is a part of the animal soul – is not like the activity of the imaginative faculty in the animals. For by the power of imagination in man a great number of devices and tricks are invented to

524 MS Vienna ÖNB, Heb. 62, fol. 7 r.
produce an artifact that he wishes what is not the case with animals. And all this has been ordered by nature because man needs [for survival] many arts that cannot be perfected except by the virtue of the first type of practical intellect what is from the imaginative faculty and from the incisive faculty […] 

[fol. 12 v] […] And similarly the foreseeing faculty in man by which man can tell the future is due to the perfection of the imaginative faculty. And the Master, the Righteous Guide [=Maimonides] teaches that the imaginative faculty must be perfected for the purposes of prophecy since the prophet is about to know the future concerning practical things and to teach his contemporaries good morals. 

But there is no relationship whatsoever between the Active Intellect – being the cause of prophecy – and these matters [i.e. telling the future and admonishing people]. All what happens is that an emanation coming from the Active Intellect reaches the intellectual faculty and teaches it the truth of reality in its entirety within a moment without premises and demonstrations. And this intellectual emanation emanates to the imaginative [fol. 13 r] faculty as well so that it receive the emanation in order to know tremendous things about the future […] with the help of the Active Intellect and with the help of his own intellect on which [the Active Intellect] has worked.

Now since the imaginative faculty is corporeal, it is beyond doubt that it cannot get rid of corporeality in its apprehension. And even the things that are not corporeal are imagined as corporeal [by the imaginative faculty]. For example, lines or points are known to be incorporeal; nonetheless man draws/represents them with his pen in a way that [they have] properties like the corporeal things since it is easier to apprehend a corporeal thing. Therefore, the imaginative faculty receiving the sublime emanation represents the Active Intellect – being its cause, I mean, the cause of the emanation – as a man [fol. 13 v] standing and speaking to him and telling him the future in speech or showing it to him in riddles [and visions] like, for example, a “staff from almond tree” (cf. Jeremiah 1:11) or a “flaming pot” (Jeremiah 1:13).

The concept that can describe the cooperation between the intellectual and imaginative faculties is emanation. “Emanation” means in the present context a process in which a being higher in hierarchy causes certain properties in a being of lower rank without having the same properties in itself. At the same time, the being of lower rank ascends in the hierarchy of being as a consequence of having the new properties; therefore the process can be called “perfection.” Intellect emanates on the imaginative faculty and perfects it. As a result human imaginative faculty is able to perform a number of intellectual operations that animal imaginative faculty cannot. This solution is inspired by Maimonides’ definition of prophecy as an emanation of the Active Intellect on human intellect on the one hand, and an emanation of the intellectual faculty on the imaginative faculty on the other hand. Prophetic visions are the results of such “cooperation” between intellect and imagination.

Geometrical knowledge is analogous to prophetic knowledge. “Lines” and “points” are incorporeal entities, and as such they are objects of the cognition of the intellect (cf. the third degree of intellect above). Therefore, they cannot be the objects of sense perception. Nonetheless, humans use corporeal representations (drawings, figures) of geometrical objects to facilitate the understanding of theorems and demonstrations. The fact that no lines or points drawn by pen on a piece of paper are actually Euclidean lines or points does not disturb us too much. Thanks to the cooperation between intellect and imagination we are able to “read”

525 MS Vienna, ÖNB, Heb. 62, fol. 11 v -13 v.
these drawings and figures as symbols representing Euclidean lines and points. Biblical narratives about prophetic visions are to be read in the same way according to the author. The topic of geometrical knowledge as a result of cooperation between imagination and intellect is further developed in chapter five of *Ruah heq*

Know that there is a great difference between the apprehension of the imagination and the apprehension of the intellect. For the intellect – due to its subtleness – apprehends only non-corporeal things such as the separate forms [i.e. angels], or it apprehends natural forms abstracted from their matters carrying/bearing them. Now imagination [fol. 14 v] due to its being a corporeal faculty does not apprehend these things at all. It apprehends only the body with its accidents, that is to say, with its colors and shapes and measures and through them [even] the intellect is apprehended by the imagination.

And just like the intellect abstracts the form from its matter even if [form] has no reality except in the matter, similarly, the imagination abstracts the accidents of the body that carries/bears them even if that particular accident has no reality except in the body. For whiteness and blackness *marginal addition: and the rest of the colors*, that are accidents of quality *marg. add.: and in the same way, lines and surfaces, that are accidents of quantity* do not have any existence at all except in the body carrying/bearing them, and the imagination abstracts them from the body. Therefore, whiteness, blackness, and the rest of the colors and in the same way, lines and surfaces are the objects of the imagination just like the forms are the objects of the intellect / intelligibilia [muskalor].

Know that the true intellect is not led astray in its representation [*tsiyur* which follows the reality of the thing in itself, for example [fol. 15 r] when it represents in its intellect the reality of the separated intellects and the reality of the forms carried/born by matter or when it represents the reality of the two upper elements that cannot be perceived by the senses due to their subtleness. Indeed, all these things have reality in themselves outside of the intellect [huts la-sekhel].

[...] [fol. 15 v] And it is known that the imagination errs sometimes and represents things that do not exist by any means [...] and sometimes imagination follows the reality of the thing and in this case its representation will be true. For example when it represents in its imagination the quantity of the sensible things and their quality in accordance with what was perceived from outside or when it represents the quantity of the spheres and their quality and similarly the quality of the earth and its quantity. For these things are proved to us by demonstration which comes from the intellectual faculty. In such a case the representation in the imagination follows the intellect that has brought forth that representation [*tsiyur*]. For the intellect does not represent quantity and quality – since they are accidents of the body – but it [sc. the intellect] does build up the demonstrations necessary [fol. 16 r] for accepting these things as true. And after this the imagination represents the quality of the body and its quantity and preserves it in its imagination.

So we find that imagination can represent true things in two ways. Its representation can follow external sensation, or representation can enter it from the side of intellectual demonstrations. However, its representation never gets rid of the corporeal accidents.\(^{526}\)

\(^{526}\) I could not consult the printed edition. The translation is based on MS Vienna, ÖNB, Heb. 62, fol. 14 r – 15 v.
Imaginative faculty helped by the intellect is able to transcend the limits of sense perception. For example we are able to represent the shape of the Earth as a sphere even if we never saw in fact that the Earth was spherical. Similarly we can draw the shape of an island on a map even if we never saw with our own eyes that island in its entirety. Between the non-corporeal essences of geometrical objects apprehended only by the intellect and the corporeal accidents perceived by our senses there is a third field intermediating between them: models, maps, drawings, and figures that are corporeal realities in themselves representing other corporeal realities never perceived by the senses in such a way. The author probably has in mind this kind of applied geometry when he speaks about “representation” entering the imaginative faculty “from the side of intellectual demonstrations.” Similarly, the lines and surfaces mentioned as objects of imagination are probably not meant to be geometrical entities (they were declared to be incorporeal in the previous quotation!) but the individual shapes of corporeal bodies. Nonetheless, “pure” geometrical knowledge is instrumental in representing them, although this representation is the job of the imaginative faculty.

At the beginning of the quoted passage the author claims that the proper objects of intellect are “separate forms” and “natural forms abstracted from their matters.” This corresponds to the third and fourth degrees of intellectual knowledge mentioned in chapter three (see above). They are contrasted with knowledge gained through the imaginative faculty not the first two degrees. Does the author imply by this that the first two degrees of intellectual knowledge (i.e. knowledge of first principles and conclusions derived from them) are not purely intellectual but imagination also plays some role in them? There is no explicit answer to this question in the text. I am inclined to believe that the answer is yes since the last two paragraphs of the quoted passage do speak about demonstrative knowledge in which the role of imagination is indispensable.

The reader might wonder what kind of reality Euclidean points and lines have according to Ruah hen. There is no explicit statement about this in the text (besides the already quoted sentence that they are “known to be incorporeal”). The simplest way to understand the author is that geometrical entities belong to the objects of the third degree of intellect, that is to say, they are forms abstracted from their matter not existing outside the mind without matter. At the end of chapter five there is a short remark concerning entities existing only in the intellect but “not outside of the intellect” [huts la-sekel].527 Although only universals mentioned as examples of this group, it is convenient to suppose that mathematical objects also belong there.

“Representation” [tsiyur] is often mentioned in the text so it is useful to outline the Ruah hen’s ideas concerning it. The Hebrew word is a nomen actionis of the verb “to shape, to draw, to form” [le-tsuyyer] and connected to the noun tsura what is the terminus technicus for (Aristotelian) ‘form’ in Tibbonide Hebrew diction. Thus the noun tsiyyur is comparable to Arabic tašawwur and Latin informatio. It designates “formation;” the process through which a certain matter receives a certain form or – and this is the more important in the present context – the senses receive the forms of the sensed objects (what the Latin scholastics called ‘species’) through a medium in the sensual organs. Besides these senses in the Ruah hen the word has a further meaning: it refers to the process in which the imaginative faculty “processes” the sensual data received by the organs and composes complex images of the external reality:

Now since all the sensual data [hargashot] arrive to {marginal addition: one place and that is} the brain, which is the place, intended for them, the imaginative faculty is able to combine different kinds of sensual data with each other. For example when

527 Cf. MS Vienna, ÖNB, Heb. 62, fol. 16 v.
somebody sees a white man who is singing, then he apprehends and represents [ṭsiyyer] in his imagination the color and the sound and knows that this sound what he is hearing belongs to the white man [fol. 6 r] whom he is seeing. And this happens by composition and this is the reason why he is able to recognize that this is the singer when he sees him even if he does not hear him. And in the same way, when he is hearing him he can recognize that this is the white man even if he does not see him.

It can be taken for granted that Eleazar read Ruah hen since he refers to it many times in the supercommentary. (We shall see in the third part that commenting on Genesis 18: 1 Eleazar explicitly refers to chapter four of Ruah hen and quotes a passage concerning prophecy from it.) I think his remarks concerning points, lines, moment, and time should be understood against this background. He partly presupposes the Ruah hen’s ideas, partly modifies them.

The analogy between prophecy and geometry no matter how witty and illuminative is the Ruah hen’s account of it has a problematic aspect. We do not know what the Active Intellect is, for our intellect, as long as it is connected to our body, is unable to grasp the essences of separated intellects – this is explicitly admitted by the author of Ruah hen. Our intellect can “apprehend” the Active Intellect by which the author means getting into contact with or getting attached to the Active Intellect. This “apprehension” has beneficial effects: we can foresee the future, understand the truth of certain propositions concerning metaphysical reality without discursive reasoning and our imagination is even able to represent noncorporeal reality in a corporeal way. But this apprehension does not result in our mind’s grasping the essence of Active Intellect and other separate intellects – not to speak about God Himself – which are represented in our imagination in a corporal way.

Prophetic knowledge, its imaginative-corporeal aspects notwithstanding, is superior to discursive knowledge. Certain truths are not revealed to us through premises and demonstration but through visions. Therefore, in certain cases our imagination practically takes precedence over our intellect in the cognition of metaphysical realm. What cannot be perceived by the intellect is represented by prophetic imagination and then the intellect helped by prophecy can get closer to truth.

Now as for geometry, the author of Ruah hen seems to presuppose that our intellect does understand the essence of point, line and surface. Drawings, figures have only auxiliary role in geometrical knowledge. Their role is dispensable in principle. This is a very important difference between prophetic and geometric knowledge.

However, is Ruah hen right concerning this question? Or is it rather the case that the analogy between prophecy and geometry is even stricter than the Ruah hen imagined? Do we really know what the essence of a point is? Paradoxes concerning continuity and their “applied” versions, especially the famous paradox about time having no parts – aren’t they evidences that our intellect actually does not grasp the essences of Euclidean objects, and consequently, the essence of time? If someone objects, “How can we demonstrate propositions about Euclidean objects, once we do not understand what they are?” the answer is offered by the analogy between prophecy and geometry. Just like we are able to prove propositions concerning the separate intellects whose essence we do not know, similarly in geometry failure of grasping the true essences of the objects is not a hindrance for proving propositions about them. I think Eleazar was lead by such considerations in formulating his supercommentary on Numbers 7:72.

528 MS Vienna, ÖNB, Heb. 62, fol. 5 v – 6 r.
529 Theorems concerning conic sections initiated discussions concerning the nature of geometrical knowledge among Arab mathematicians already in the late tenth and early eleventh century. Al-Sijzi raised the following problem. Normally a sentence must be understood (represented in the mind – taṣawwur) before we judge its
First he refers to his own supercommentary on Ibn Ezra ad Exodus 33: 21. This is a very important and notoriously difficult passage in Ibn Ezra. For the moment it is sufficient to quote Eleazar’s remarks concerning the sentences he himself quoted above:

**AND IF YOU CONSIDER THE EDGE OF COUNTING** that is, its head, THE EVERYTHING, blessed be He, who is One, AND ALL THE NUMBERS ARE OUT OF UNITS, you will find that the One is Everything on every principle [so it is] most praiseful to say “YYY is our God, YYY is One!” (Deuteronomy 6:4).

[…] **AND HE IS THE ONE WHO HAS NO IMAGES** since all the images are corporeal, and all the corporeal things are bodies and all the bodies are composed from units [lit. “ones”] and thus, there is no similarity between the Former and all the forms, since all the forms were formed by Him just like all the numbers proceed from the One.

And every “one” that is a body is not called “one” in the proper sense because it is composed of parts and if the composition is divided then the unity in question is over. And every “one” in the counting after it [sc. the One] like 2 or 3 or 4 is not one in the proper sense since it is obvious that ‘two’ is composed out of two units [lit. “ones”].

And He – blessed be he – is one, and there is no other besides Him. And if you ask, “If so, how shall we represent [netsayyer] his unity?” I will tell you that there is no other besides Him who would be similar to Him among all the existents – this is his true unity.\(^{530}\)

Eleazar uses the term ‘representation’ in a sense similar to the one we have seen in the Ruah hen. The only difference is that whereas the Ruah hen defined the term as an activity of the imaginative faculty, Eleazar presumably speaks of intellectual representation here. This difference does not seem to influence the bulk of the argument. Representation involves composition: out of fragmented information human mind builds up a unified account of a certain thing. Now since God’s nature involves no composition it is appropriate to ask “how shall we represent his unity?” Answering this question Eleazar subscribes to the prestigious tradition of negative theology. What we can know about God is that nothing is similar to Him. This topic is further developed in the comment on Numbers 7:72 already quoted above:

And just like the One has no reality [composed] of parts in the representation [tsiyyur], in a similar way time contains past, present, and future. And this is a very obscure thing, namely, that its parts would have any existence. For it is appropriate to everything composed of parts that all the parts or at least some of them should be found in the thing simultaneously. And these two aspects are not found concerning time, since its parts [etc…]

In this passage Eleazar draws analogy between the incomprehensible nature of God and the incomprehensible nature of time. The famous paradox about time having no parts is retold in order to establish this point. Time is “mirroring” God’s essence in a way: God is not

\[^{530}\text{truth value (taṣdiq). Now the famous theorem about the asymptotes of hyperbola converging to each other infinitely without ever meeting contains the idea of infinity and as such its meaning has no representation (taṣawwar) in the mind. Nonetheless, the theorem is proved to be true so we are able to judge its truth value! It is possible that Eleazar was influenced by such considerations as well. On al-Sijzi, see: M. Roshdi Rashied, “Al-Sijzi et Maïmonide: Commentaire mathématique et philosophique de la proposition II-14 des Coniques d’Appolonius,” Archives internationales d’histoire des sciences, 37 (1987): 263-296.}\]
composed of parts, and time, although dividable into past and future, has its parts in a very obscure way. Therefore, both the essence of God and the essence of time are beyond the grasp of human understanding.

Eleazar puts the problems of continuity, points, moments, and time into an overtly neo-Platonic doctrinal context. These are mysterious entities reflecting the Greatest Mystery, the essence of God. This is a major difference between his and the Ruah hen’s approach.

At the same time, this passage also testifies that he uses the phrase “having no reality in representation” in the sense “having no representation” or “not capable of being represented.” From this we can conclude that the phrase “x has no reality in the intellect” means in Eleazar’s jargon that intellect is unable to grasp x.

Now Eleazar applies the same line of argument to Euclidean points as well. “Point is something that has no parts” according to the definition of Euclid. The question, “If so, how can we represent it?” can be asked again. And Eleazar’s answer is that we cannot represent it:


Eleazar probably agrees with the author of Ruah hen that Euclidean points are not corporeal things or angels so they do not exist “outside of the intellect.” They are similar to the universals in this respect. That’s why they are called “mental points” since they exist only in the mind. However, unlike the author of Ruah hen, he emphasizes that point “has no representation” – presumably in the intellect – due to the fact that it “has no parts” and things that are not composed of parts cannot be represented properly by human mind. He probably understands the statement attributed to Euclid on the point’s having “no reality in the intellect” as meaning that the point “has no representation” in the intellect. The analogy between prophecy and geometry might work here: just like our intellect is unable to represent the essences of the separate intellects and God but can have only a “glimpse” of them, similarly it is unable to grasp the essence of the Euclidean point. Nonetheless, a “glimpse” of the essences of geometrical objects emanated from the Active Intellect on ours can enable our intellect to prove propositions concerning them and our imagination to draw figures representing them.

Formulating these views Eleazar stands in a distinctively neo-Pythagorean and neo-Platonic tradition that perceives mathematical objects as mirroring divine realities. Proclus in his commentary on Euclid’s Elements asks the question how human imagination can apprehend an indivisible entity such as a Euclidean point. Answering this question Proclus makes difference between the “idea of point” that is indivisible and the “image of point” that is divisible and apprehensible for the senses. For the correct reading of a geometrical figure cooperation between intellect and imagination is required.

Proclus conceives a hierarchical order between the true intellectual point and its images and realizations in other geometrical objects and in corporeal substances. The point is a source of dynamic emanations in Proclus’ vision: the fact that the heaven revolves around a point, namely the center of the universe, which is a Euclidean object in Proclus’ opinion indicates that Nature as such is dependent on a Euclidean point (and on other mathematical entities as well). The Euclidean point, which belongs to the “higher region” of incorporeal existents, is the ultimate source of a dynamic process that creates the physical world:
This is why in that higher region the point is completely without parts and yet, although its being is determined by the Limit, it secretly contains the potentiality of the Unlimited, by virtue of which it generates all intervals; and the procession of all the intervals does not exhaust its infinite capacity.\(^{531}\)

Such neo-Platonic and neo-Pythagorean ideas found their ways into early medieval Islamic and Jewish philosophy. Ibn Ezra himself was certainly influenced by this tradition. It seems to me that Eleazar ben Mattityah writing at the end of the thirteenth century was still close in spirit to Ibn Ezra’s neo-Platonism and probably had access to neo-Platonic sources in Arabic, Hebrew, or even Greek.

Ibn Ezra’s enigmatic comment about the number eleven having been “begotten” by the number ten is interpreted by Eleazar as referring to the “mystery” of point dividing line, moment dividing past and future, or line dividing surface. As dividers these entities has no parts just like God has no parts. They were “begotten” by ten, i.e. by God, in a sense since they are “mirroring” some aspects of the Divine Mystery “in continuous quantity.”

As we have seen, the author of *Ruah hen* emphasized that the Active Intellect was not similar to the things produced by its emanation. Eleazar here speaks about a different sort of emanation: the source is replicated somehow in the result. Hence the phrase “begotten” is appropriate. I will argue in a different paper that Eleazar’s (and as a matter of fact, Ibn Ezra’s) theory of emanation is very different from Maimonides’ and many of his followers’ one despite of the similar (sometimes verbally identical) formulas used by both groups. I will characterize the first version of emanation theory – in which the result mirrors the source in a way – as neo-Platonic, whereas the second version – in which no similarity is allowed between the source and the result – as Aristotelian.

The non-existence of point both within and outside of mind can be interpreted in a neo-Platonic framework as a further analogy between the point and the One. The One is “beyond being” according to a key formula based on a famous passage of Plato’s *Republic*; it does not exist in the normal sense of the word. In Plotinus’ system existence is associated with intellect that is the first emanation from the One. If geometrical point does not exist that might mean for a neo-Platonic thinker that it does not belong to the realm of intellect / existence; therefore it must come from a source higher than intellect / existence. In this sense geometrical objects can be perceived as sort of proofs for the existence of God: since their essence cannot be grasped by the intellect they prove that intellect is not the ultimate cause of reality but there must be something beyond it.

However, these points are not made even implicitly in Eleazar’s text and we cannot be sure that he knew or accepted neo-Platonic tradition to that degree that he could develop such a theory. As far as I know the formula “the One is beyond existence” is attested neither in Eleazar’s works nor in his chief sources such as Ibn Ezra, Maimonides, Samuel Ibn Tibbon, and the *Ruah hen*. At the same time it is possible that Eleazar used a neo-Platonic source that wanted to establish the analogy between the non-reality of geometrical objects and the super-reality of the One. Eleazar definitely knew Greek; he was in Candia, Crete in 1228 and perhaps he spent more time in the Byzantine zone. He could have communicated with Byzantine neo-Platonists orally and the possibility cannot be excluded either that he consulted written texts in Greek. Further research into Byzantine neo-Platonic texts might unfold great surprises in the future.

Usually, point is associated with number one in neo-Pythagorean and neo-Platonic tradition. Eleazar’s choice for number eleven is probably an ad hoc response to Ibn Ezra’s text. (I have not found any other source linking point to eleven yet.) His decision was

corroborated by the fact that eleven is a prime number (“having no parts” cf. the last paragraph of the comment) posited in between two dividable numbers representing dividable continuous quantities such as line and past or future. Furthermore, number ten is strongly associated with number one and thus with God Himself in Ibn Ezra’s numerology. The Hebrew letter representing ten is also the first letter of the tetragrammaton. Therefore, the idea that eleven’s proceeding from ten is analogous to point’s proceeding from God must have been very attractive to Eleazar.

His interpretation also evidences that geometrical objects, time, and moment could have been described as “having no reality outside of the intellect” even in a profoundly neo-Platonic mystical-theological context. Here we encounter an “archeological shift” to use Foucault’s expression: the same sentences and the same propositions make different statements because their enunciative function is not the same. Bonet and Eleazar agree that “line is analogous with time and point is analogous with moment.” However, Bonet situates the statement in an enunciative field that is made up of statements about mathematical entities and the semantics of temporal phrases, whereas Eleazar inserts it into a hierarchical succession of statements mirroring the enigmatic nature of the Godhead on different levels: theology (God), arithmetic (one), geometry (Euclidean point), natural philosophy (time and moment), and halakha (Rabbi Jose’s opinion about the beginning of Shabbat).

Eleazar’s strategy of constructing enigmatic objects is also noteworthy. A simple and archaic consideration lies in the background: chance can be a stamp of necessity. What seems to be a mere coincidence from a limited perspective might turn out to be a deeper necessity once a higher perspective is adopted. By pointing out “accidental coincidences” (God has no parts, “mental point” has no parts, time has non-existing parts) Eleazar suggests that a profound necessity operates beyond the surface of accidents: ‘eleven’ standing for ‘mental point’ and its variants (lines, surfaces, and moment) is “begotten” by ten – a number associated to God since “by chance” the first Hebrew letter of God’s name is the tenth letter of the Hebrew alphabet. Moreover, just like God has no parts, mental point and its variants are also indivisible at least from certain perspective.

All these facts call for a “higher perspective.” A change in the subjective position is required. The “subject” involved in the discourse is expected to go through an “ascension:” through different stages the subject adopts different perceptual modes and describes different sort of objects situated in different domains. The first step is to read the relevant text – the uninitiated eyes seeing only manuscript and ink-drawings are replaced by the competent eyes seeing letters, words, sentences and texts (even textual corruptions and possible emendations). The second step is to understand the meaning of the text – the corporeal eyes are replaced by mental eyes seeing “mental objects.” The third step is to recognize the mystery that transcends the boundaries of theology, arithmetic, geometry, natural philosophy, and halakha; but still, nonetheless, that is incarnated in diverse ways in all the aforementioned discursive domains. A sort of mystical eye is required for this activity. And the mental objects are transformed into mystical objects: “Euclidean point” mirroring the nature of the Godhead is not the same “Euclidean point” that appears in geometrical theorems in the normal discursive practice of geometry.

532 The process of constructing different perceptual modes and objects can be modeled again by Merleau-Ponty’s theory of “field of culture;” cf. Merleau-Ponty: L’Institution, 98-104.

533 This is not to say that Eleazar implicitly or explicitly drew distinction between geometrical and mystical objects: there is no reason to think so. But the lack of distinction at the level of proposition or at the level of Eleazar’s consciousness does not exclude the possibility of distinction at the level of discursive practice. On the contrary. The relevance of Eleazar’s statement, the reason why it is interesting and inspiring is exactly the fact that the unity of “Euclidean point” (at the level of the theory) covers a difference between a geometrical and a mystical object (at the level of discursive practice). Due to this difference “Euclidean point” is relevant to more than one disciplines and it acquires certain “energy.”
However, the third stage does not produce propositional knowledge that is manageable according to clear schemata as is the case with the first two stages. Here we can recall Maimonides’ teaching about the difference between divine science and the “normal sciences,” such as geometry and medicine: the latter are capable of systematic disposition whereas the former is manageable only through “allusions” and “flashes” of illumination. This is not to say that the third stage lacks any scientific norm; the norm is the lack of clarity and systematic exposition and the presence of allusions pointing to coincidences without explaining them. The enigma remains an enigma.

The reader can observe that despite the obvious neo-Platonic leanings of Eleazar’s text on the level of ideas his interpretation is in conformity with a possible reading of Maimonides on the level of discursive practices. On the one hand the divine science cannot be approached without knowledge of preparatory sciences, such as geometry or natural philosophy. Divine science also has a body of propositional knowledge – no doubt that the theorem “God has no parts” belonged to that domain of propositional knowledge for Eleazar as well. On the other hand, divine science transcends the previous domains and enters a region where only allusions and “flashes” can orient the human visitor.

Nonetheless, a further difference can be pointed out between Bonet and Eleazar. Bonet admits the existence of enigmas: we have seen that he talked about creation out of nothing as a mysterious subject that human mind cannot fully comprehend. However, unlike Eleazar, Bonet locates the enigma not in “mysterious” objects, such as Euclidean point, but in an article of Jewish faith. Here we can detect two different strategic choices in forming discursive objects and managing the enigmas of divine science.

In a significant way, Eleazar abandons the subjective position “advocate” and starts to speak in his own name in a passage of the text quoted above:

And Eleazar says:
There is a sect among the Mutakallimūn [who say] that moment is a part of time standing between past and future. And this is the same as the debate between Rabbi Judah and Rabbi Jose in the chapter “Ba-me madliqin” (Babylonian Talmud, Shabbat 34 b) concerning the interval between day and night [bein ha-shemashot]: Rabbi Judah said, [the interval between day and night takes as much time as] “half mile [walk]” – so Rabbi Judah’s opinion inclines to the aforementioned sect’s one. On the other hand, Rabbi Jose said, “like a wink of the eye, it is impossible to stand by it, this one [night] enters and that one [day] goes away” – So Rabbi Jose, “his depth with him!” (Gittin 67 a; Erubin 51 a), goes after Aristotle’s opinion.

Here Eleazar presents his own discovery about the meaning of a passage in the Talmud. Rabbi Judah and Rabbi Jose’s statements about the beginning of Shabbat are relocated in an enunciative field which is not about halakha but about the nature of time. Thus, the talmudic text is made to state “opinions” about the nature of the ‘now’ in the Aristotelian sense.

Eleazar’s practice can be interpreted within the framework of “post-Maimonidean research program.” Just like in the case of Samuel Ibn Tibbon, the great discovery that makes Eleazar to abandon the role of humble commentator and to use an independent, assertive voice is not something that concerned the nature of things but something that concerned the presence of philosophical ideas (even incorrect philosophical ideas) in a sacred Jewish text.

The ideological implications of Eleazar’s statement should also not be missed. If a talmudic debate turns out to be not only about halakha, but also about philosophy, then philosophy is not “alien wisdom” but an integral part of Jewish tradition. Although these
implications are not pointed out in the text there can be hardly any doubt that Eleazar here made a statement that was reusable in the ideological debates called “Maimonidean controversies” by modern scholars.

Foucault’s assumption that ideology influences sciences at the level of their very existence seems to be corroborated by this example. Interpreting the talmudic debate in terms of natural philosophy could not be possible without the well-established practice of relocating biblical statements in enunciative fields belonging to philosophy and sciences. This practice was ideological by itself. And its result had far-fetching ideological consequences that concerned not only the role of “Greek sciences” in Jewish theology, but such matters as the style of education, spirituality, leadership, and community life.
Chapter 5: Moses Nagari: “One, Imaginative Moment”

Moses Nagari’s supercommentary testifies the reading keli taam and contains criticism of the “holders of far-fetched ideas” – presumably the ones who interpreted the word be-reshit as referring to an eternal creation. (In the next section we shall discuss who these people might have been).

And some say that the ‘in’ carries instrumental sense [nose keli taam] and the sense that it should not come to anybody’s mind that heaven and earth have no beginning, this is why [Scripture] says be-reshit, “in a beginning…”: His intention in this saying is that the be- is neither superfluous [nosefet] nor is it necessary to suppose that [“in the beginning”] is governed by [some other word] as the holders of far-fetched ideas want. In fact, [fol. 4 v] the phrase stands independently bearing the meaning that was intended in this verse. And its explanation shall be the following: Since many people, even if they agree that reality in a general way is caused by the First Cause, they still consider it necessary that [the world] is eternal as a consequence of His eternity [hayoto nitsi be-nitsahuto] and that it has no beginning [hathala] in absolute sense. And this is an arbitrary solution far from the faith and religion. The intention of the meaning of the word be-reshit teaches that in a beginning [ba-tehilla] [God] – blessed be He! – brought [the world] into existence and emanated it [ve-heetsilo].

The sentence about the be- not being superfluous [nosefet] might be an implicit criticism of Bonet’s supercommentary that read nosefet instead of nose keli taam. As we have seen Moses Nagari probably consulted Bonet’s supercommentary.

In the introduction to the supercommentary we find a further remark concerning the first moment of creation:

Even if existence in general was emanated from God without any amount of time except for one imaginative moment [ki im ha-atta ahat meduma], still it is possible to speak about prior and posterior parts from the point of view of existence.

What does Moses mean by “one imaginative moment” in which creation took place? In this case the source can be identified with certainty. The phrase “imaginative moment” appears in the same doctrinal context in Judah Romano’s commentary on the creation-narrative. Judah Romano was a very significant Jewish philosopher in the first half of the fourteenth century in Rome. He was probably an elder contemporary and a compatriot of Moses Nagari. The latter refers to Judah Romano’s Hebrew translation of the Liber de causis

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534 ve-ha-taam as opposed to ve-taamam of the textus receptus.
535 MS Vienna, ÖNB, Heb. 106, fol. 4 r-v.
536 MS Vienna, ÖNB, Heb. 106, fol. 1 v/c.
(completed in 1325) at the beginning of the supercommentary. It is possible that Judah Romano was actually the master of Moses Nagari. In any case it is very difficult to imagine that they would have never met each other in their life.

Judah Romano writes the following about Genesis 1: 1:

IN THE BEGINNING does not refer to real time but to imaginative time \( zeman medumme \) for we are unable to imagine the precedence of one thing over the other except with the help of time.

A couple of lines later Judah Romano summarizes the meaning of Genesis 1: 1 thus:

The explanation of this sentence [i.e. Genesis 1: 1] in a general way is that the First Cause emanated first \( tehilla \) all the existents higher or lower. By “lower” I mean the first matter together with its four forms. Now before the emanation of corporeal reality the spiritual emanation [took place] by which I mean the separate intellects and the souls of the heavenly spheres. And even if one emanation did not precede the other truly speaking, for in one imaginative moment \( ba\-atta\ ahat medumma \) the emanation took place, still, nonetheless, there is natural precedence in this case according to the ideas of some sages [saying] that the cause is a maker of the caused thing \( li\-hyot ha-illaha sbbat ha-alul \) ⁵³⁹.

The last sentence is followed by a juxtaposition of two theories of creation. The first one is the usual approach of Arabic and Jewish philosophers: God emanated the second intellect, the second intellect the third, etc. the chain ending with corporeal existence. The second is the usual approach of Latin scholastics: God created everything without meditation, since only God can create. The quite difficult last sentence in the passage quoted above perhaps is meant to be a harmonistic formula: God alone created everything, but He created spiritual reality as a cause of the corporeal reality. Thus, the intellects operated as causes already at the moment of their creation – that’s why we can speak about their priority in creation in spite of the fact that they were not created earlier than the corporeal things. And since they were causes already in the first moment the model of the successive emanation of intellects is not totally out of place, since “the cause is a maker of the caused thing.”

Judah Romano was apparently inclined to prefer the scholastic formula to the Arabic-Jewish tradition of Aristotelianism; nonetheless, he had a reason to retain the latter. As shall be shown below the idea of the hierarchy of being was very important for him – and this hierarchy had to be founded in the divine act of creation. The theory of the successive emanations of the intellects enabled him to posit a clear-cut hierarchy of being in the moment when God created the universe.

Judah Romano was certainly able to read Christian scholastic texts in Latin. ⁵⁴⁰ He translated long passages from Aquinas and Giles of Rome into Hebrew. ⁵⁴¹ I think the idea of “imaginative time” came from a passage of Giles of Rome’s Super libro Sententiarum.

In the third questio of Distintcio XII of the second book Giles tries to define in what sense the world was created in time (\( in\ tempore \)). There are two strong arguments against the

⁵³⁹ MS New York, JTS, Lutzky 2362, fol. 2 v. (Emphasis is mine.)
phrase *in tempore*. Aristotle defined its meaning as being “bracketed” by time. Giles summarizes the argument we have already met in Ibn Ezra and Maimonides: The application of Aristotle’s definition to “creation in time” would result in the absurdity that time existed before the creation of the world. The second objection comes from no lesser authority than Augustine who argues that the world was not created in time but *with time* (*cum tempore*).\(^{542}\) Giles insists that it is possible to say that the world was created in time without disagreeing with Augustine. The formula “the world was created in time” is true or false according to which of the possible meanings is assigned to the phrase *in tempore*.

Giles bases his solution on a neo-Platonic tradition that he learnt from [Ps.-] Dionysius and Proclus (he explicitly refers to *On the Divine Names* chapter 5 and *Elements of Theology*, theorem 54). Time (*tempus*) and eternity (*evum*) are contrasted as two “measures” (*mensurae*) that can measure reality: eternity measures being (*esse*) and time measures motion. Things that are capable of being moved in one way or another are all “in time” in the sense that they are measured by time. Thus time distinguishes two ontological realms in Giles opinion: there are temporal things (*temporalia*) and eternal things.

“Being in time” is an intrinsic characteristic of the first group. They are in time as a moving object is said to be “in motion.” And they are in time, since they *suffer* from time (*patintur a tempore*), that is to say, they are gradually decomposed by time. This point is made explicit in the subsequent *questio*:

Alterius autem circa hoc queritur. Quomodo ‘essendi in’ accipitur mundum esse factum ‘in’ tempore. Respondeo dicendum quod cum philosophus in iii physicorum assignet multos modos ‘essendi in’ mundus esse factum in tempore reducetur ad ullum modum ‘essendi in’ sicut ea quae sunt grecorum sunt in rege eorum: et sicut omnino motiis enim res mota est in movente; et per consequens sicut alteratus est in alterante: hoc enim mota que sunt grecorum sunt in rege grecorum: et omnia quae sunt in quocunque regno sunt in rege illius regni: quia rex de omnibus eis facit voluntatem sua: et omnibus eis utitur et reducit ea ad modum suum. sic mundus quantum ad temporalia est factus in tempore: quia omnia temporalia reducuntur ad modum temporis: ut suis spatii transeant sicut transit tempus: et omnia sunt in tempore: sicut res mote in movente: sicut res alterate in alterante: quia alterantur a tempore. Omnia tabescunt et senescunt a tempore: et per consequens omnia corrumpuntur a tempore: quia idem est ire ad senium et ad corruptionem. et ideo bene dictus est quod male nos mensurat tempus quia mensurando nos facit nos senescere et ire ad corruptionem.\(^{543}\)

Giles introduces further distinctions between temporal and eternal beings and concludes that only God is an eternal being in the proper sense. Everything else even if not bracketed by time fails to be eternal in the full sense of the world. This implies according to Giles that everything besides God is temporal. In this sense the entire created world is in time even if not “bracketed” or “encompassed” by time. According to Aristotle’s definition of ‘in time’ the heavenly bodies are not in time. Following Dionysius’ neo-Platonic ideas Giles is

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\(^{543}\) Giles of Rome: *Excellentissimi sacre theologie doctoris divini Egidii Romani... Super libro Sententiarum* (Venetis: Johannes Mocenico, 1482). The edition has no pagination. The passages refered to are to be found slightly before the middle of the volume. A point of orientation is the inscription “Distinctio XII” on the top of the pages. I take the first page of Distinctio XII to be folio 1 recto and number the subsequent folios according to the usual conventions. Thus the quoted passage is to be found on “folio 8 v/d.” So the reader should find the beginning of Distinctio XII and then count 8 folios and on the verso of the 8th folio in the second column the quoted passage will be found. Perhaps this is the easiest way to identify the page. I used the digitalized copy available on Gallica (www.gallica.fr.).
able to assign a sense to the phrase ‘in tempore’ according to which even the heavenly bodies are in time.

By the same token Giles also admits that not every part of the world is temporal in every respect. The angels, eternal bliss, and the fire of hell are creatures that will never cease to exist. Therefore, Giles argues, they participate in eternity without being eternal *simpliciter*, like God.

In sum, Giles concludes, the world in its entirety is temporal in the sense that some aspects of it and of all its parts without exception are temporal. But it is not temporal in every respect. If the phrase *in tempore* is taken to mean that the world is temporal in *some* of its respects, then it is justified to say that the world was created in time. However, if *in tempore* means that *every* aspect of the world is temporal then the proposition “the world is in time” is false and consequently “the world was created in time” is also false.

Therefore, according to Giles, it is possible to say that the world was created in time even if it is not bracketed by time. By this he means that the world is temporal and it started to “suffer” from time from the moment it was created. On the other hand Augustine is also right in saying that the world is not created in time but *with* time, since no time preceded its existence. Augustine’s formula is useful to exclude the mistake of the eternity of the world; however, in itself the first formula is “truer” (*verius*) since it points out an important metaphysical property of the created world, namely that none of its parts are completely devoid of temporality.

At the same time, Giles emphasizes that by saying that the world was created in time it is not implied that God’s creative activity was conditioned by time or anything else:


Ideo argumentum non est contra nos: immo pro nobis: quia si illa factio fuit in principio temporis: consequentia est quod res temporales per illam factionem producte fuerunt facte in tempore: ut ex hoc ipse mundus ratione suarum partium temporali fuit factus cum tempore et in tempore. ratione autem suarum partium non temporalium sciendum quod huiusmodi: factus fuit mundus cum tempore: sed non in tempore. 544

The world was created in the first moment, in the beginning of time (in principio temporis). In the quoted passage Giles concludes from this fact that the world was created in tempore. This is the point where the tension between the Aristotelian and Platonic notions of time becomes evident. We have seen that for Sen Bonet de Lunel the significance of the formula “in the first moment God created…” lied in the fact that this formula excludes the possibility that creation took place “in time.” A moment is not a part of time. On the other hand, for Giles, the significance of the formula is exactly to establish the thesis that the world was created in time. By this Giles did not want to contradict the Aristotelian principle that moment is no part of time just like point is no part of line. He meant by this that it is an important ontological property of the created world that it participates in time. And this

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544 *Super libro Sententiarium*, Distinctio XII, “fol. 8 r/b.”
ontological property characterized the world already in the first moment of its existence. In this sense the world was in time already in the first moment which was not in time in the Aristotelian sense.

At another place Giles tries to bridge the gap between the Aristotelian and Platonic concepts of time by saying that from the moment of their creation the things started to “suffer” from time: “Cum ergo omne quod patitur a tempore: dicatur esse in tempore: mundus quia statim factus incepit pati a tempore: potest dici factus in tempore.”

Although this is not made explicit, Giles would probably agree that creatio activa is not temporal in the sense that it is not “subjected” to time; whereas creatio passiva is. Being created meant being subjected to time for the creatures, but to create did not mean being subjected to time for God. Time was not a framework for God’s creating the world; but the world as created by God was conditioned by time. One might perhaps say, God created the world to be in time.

Giles definitely accepts the truth of the statement “the world was created by God in time.” However, the statement “God created the world in time” does not seem to mean exactly the same thing for him. Would he agree with Sen Bonet de Lunel that the phrase “in a moment” means exactly the same thing when applied to creation and when applied to processes in the created world? Or would he prefer Narboni’s view that it cannot mean the same thing in both cases? This problem is not discussed any further in the text. An intelligent reader with Jewish background as Judah Romano presumably was might have felt inspired to develop Giles’ ideas to this direction.

Responding to a counter argument Giles highlights the difference between Aristotle’s position and the truth of the Catholic Church:

[...] secundum philosophum non omnia sunt facta: sed multa sunt coeterna deo. secundum veritatem autem tempus non precessit omnia facta: nisi forte loquimur de tempore imaginato: non de tempore secundum veritatem.

A peculiar problem of the Maimonidean-styled theories of creation comes to the fore in this remark. If time is a created thing then God cannot have temporal precedence, or – to put it into simpler terms – God cannot be older than the universe. This sentence might sound surprising and suspicious of heresy for the ears of those religious persons whose philosophical education was not as deep as Maimonides or Giles of Rome’s one. Temporal endurance was a basic criterion for establishing the ‘excellence’ of one thing over the other. If the world “equals” God in age – does it not equal Him in other respects as well?! How can something equal God in any respect?!

According to Aristotle, Giles writes, if something is not preceded by time – that is to say, there was no time before its existence – then it is co-eternal with God. According to “the truth” (i.e. Catholic faith) this is not the case. The world’s existence is not preceded by time – there was no real time when the world did not exist – nonetheless, the world is not co-eternal with God. To help understanding this point Giles mentions the possibility of an imaginative (not real) time that can be imagined to precede the existence of the world and in which only God existed. By implication, the first moment of the real time, the moment of creation, can be described as the last moment of the imaginative time, an imaginative moment in this sense.

Judah Romano’s interpretation of Genesis 1: 1 reads the best against this background:

545 Super libro Sententiarum, Distinctio XII, “fol. 7v/d – 8 r/a.”
546 Super libro Sententiarum, Distinctio XII, “fol. 8 r/b.”
IN THE BEGINNING does not refer to real time but to imaginative time [\textit{zemanim mediumme}] for we are unable to imagine the precedence of one thing over the other except with the help of time.

The point of Genesis 1: 1 according to this interpretation is to establish God’s precedence over the world. It is essential to maintain the thesis of God’s priority in order to exclude the undesired consequences of Aristotle’s approach. As a pagan, Aristotle had little worries about a possible deification of the world; therefore, nothing prohibited him to think that the world is “coeternal” with God. To contradict Aristotle and to exclude the possibility of the “deification” of the world we should insist on the temporal priority of God.

On the other hand, Maimonides had good reasons to deny the temporal priority of God. There is no temporal priority without a pre-existing time implying the pre-existence of heavens... Judah Romano solved the problem by positing an imaginative time, as a concession to the weakness of human mind, in which God could be temporally prior to the universe without implying the pre-existence of the heavens as the substrate of time.

In the supercommentary on Exodus 3: 15 Moses Nagari writes the following:

Since Ibn Ezra perfectly realized from the posited statements that God is eternal according to the attribute of perfect eternity without being touched by change in any way of the various ways he intended [also] another statement which follows from the [previous one] that this propriety belongs only to God’s existence, for it is not possible for other existents besides Him not to be touched by change at some occasion out of the [possible] occasions. Indeed, you should know that change and the lack of perfect substantiality that belong permanently to the parts of [created] existence do not exist in themselves in any way after they are represented [in the mind as] being parts of the existence when they are examined. And indeed, the closer an existent is to the One that is eternal and first, the stronger the eternity will be in it and the weaker the change [will be in it]. And what is farther from Him, the change is necessarily stronger and the eternity is weaker in it. Generally, [the things] are measured according to their proximity and distance from the first existence as we have posited.\textsuperscript{547}

In the continuation of the text Moses Nagari reconstructs Ibn Ezra’s teaching about the three parts of the created world in terms of eternity and change: in what aspects they share the nature of eternity and in what aspects the nature of change. The place an existent has in the great chain of being is determined, or better to say, “measured” by the degree it participates in eternity and change.

Such interpretation of the hierarchy of being is very unusual in post-Maimonidean Jewish philosophy. However, it is by no means surprising in Latin scholasticism. As has been pointed out above Dionysius Areopagite was the chief authority on this subject for the Christian theologians. No doubt that Moses Nagari in fact adopted this Christian neo-Platonic tradition to explain Ibn Ezra’s doctrine of the hierarchy of being. His immediate source was most probably Judah Romano who probably read it in Aquinas’ and Giles of Rome’s works.

In the light of these facts we can arrive at a closer understanding of Moses Nagari’s comment quoted already above:

Since many people, even if they agree that reality in a general way is caused by the First Cause, they still consider it necessary that [the world] is eternal as a consequence of His eternity [\textit{hayoto nitshi be-nitsahuto}] and that it has no beginning [\textit{hathala}]

\textsuperscript{547} MS Vienna, ÖNB, Heb. 106, fol. 45 r.
absolute sense. And this is an arbitrary solution far from faith and religion. The intention of the meaning of the word *be-reshit* teaches that in a beginning [ba-tehilla] [God] – blessed be He! – brought [the world] into existence and emanated it [ve-heetsilo].

Due to the Dionysian metaphysical theory adopted by Moses Nagari the problem of the possible co-eternity of God and the universe is much more urgent than in other versions of medieval Jewish philosophy. In his supercommentary on Exodus 3: 15 Moses emphasizes that the separate intellects (angels) do not change at all; they are not under time just like God. Had they been only caused by God, and not created, their existence would not be separated radically from God’s. Co-eternity in this doctrinal context is a more relevant criterion of ordering the hierarchy of beings than the cause-consequence relationship.

Therefore, it was necessary to emphasize creation out of nothing – a dramatic change – to secure the shift between God and the intellects in the hierarchy of being. The concept of “one imaginative moment” localizes creation as a temporal event that can be represented as a point breaking the continuity of a line, even if the first part of the line represents only imaginative time.

One could object that the concept is functionless because, according to the explicit statements of Judah Romano and Moses Nagari, there is a non-temporal precedence between the spiritual and corporeal world within the first moment of creation. If human mind is able to comprehend this non-temporal precedence than why cannot creation be comprehended similarly as a non-temporal precedence? Why do we have to turn to imagination to help us with an “imaginative time”?

This objection reveals a key point. God’s priority is, strictly speaking, non-temporal. But it is not the same sort of non-temporal priority as the priority of the spiritual world vis-à-vis the material one. The intellects started to exist in the moment of creation; God not. This is why the same formula cannot be applied to both cases. *Be-reshit* is interpreted as “one imaginative moment” ending an imaginative past time in order to make the difference between the two types of non-temporal precedence. The beginning of time was a start for the universe but it was not a start for God – this is the idea difficult to represent without employing “imaginative time.”

Just like in the case of Bonet, there is a strong emphasis on creation out of nothing as the orthodox opinion about the origin of the universe. However, the first sentence of the Bible makes a different statement for Moses Nagari. The *enunciative field* into which the biblical statement is integrated is neither a set of opinions about the origin of the universe – as is the case with Caspi and Eleazar ben Mattityah – nor is it a set of statements about time as an abstract entity. It is a set of statements about the hierarchy of being. The point of interpreting Genesis 1: 1 in the way Moses Nagari (and Judah Romano) did is to establish a hierarchy of being by defining the radical priority of God vis-à-vis creation on the one hand and a secondary hierarchy within the created world on the other hand.

The formation of the concepts “imaginative time” and “imaginative moment” is also different from the strategies of conceptualization we have encountered so far. The *form of succession* that is the basis of the conceptualization can be identified as ‘managing conflicts between authorities.’ The philosophers, especially Aristotle, Jewish authors, especially Maimonides, and Christian neo-Platonic sources made conflicting statements about the same subjects. “Managing the conflict” means reconstructing the possible positions, identifying points and agreements and disagreements, and proposing solutions by preferring one authority to another or harmonizing the apparently contradictory sources.

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548 MS Vienna, ÖNB, Heb. 106, fol. 4 v.
The field of presence can be identified as one particular constellation of a conflict between authorities. Aristotle denied creation out of nothing. Maimonides elaborated a skillful formula of creation (implying that God’s priority is non-temporal) that effectively defends the Jewish article of faith against Aristotelian criticism. Therefore it is difficult to disallow it. On the other hand, Maimonides’ theory is not completely satisfactory in the light of Dionysian metaphysics. These statements reveal the theoretical problem that is answered by the concepts.

Finally, there is a procedure of intervention. In the present case it is proposing a veridical fiction. A point models the moment of creation and a line the time preceding it. It is emphasized that the time thus modeled is not real – it is imaginative time. Nonetheless, this fiction describes, no matter how imperfectly, a theoretical reality: God is not prior to the world in the same way as spiritual world is prior to corporeal world.

According to Alain Boureau, such veridical fictions lie at the heart of the scholastic style of thinking. Boureau speaks about a change in episteme in the Foucauldian sense when he describes the appearance of veridical fictions in law and theology during the twelfth century in Latin Christianity. Apparently, Moses Nagari and Judah Romano learned not only some philosophical ideas from their Christian sources but also a strategy of managing theoretical problems and forming concepts.

549 Alain Boureau, “Droit et Théologie au XIIIe siècle,” Annales 47 (1992): 1113-1125. I am grateful to Piroska Nagy for calling my attention to this article.
Chapter 6: Anonymous quoted by Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara: Last Remarks on nose keli / beli taam

The shorter version of Shlomo Ibn Yaish the Younger’s supercommentary (Hinneh shakhu) leaves the passage under consideration uncommented. In the longer version we find the reading keli taam and a short comment that hardly needs further explanation:

AND SOME SAY THAT THE ‘IN’ CARRIES INSTRUMENTAL SENSE [nose keli taam]: [That is to say.] “in the beginning” is not the beginning of something and it is a principle/beginning [hathala].

However, in two manuscripts, namely, MS Florence, BLM, Plut. 2. 49 and MS Vat. ebr. 54, the usual beginning of the supercommentary on Genesis 1: 1 is preceded by a collection of scattered notes on the creation-story. As for the dating of the manuscripts themselves, the Florentine manuscript is of Italian provenance and can hardly be later than the 1390s and probably not earlier than the 1370s, whereas the Vatican manuscript can be safely dated to the early 1450s and it is of Byzantine (possibly Candian) provenance. Generally the Florentine manuscript preserved a better text but some of its copying mistakes are to be corrected on the basis of the Vatican codex.

As has been noted in the section on the manuscript a characteristic of the longer version of Shlomo Ibn Yaish’s supercommentary is that it contains a supercommentary on Ibn Ezra’s introduction. The supercommentary on the introduction is contained in all the manuscripts of the long version. However, the style of this part differs remarkably from the rest of Shlomo Ibn Yaish’s supercommentary. Solomon M. Schiller-Szinessy suggested in 1876 that the “supercommentary on Ibn Ezra’s introduction” was not the work of Solomon Ibn Yaish.

On the basis of stylistic criteria the author of the “supercommentary on Ibn Ezra’s introduction” is certainly identical with the author of the scattered notes on Genesis 1 (attested only in the Florentine and Vatican manuscripts). Thus they could not be written by Solomon Ibn Yaish either despite the fact that they appear in the latter’s supercommentary.

In 1877 Michael Friedlaender identified the source of both the supercommentary on the introduction and the notes on Genesis 1. They come from an anonymous supercommentary on Ibn Ezra attested in:

(1) MS London, British Library, Add. 27561 (Margoliouth 195), fols. 1-44 (Byzantine script, end of fourteenth or beginning of fifteenth century, another text in the same codex is dated to 1382)

(2) MS Rome, Biblioteca Casanatense 2847, fols. 44-68 (Sephardi script, end of fourteenth or beginning of fifteenth century, another text in the same codex was finished on 16 July, 1395 [19 Tamuz, 5155] in Kandia, Crete)

(3) MS Cambridge, University Library, Add. 1509 (Reif, SCR 152), fols 197-292 (Ashkenazi script, dated to 1543)

550 MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 237 v.

551 This dates are based chiefly on watermarks; see the chapter on the manuscripts.

552 This has already been suggested by Solomon M. Schiller-Szinessy: Catalogue of the Hebrew Manuscripts Preserved in the University Library Cambridge (Cambridge and Leipzig: Deighton, Bell, et Co. and F. A. Brockhaus, 1876), 130.

553 Cf. Friedlaender, Essays, 226-229 where the supercommentary is briefly characterized on the basis of the London manuscript. Steinschneider realized that the supercommentary on Ibn Ezra’s introduction in Oxford MS Hunt. 293 is identical with the corresponding passage in MS Munich 61; cf. his “Supercommentare....” 126.
The identity of the author is still a mystery. The text was certainly written before 1375 since Joseph Bonfils added his remarks on it in a manuscript which he copied in Candia, Crete, in 1375.\(^5\) It seems to me that the author re-used passages from Caspi’s supercommentary that was written in 1296. He held in great esteem Saadyah gaon. On the basis of the Munich manuscript Steinschneider resolved an abbreviated reference in the text as “Rabbi Shlomo Ibn Yaish” – which can mean either the elder or the younger Ibn Yaish. Steinschneider also points out a number of shared passages between Shlomo Ibn Yaish the Younger’s supercommentary and the anonymous text.\(^6\) However, it is not clear whether the anonymous author used Ibn Yaish’s text or the similarities are due to a common source (Moses Ibn Tibbon’s lost supercommentary?).\(^7\)

Therefore, the original author, date, and provenance of the text cannot be established for sure. Probably it is not a big mistake to suppose Provencal or Northern Spanish provenance for the author, although a Byzantine provenance has also some probability since the two eldest manuscripts point to a Byzantine context. The date can be anywhere between 1296 and 1375. If Steinschneider’s assumption is correct then the period can be limited to roughly 1340-1375.

Therefore, it cannot be taken for granted that this supercommentary was written before the Black Death (although this possibility cannot be excluded either). Nonetheless I mention this source here due to the original, and in my opinion ingenious, interpretation put forward.

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554 These remarks appear in MS Florence, BLM, Plut. 2. 49, fol. 1 v within the “supercommentary on Ibn Ezra’s introduction.” It seems that Joseph Bonfils in 1375 had a text of Shlomo Ibn Yaish into which the anonymous supercommentary on Ibn Ezra introduction had already been integrated.


556 Cf. MS Munich, BS, Cod. hebr. 61, fol. 128 r, where a sentence – which appears verbatim in all the versions of Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara’s supercommentary – is quoted in the name of Moses Ibn Tibbon.

557 Reading libbi megamgem instead of le-fi-kakh megamgem (“accordingly [someone is] wondering”) appearing in the manuscripts. The phrase libbi megamgem (lit. “my heart is undecided”) appears later in the text by the same author in both manuscripts. It is easy to explain how the supposed textual corruption came about: libbi לבקי
not mention what the sense carried is since it is written [immediately after]: THE SENSE ACCORDING TO THEM. And the explanation of THE SENSE ACCORDING TO THEM is so and so. We find that the be- carries and teaches this matter.

And on the basis of a thorough examination of the matter it is to be resolved as follows – though everything goes to the same place [i.e. there is no big difference between the proposed solutions]. Reason is inclined [to say] that this is the correct [reading]: nose keli taam “carrying the armor of sense.” Similar to “our armor carrier/shield-bearer” [cf. 1 Samuel 14: 1]. [And the meaning is this:] “that be- does have a meaning. And the meaning is etc.” And after that I have found supercommentators saying that it was be”’t ha-keli.558

Perhaps, the first paragraph of the quotation is to be read as a supercommentary on the first opinion quoted by Ibn Ezra according to which be-reshit means ba-rishona (“first”). The author claims that ‘beginning’ is a word used only in connection with time. The well-known argument about creation not taking place in time (“bracketed by time”) is very briefly recapitulated. The conclusion drawn by the author is that be-reshit is not used in the proper sense in the biblical verse.

The second paragraph, if I understand correctly, testifies the existence of Ibn Ezra manuscripts with the text nose keli taam having a marginal correction to beli taam. This is probably what the author calls tigqun be”’t “emendation of bet,” i.e. the bet of beli. The first sentence of the paragraph says that the text will be taken as keli taam in the subsequent comment in spite of the fact that we find a marginal correction to beli taam.

At the same time, it is possible to understand the phrase tigqun be”’t (“emendation of bet”) referring to something else. The bet of be-reshit is traditionally enlarged in most of the Hebrew manuscripts. There are also other letters in the Bible that are written in strange ways enlarged, lifted, turned upside-down etc. These conventions concerning the graphical outlook of certain letters in the biblical texts were accepted as sacrosanct on the authority of the “scribes” (sofrim). They were sometimes called tiqqune sofrim, “the emendations of the scribes.”

It is possible that tigqun be”’t in our text refers to the fact that the be”’t of be-reshit is enlarged in the Hebrew codices. However, I cannot see any relevance of this fact in the context of the supercommentary. Why does the author bring up this issue here? On the other hand, the first interpretation makes perfect sense out of this sentence. Therefore, I prefer the first interpretation.

558 MS Florence, BLM, Plut. 2. 49, fol. 2 v (in brackets variants from MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 235 v);
The second paragraph also evidences that the author was uneasy with the phrase *nose keli taam* (lit. “carrying the instrument of sense”). He explained it as “instrumental ‘in’ that bears the sense of the thing.” Consequently, he paraphrases *be-shet* as “with the beginning” (*im reshit*); so the Hebrew preposition *be-* is replaced by *im* meaning ‘with.’ As for the sense of *reshit* itself the Florentine and the Vatican manuscripts give different answers.

In the Vatican manuscript we find *im ha-hathala* meaning ‘with the beginning’ or ‘with the principle.’ It is more natural to take the phrase in the sense of temporal beginning. Thus the holders of the view quoted by Ibn Ezra are understood to say that *be-* means ‘with.’ emphasizing that the world does have a temporal beginning. “With a temporal beginning God created…”

In the Florentine manuscript the reading is *im ha-hathalot* in the plural. This cannot be translated otherwise than “with the principles” or “with the elements.” This reading actually fits the context better. The author continues: “Like the *hyle*, which is the point that is not real in itself. And with a transfer of meaning they call it first matter [*homer rishon*]…” These are enigmatic words – maybe they are misplaced or an important connecting phrase fell out of the textual transmission – nonetheless, the author certainly considers here the possibility of pre-existent matter.

There are two alternatives for interpreting the argument underlying the text:

1. The words just quoted are to be taken as representing the opinion of those who reject the idea of *creatio ex nihilo*. They interpret *be-shet* as “with the principles/elements” i.e. out of pre-existing matter “God created etc.” The last sentences of the paragraph are meant to be an answer to their opinion: “And the truth is the following. ‘In the beginning’ [equals] ‘first’ and ‘creation’ [*ba-tehilla ve-hiddush*]. And it is independent. And everything is included in the creation.”

2. The words at stake are representing the view of the defenders of *creatio ex nihilo*. “With the elements God created heaven and earth” does not mean “out of the elements” but “together with the elements [God created heaven etc.]” The remark concerning *hiyuli* and prime matter points out that these things were created *together* with heaven and earth, so they are not pre-existent. The last sentences are not refuting the previous ones but re-stressing the key points.

The first interpretation implies that reading *be-* as “instrumental ‘in’” is the opinion of those who deny creation out of nothing. This is the opposite what Ibn Ezra says in his commentary that the present supercommentary is supposed to explain. On the other hand, the first interpretation offers a more natural reading of the last sentences of the paragraph. As for the second interpretation, it is more persuasive concerning the first part of the paragraph since it conforms to the words of Ibn Ezra concerning *nose keli taam*. However, it makes the last sentences of the paragraph a bit arbitrary. Therefore, I cannot decide between the two interpretations. Maybe the text is corrupt.

What is the difference between *hiyuli* and ‘first matter’ (*homer rishon*)? The author provides more information in his supercommentary on Ibn Ezra ad Gen 1:2 concerning the meaning of *tohu va-bohu*:

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**THE YELLOW LINE** is capable to receive all the forms without turning into real matter [*homri mamash*]. And this is what the philosophers call ‘hyle’ [*hiyuli*], which is without reality in a way similar to point. And this what TOHU means, like “a man hallucinates [tohe] about non-existing things.” SMOOTH STONES the reality of the first matter [*homer rishon*] that is capable to receive individual form in accordance with what it is.⁵⁵⁹

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⁵⁵⁹ MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 236 r.
“What the philosophers call *hiyuli*” is something that has no existence – presumably “outside of the mind” – just like Euclidean points has no reality outside of the mind. In other words, *hiyuli* is an abstract concept, “matter” as abstracted and formed by human intellect whereas “first matter” does exist outside of the mind, although it cannot exist normally without forms.

The author would probably agree with the following description of the difference: The four sub-lunar elements (fire, air, water, earth) have a common matter, namely the first matter, *materia prima*. Now, heaven is built up from different matter: the fifth element (*quinta essentia*). Heaven has no common matter with the aforementioned four elements. In this sense there is no “prime matter” that would be common to both the heavenly and earthly realms. Nonetheless, humans can call both earthly and heavenly prime matters “matter”, that is to say, the human abstraction “matter” apply to both of them. The term “matter” describes correctly both of them without implying the existence of a matter common to both of them. Therefore, it is justified to make difference between “matter” as abstract concept and “matter” as physical reality. The first is called *hiyuli* (a loan word derived from Greek *hyle* in Tibbonide Hebrew) the second is called *homer* (a Biblical Hebrew word) by “the philosophers” according to our author.

The third paragraph contains a quite witty explanation of the text once the correction to *beli taam* is accepted. The verb *nose* is not to be understood as “carrying/bearing [the sense]” but as “lifting up/putting away/remove” it. Thanks to this proposal it is possible to make sense of the phrase *beli taam* (“without sense”). The ‘in’ of “in the beginning” is there to remove a false interpretation that is devoid of sense. This non-sense is the idea of creation without a “beginning.”

This explanation is by far the most convincing of those that accept *beli taam* as the correct reading. However, our author is not satisfied with it. In the last two paragraphs he argues that *keli taam* is the better text and it can be understood without any reference to the concept of *bet ha-keli*.

The phrase *nose keli* means “shield-bearer” in Biblical Hebrew (cf. 1 Samuel 14:1 etc.). Ibn Ezra’s insistence on using purely biblical phrases is well-documented enough. Ibn Ezra was also fond of word-punches, allusions, and poetic style even when he was composing scientific texts.

Therefore, it is possible to take the phrase *nose keli* in its *biblical* sense, as “shield-bearer.” Ibn Ezra does not have in mind any grammatical terminus technicus he is just using poetic imagery taken from the Bible. The phrase *be’*t nose keli *taam* means “the ‘in’ preposition bears the armor of sense” i.e. “the ‘in’ preposition does have a sense” as opposed to the opinion of those people – quoted by Ibn Ezra in the previous paragraph – who say that it is without sense.

From a historical point of view, I think this is the correct interpretation of the text.\(^{560}\) That is to say, I think this is indeed what Ibn Ezra wanted to say. The anonymous supercommentator quoted in Shlomo Ibn Yaish’s compendium succeeded in discovering the meaning of *nose keli *taam*. The presence of the grammatical term *bet ha-keli* in Ibn Tibbon’s Hebrew version of GP mislead many other medieval supercommentator in interpreting these words. The temptation to see some connection between Ibn Ezra’s and Maimonides’ words was very difficult – although not impossible – to resist.

\(^{560}\) Lipshitz is of the opinion that the reading “*beli taam*” is correct. However, in his reconstruction, there is no real difference between the first and the third opinion quoted by Ibn Ezra. Cf. Lipshits: “*Iyyun ve-heqer beferushey Ibn Ezra...*” 21-22.
II. Bara

Introduction

Ibn Ezra’s comment on Genesis 1:1 continues as follows:

CREATED:
Most of the interpreters say that ‘creation’ is to bring forth something out of nothing. And this is true of “with creation God created…” (Num 16: 30).

But look, they have forgotten about “and God created the dragons” (Gen 1: 21), and three [examples] in one verse, and “God created the man” (Gen 1: 27). And “the Creator of darkness” (Isaiah 45: 7) what is the opposite of light and [light] is an existent!

And this is the grammar/morphology [diqduq] of the verb bara:
[It is divided] into two senses [taamim] the aforementioned one is the first; and the second one is “he did not eat [bara] bread with them” (2 Sam 12: 17).

And in the second sense the alef [i.e. the third radical of bara] is instead of he, since it is similar to “to give David bread to eat [le-habrot]” (2 Sam 3: 35). Now this is [the same verb] in the “additional heavy” stem [=causative stem] and if [the third radical] were alef; it should have been [in the causative sense] like le-havriakhem [“to make you fat”] (1 Sam 2: 29).

And it is also attested in the “heavy” stem [=intensive stem]: “and thou shall cut out [u-bereta]” (Josh 17: 15). And this is not like [i.e. not from the same root as] “Choose a man for yourselves! [beru-lakhem ish]” (1 Sam 17: 8) but like “and he shall cut them… [u-bare othen]” (Ezekiel 23: 47). And its sense is “to determine,” “to put a determined limit [on something],” and the enlightened will understand [ve-ha-maskil yavin].

Ibn Ezra leads the reader into a slightly confusing discussion about the various senses and morphological characteristics of the root b-r-' used for “created” in Gen 1:1. The grammatical notes end abruptly with the notorious remark often found at other places of the commentary as well: “the enlightened will understand” (cf. Daniel 12: 10) Thus, Ibn Ezra seems to allude to the fact that his comment has a deeper sense which only “the enlightened” will get whoever they might be.

Needless to say, such comments inspired greatly Ibn Ezra supercommentators of every age to try to guess what the intended meaning of the master was. We shall see in the present section that the early supercommentators had a sort of consensus about Ibn Ezra’s esoteric intention here.

It should be remembered that Ibn Ezra does not say at all that the verb bara means to create something out of nothing in this context. Latin Christian exegetes took it for granted that “creare est de nihilo aliquid facere” and the same is taken for granted by Maimonides as well. From Ibn Ezra’s remark it seems that most of his Jewish contemporaries and predecessors also took the verb in this sense. Ibn Ezra’s unusual interpretation of bara presented the supercommentators an opportunity for developing original ideas about the meaning of the creation narrative.

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561 Cf. for example, Peter Lombard, Liber Sententiarium, II, dist. I, 1 (PL 192: 651).
Chapter 1: Joseph Caspi: Introductory Remarks

It is convenient to start the discussion with Caspi’s supercommentary again:

BUT LOOK, THEY HAVE FORGOTTEN ABOUT “AND GOD CREATED THE great” DRAGONS’” that is to say, they were doubtlessly created out of the four elements, since they were created <out of them> before. Moreover, Scripture says concerning them “let [reptiles] swarm in the water” (Gen 1: 20).

AND “THE CREATOR OF DARKNESS” that is to say, THE OPPOSITE OF LIGHT, what is AN EXISTENT because the darkness is nothing, since it is the privation of the existent [light]. [Nonetheless,] the verb ‘to create’ is used concerning it. This is contrary to [the opinion of those] who say that ‘to create’ is used only concerning [the creation] of something out of nothing.

Caspi reconstructs two simple arguments of Ibn Ezra: The four elements were created already on the first day. The dragons (sea animals) were created on the fifth day. Now it is doubtlessly true that the dragons are composed of the four elements. Therefore it is but logical to assume that they were created out of something on the fifth day, i.e. out of the four pre-existing elements. Nonetheless, Scripture uses the verb ‘to create’ concerning them. This is an instance were ‘to create’ does not refer to creatio ex nihilo.

A second instance for the same thing is the phrase “creator of darkness.” Since darkness is nothing but a privation of light, “creating darkness” must mean “creating nothing out of something.” Thus the verb ‘to create’ is used even in cases when creation of nothing out of something is at stake!

It is worthy of noting that in one particular manuscript, MS Vat. ebr. 36, fol. 51 r, a second hand crossed out the word “out of nothing” [me-ayin] and wrote above the word “out of something” [mi-yesh]. The last sentence of the quoted passages due to this “correction” reads:

This is contrary [to the opinion of those] who say that ‘to create’ is used only concerning [the creation] of something out of something [be-yesh mi-yesh].

It is not very likely that this emendation restores Caspi’s original text. The textus receptus of other manuscripts makes perfect sense without the correction. However, it is an interesting example of “censoring” the text. The corrector was probably not happy with Caspi’s apparent statement that Scripture uses the verb ‘to create’ to other activities than creatio ex nihilo as well. The hand of the “censor” is probably from the fifteenth century.

Caspi does not attempt to discover the esoteric implication of the passage what only “the enlightened” are suppose to understand. This is in harmony with his general strategy of avoiding the “secrets” of Ibn Ezra.

563 The adjective ha-gedolim is added to the lemma in MS Vat. ebr. 106, fol. 5 v and by a second hand on MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 184, fol. 4 v
564 mehem appearing only in the Paris manuscript. It is probably to be deleted.
565 The manuscript itself is of Byzantine (Candian?) provenance and can be dated to 1370-1400 chiefly on the basis of its watermarks. See the section on manuscripts.
Chapter 2: Eleazar ben Mattityah: The Spherical Cycle

As opposed to Caspi’s simple, introductory comments, Eleazar leads his readers into a network of complex problems with many cross-references again.

AND THREE [EXAMPLES] IN ONE VERSE: the dragons, and living animals and birds with wings [cf. Gen 1: 21]. They were created out of water – this is something out of something [yesh mi-yesh]. And “THE CREATOR OF DARKNESS” WHAT IS THE OPPOSITE OF LIGHT – that’s nothing out of something [ayin mi-yesh] as is explained in Part Three, Chapter Ten [of Maimonides, GP].

And it is possible to interpret [the verb] ‘to create’ as ‘to determine,’ ‘to order a term, a time, or border to something.’ See in section “Noah” [at the verse] “All the subsequent days of the earth…” – THIS IS TO SIGNIFY THAT [EARTH] HAS A DETERMINED TERM. Just like the sentence of Aristotle and Ibn Sina:

It is not impossible that God will revert the inhabited land in its entirety or a part of it into water or that the water dries up and [what was water before] becomes inhabited land and this [can happen] by the force of the stars.

THE GRAMMAR/MORPHOLOGY OF THE VERB BARA [IS DIVIDED] INTO TWO SENSES: This bara is derived from “and he shall cut them… [u-bare othen]” (Ezekiel 23: 47) from the Qal stem. And its sense is “determination.” And from the same [root] in the Piel stem: “and thou shall cut out [u-bereta] for yourself the place…” (Josh 17: 15).

And the second [sense]: “he did not eat [bara] bread with them” (2 Sam 12: 17). This belongs to the “third [radical] weak [verbs]” and the alef replaces the he. [And the meaning is] ‘to eat.’ And it is also attested in the Hifil stem: “to give David bread to eat [le-habrot]” (2 Sam 3: 35) – [le-habrot is from the root b-r-h] like le-hafnot from p-n-h. And it is also found in the Hifil stem with alef as third radical in the sense “eating;” le-havriakhem [“to make you fat”] (1 Sam 2: 29).

AND IT IS NOT LIKE “CHOOSE A MAN FOR YOURSELVES! [beru-lakhem ish]” (1 Sam 17: 8) even if the root is b-r-h since the meaning is ‘to choose.’ And from the same root is: barita be-sheqel shevit.566

The esoteric implication of Ibn Ezra is that the verb ‘to create’ does not refer to creatio ex nihilo in the first sentence of the Bible but to “putting limit” “determining” a period, a cosmic cycle for the universe after which it will return to the chaos of beginning. The words of Aristotle and Avicenna are quoted to support this interpretation. The quotation from Aristotle and Avicenna is probably taken from Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s Maamar yiqqawu ha-mayim. In chapter three of the Maamar we read:

Ibn Sina writes in his aforementioned book that it is not impossible that a flood comes and covers all the inhabited part of the earth or a part of it, and destroys all the animals or some of them. And after that they [the animals] are generated again out of the mixtures [of the four elements] with the help of the stars alone or with the help of the separate intellects.567

566 MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 166 v. I was unabl to find the source of the quotation.
567 Maamar, 8.
We have discussed already the significance of this doctrine in Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s work.

Furthermore, Eleazar refers to an indefinite passage in the commentary on Deuteronomy 3:23 – 7:11 (the section “Ve-ethanan”) and to Ibn Ezra’s comment on Genesis 8:22. Let’s follow the author’s instruction and read the passages he referred to.

The first allusion is probably to Deuteronomy 7:9: “And you shall know that YYY your God is the God, the truthful God, who keeps the covenant and the mercy with those who love Him and with those who keep His commandments for one thousand generations.” Ibn Ezra comments:

FOR ONE THOUSAND GENERATIONS: The one who says that after thirty-six thousand years the sphere of the zodiac returns [to its original place] is wrong. For one grade is found [to pass] during seventy years. And sense of THOUSAND is ‘for ever.’

Ibn Ezra seems to refer to a previous commentator who believed that the “one thousand” generation mentioned in the biblical text was an allusion to the topic of the Great Year known from Greek sources. Claudius Ptolemy calculated the length of the cosmic cycle, the time during which the sphere of the zodiac accomplishes a cycle of its movement, to 36,000 years. After a cycle having been completed the world was expected to return into its original, chaotic state and a new cycle to begin since the physical conditions ruling on our Earth were believed to be dependent on the movement of the heavenly spheres. The biblical verse quoted was read as an allusion to this doctrine.

However, this was not the way Ibn Ezra read the text. He rejects the astrological sense read into the passage by others and declares that the phrase “for one thousand generations” means simply ‘forever.’ At the same time, he claims that Ptolemy’s calculation was not correct. One grade (out of the 360 making up a full circle) of the movement of the sphere does not take one hundred but seventy years. From this it follows that Ibn Ezra estimated the length of the Great Year to 360x70= 25,200 years.

Commenting on this passage Eleazar writes:

FOR ONE THOUSAND GENERATIONS: THOSE WHO SAY THAT AFTER THIRTY-SIX THOUSAND YEARS THE SPHERE OF THE ZODIAC RETURNS [TO ITS ORIGINAL PLACE] ARE WRONG. FOR ONE GRADE IS FOUND [TO PASS] DURING SEVENTY YEARS:

I’ve said already in the section Lekh lekha at the verse “And the fourth generation…” that many were confused in [the interpretation] of “generation.” And I’ve written my opinion there. However, since here the sage’s [Ibn Ezra’s] thoughts go deeper into the topic I have to explain them with a strong explanation.

So, he found in the wisdom of Ptolemy in the book Magesti, in the epitome compiled by al-Fargani, in chapter 19: “Around the fixed stars and the height of the planets and their guzahar the spheres of the zodiac pass in 36,000 years.”

Guzahar is dragon and it is tali and each of the planets have a tali inclined to the south or to the north.568 And this is what he says in chapter 15:

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568 On these terms see Abū Maʿṣar: The Abbreviation of the Introduction to Astrology: together with the medieval Latin translation of Adelard of Bath, ed. and tr. Charles Burnett, Keiï Yamamoto, and Michio Yano (Leiden, New York, and Köln: E. J. Brill, 1994), 15: “The planets, which are swift in their movements are seven […] Each one of them has a share in one of the [zodiac] signs, and they have apogees and nodes in them.” (1: 7-8) ‘Node’ is ǧūżahar in the original and ‘draco’ in Adelard’s Latin translation.
The form that is created by cutting the circle of the stars and the circle of the zodiac and the dragon and the point out of which the sphere of the stars is taken on the north of the circle of the zodiac is called “the head of the dragon” and it is called guzahar. And the point opposing it is called “tail.” Now it is known that the sphere is divided into 340 [sic!] grades, and according to Ptolemy it reverts one grade every 100 year. Therefore, in 36,000 year it reverts all the 340 [sic!] grades.

According to the commentators on the section “Lekh [lekha]” one generation lasts for 70 years. If so, then one thousand generations make up 70,000 years. That’s twice the cycle of the aforementioned sphere. That is to say, He – blessed be He – keeps the covenant for 500 generations what is just a bit less than 36,000 [years] and it is not exact. And He also keeps the mercy to those who keep His commandments for 500 generations. And these times are mentioned [rather than the precise figures] because of the many parts of longitude [of the precise figures (?) le-rov haflagat arkham].

And the Arab sages say that it reverts one grade in 70 years – [like] one generation – so the sphere reverts [completely] in 25,200 years.

And Ibn Ezra agrees with the Arabs.

And according to my opinion this is the same what is at stake in the tractate Horayot [of the Babylonian Talmud] in the chapter “Kohen mashiah:”

Rabban Gamliel and Rabbi Joshua were traveling on a ship. Rabban Gamliel did not have bread any more so he ate of Rabbi Joshua’s flour. He asked him, “How did you know that [the journey] would be so long?” He replied, “A star goes up every seventy year and confuses the sailors. So I was afraid that this would happen to us as well” (Horayot 10a)

Behold, one grade is 70 years just like the opinion of the Arabs.570

Eleazar’s supercommentary on Genesis 1:1 is to be interpreted in the light of this passage. Accordingly, ‘God created heaven and earth’ means ‘God assigned 25,200 years to heaven and earth after which they are to return into tohu and bohu.’ Furthermore, he seems to imply that Ibn Ezra must have accepted the theory of cosmic cycles and astronomical-astrological determinism. Perhaps, ‘in the beginning’ meant for Ibn Ezra ‘in the beginning of the present cosmic cycle.’ The cosmic cycles themselves are determined by the movement of the spheres. When the spheres return to their original position the world reverts to the situation what was “in the beginning.”

Eleazar does not comment on the conclusion of Ibn Ezra’s remark, namely, that the phrase “thousand generations” is not to be taken as the time of the cosmic cycle or anything else but it means simply “forever.” This is a bit surprising. Ibn Ezra seems to maintain consistently an overtly religious and Jewish perspective on the topic: God’s hand is not bound by natural necessity; whatever the astronomers think about the length of the spherical cycle His mercy lasts forever. On the other hand, Eleazar is interested only in the scientific problem and attributes the belief in cosmic cycles to Ibn Ezra without restriction. By this he also seems to attribute a theory of cosmic determinism to Ibn Ezra: the circumstances prevailing on our Earth are dependant on the movement of the spheres.

569 This sentence is a not clear. I think the point is that Scripture does not say “for 514.2 generation” or “for 1028.4 generations” as the exact figure would require because it would be to complicated and long to circumscribe it in Biblical Hebrew.

570 MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 226 v.
Did he deny by accepting these ideas such an important principle of Jewish faith as divine providence? Or did he think that Ibn Ezra was actually a heretic denying divine providence in spite of the fact that Ibn Ezra does interpret the biblical passage differently? Or did he try to introduce a distinction between ‘popular’ doctrines (=divine providence) intended for the masses and ‘philosophical truth’ (=cosmic determinism) intended for the intellectual elite?

I think there is no need to turn to Straussian esotericism in order to solve this problem. Faced with the objection that he disregards the very essence of Ibn Ezra’s comment, namely, that the passage is not about the spherical cycle but about eternal divine mercy, Eleazar would probably reply that different questions need different treatments. The problem concerning the length of the cosmic cycle is a legitimate question of natural science. It implies no heresy to approach a problem of natural sciences with the methodology of natural sciences. On the basis of astronomical observations and arguments Ibn Ezra concluded – according to Eleazar – that the cycle of the zodiac takes 25,200 years. A certain rabbi from Talmudic times probably came to the same conclusion. On the premises of natural sciences alone we can conclude that the world is expected to return into chaos at the end of the cycle. By natural necessity it must happen so.

On the other hand, Eleazar’s position does not exclude the possibility of divine intervention into the order of nature. On the basis of solely scientific premises the conclusion stands about the cosmic cycle. However, there might be premises other than the ones belonging to natural sciences. God can interfere with the cosmic order and bring the destruction of the world earlier if He wishes so or postpone it for ever if this is His will. Nonetheless, the problem about the length of the cosmic cycle remains a perfectly legitimate question of natural science that can be and should be treated on the bases of natural sciences (how otherwise?). Divine providence and miraculous intervention are certainly very important topics of philosophy/theology as well. However, they definitely belong to a different branch of human knowledge than natural science.

We have no reason to suppose that Eleazar did not understand the point of Ibn Ezra’s comment on Deuteronomy 7: 9 or that he wanted to suggest a difference between esoteric and popular doctrines. He just simply separated natural science from theology in Ibn Ezra’s comment: the former needed some explanation in Eleazar’s opinion; the latter could be understood without any supercommentary. Eleazar chose to explain the scientific aspect of Ibn Ezra’s comment. He treated the topic of divine intervention at other parts of his supercommentary.

The methodological separation of questions belonging to natural sciences and theology can be found with Eleazar’s contemporaries in the Latin West teaching at the faculty of arts of the Paris University. The “Averroism” of Boethius de Dacia consisted in such methodological separation of theology and natural philosophy (“fides non est scientia,” Boethius writes). The same approach is implicit in Maimonides’ dealing with the problem of creation: Maimonides is ready to admit that within the framework of natural philosophy Aristotle’s arguments for the eternity of the world are valid. However, Maimonides points out that natural philosophy does not have the last word in this question (cf. GP II, 17). Eleazar’s interpretation is in harmony with both the Maimonidean tradition and the practice of some of his Latin contemporaries.

Eleazar’s comment on the grammar of the verb bara will not receive a detailed analysis here. I will just point out two interesting features.

Eleazar rewrites and “modernizes” the text of Ibn Ezra. The order of the biblical quotations and the themes of the text are re-arranged freely in the supercommentary although Eleazar does not introduce any new biblical quotation or grammatical topic. Moreover, the old-fashioned grammatical terminology of Ibn Ezra is replaced by the one current in Eleazar’s time (and as a matter of fact, even today). Instead of Ibn Ezra’s “heavy stem” and “additional heavy stem” Eleazar says “Piel” and “Hifil;” the reader will find the same terms in present day Hebrew grammars as well. All these changes were brought force in order to facilitate the understanding of Ibn Ezra’s grammatical analysis. To sum up: Eleazar here does not follow the lemma/comment pattern but freely rewrites Ibn Ezra’s text.

A second interesting point is Eleazar’s statement that the verb (u-)bare “(and he will) cut” in Ezekiel 23: 47 is from the Qal stem. Today it is analyzed as belonging to the Piel stem. Moreover, this seems to be the opinion of Ibn Ezra as well. At least, this is the prima facie reading of his comment on Genesis 1:1 where he treats this verb among other Piel forms (see above).

The difference is very significant. If bare is from the Qal stem then it is from the same stem as the bara of Genesis 1:1. In this case it is absolutely justified to claim that bara in Genesis 1:1 means the same thing as bare in Ezekiel 23: 47. Now bare means “to cut, to determine, to set a limit…” in Ezekiel. If bara in Genesis 1: 1 means the same, then the way is opened for the interpretation that ‘creation’ means determining the length of the cosmic cycle. On the other hand, if bare is from the Piel stem then it is a mistake to suppose such a close relationship between the meanings of the two verbs. Moreover, if Ibn Ezra believed that u-bare was a Piel form then Eleazar’s interpretation of creation with cosmic cycles and 25,200 years turn to be based on a serious misreading of Ibn Ezra’s text. The reader can observe how much importance is assigned to this seemingly minor grammatical problem.

In fact the form bare is ambiguous. One would expect bara for Qal (as is in Genesis 1: 1) and *bere for Piel (cf. u-bereta “and you shall cut” in Joshua 17: 15). Moreover, the word is not vocalized either in Ibn Ezra’s or in Eleazar’s text. In principle it is possible that either of them read *u-bara instead of u-bare in Ezekiel 23: 47. Further studies are needed to settle this problem.

The discursive practices evidenced by these texts are already familiar. Eleazar relocates Ibn Ezra’s statement about the meaning of bara in an enunciatie field that is populated by statements about the cosmic cycle. Thus, Ibn Ezra’s text makes a statement about the existence of cosmic cycles in Eleazar’s supercommentary.

Eleazar follows the same procedure we have seen at the supercommentary on be-reshit. A field of co-textuality is constructed by putting together relevant texts: extracts from Ibn Ezra’s commentary, from “Aristotle and Avicenna” (meaning in fact Samuel Ibn Tibbon), and from “Ptolemy” (meaning in fact al-Fargani), and even a passage from the Babylonian Talmud. Secondly, “opinions” are constructed on the basis of texts: the opinion of Ibn Ezra, the opinion of Ptolemy, the opinion of Arabic astronomers, the opinion of anonymous interpreters mentioned by Ibn Ezra, and the opinion of Rabbi Joshua in the Talmud. Points of agreements and disagreements are identified in the usual way.

A “discovery” about the sense of a talmudic passage is comparable to the previous example we have met concerning the halakhic debate about the beginning of Shabbat. The analysis outlined there is applicable to this example as well.
Chapter 3: Moses Ibn Tibbon (?) in Hinneh Shakhu: Cosmic Cycles and the Great Year

In the “short version” Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara’s supercommentary (Hinneh shakhu) starts with the following words:

**BUT LOOK, THEY HAVE FORGOTTEN ABOUT “AND GOD CREATED THE DRAGONS”:**
and [Scripture] says concerning them “that swarm in the water [lit. that water swarms]” (Gen 1: 21) implying that they were created out of water. AND THREE [EXAMPLES] IN ONE VERSE, “and God created the dragons and all the reptile-animals and all the winged birds according to their species” (Gen 1: 21). And similarly “GOD CREATED MAN” (Gen 1: 27) “dust out of the earth” (Gen 2: 7). All these cases concern real creation [*beria mamash*].

**AND THIS IS THE GRAMMAR/MORPHOLOGY OF THE VERB BARA: [THERE ARE] TWO SENSES: that is to say, the word *bara* is found concerning two issues.

The first is “to give David bread to eat” of which we also find [an instance] in the Qal stem in the book of Samuel: “and he did not eat bread with them.” And the *alef* of the [root] is instead of a *he*.

And the other [meaning] is ‘to cut’ [*leshon kerita*] and this [piece of information] is derived from “and he shall cut them” [*u-bare othen*] (Ezekiel 23: 47). And “in the beginning God created…” also belongs to this [sense and ‘to create’ means here] ‘to determine.’

And its interpretation: It is beyond doubt that the opinion of this sage of blessed memory [Ibn Ezra] is that the world was indeed created [finite time ago – *mehuddash*]. However, before the first man/Adam there were other worlds and they were destroyed by floods or some other way as our sages of blessed memory said [in the Talmud]: “18 [thousand] worlds etc.” on the basis of a verse in Ezekiel: “surrounding eighteen thousand even the heaven and the stars etc.” (Ezekiel 48: 35) To the same effect they said, “The Torah [existed] two thousand years before the world was created.”

Now due to the big amount of water, darkness prevailed and the air turned into clouds. Consequently, the heavenly bodies were not seen and even the firmament [*raqia*] [was not seen on the sky]. So first [*ba-tehila*], when the Holy One Blessed Be He wanted to make them, the water was dried up and earth became visible. Then the air became transparent again and the edge of the firmament became visible.572

The first four paragraphs of the supercommentary hardly need further explanation except the biblical quotation from Genesis 1: 21: “[the reptiles] that swarm in the water.” In the Hebrew original “water” is the grammatical subject of the sentence and it is possible to interpret “the reptiles” as an object of the verb. The supercommentator takes the verb to mean ‘to produce:’ in his reading Genesis 1: 21 means “[the reptiles] that were produced by water.”

In the fifth paragraph the theory of cosmic cycles is attributed to Ibn Ezra just like in Eleazar ben Mattityah’s supercommentary. The present author goes even a step further. He claims that Ibn Ezra actually believed that there had been pre-existing worlds before “the beginning” of ours. This was not claimed explicitly by Eleazar ben Mattityah.

572 MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 1 r. Cf. Dov Schwartz’s comments on this passage in Yashan be-qanqan hadash, 104-105, who identifies “Shlomo Ibn Yaish’s esoteric opinion” as agreeing with the eternity of the world disregarding the fact that the supercommentary is a compilation and failing to distinguish between exegetical and doctrinal issues – in spite of the fact that the prooftext, quoted above, quite explicitly separates the two domains.
Furthermore, Ibn Ezra’s theory about the events of the first day of creation is explained in the framework of cosmic cycles. The previous world was destroyed by flood, that is why Earth was completely covered by water and all the air became clouds. Consequently, “darkness prevailed” on earth and the heavenly bodies were not visible. The starting conditions of our world are coincident with the ending circumstances of the previous world.

Consequently, the author has a fundamentally different vision of the process described by Genesis 1: 1-5 than Eleazar ben Mattityah. In Eleazar’s version the clouds (“upper waters”) appeared only in the second day as a consequence of the disappearance of water from the surface of earth. The source quoted in Hinneh shakhu disagrees with this opinion claiming that the atmosphere was filled with clouds already before “the beginning” of Genesis 1: 1 since the previous world was destroyed by flood.

**Figure 2:** The first day of creation according to a supercommentary in Hinneh shakhu

The ‘firmament’ (raqia) is definitely not taken by this writer as referring to the air between clouds and “lower waters,” since he explicitly says that the firmament did exist already on the first day – presumably above the clouds – just it was not visible on earth due to the thick layers of water and clouds – whereas in Eleazar’s account it emerged only on the second day. Maybe he thought that the firmament was simply another name of the heaven, or a lower part of the heavenly spheres. In any case, the function implicitly attributed to ‘firmament’ is to serve as a medium for the light coming from the heavenly bodies. The clouds and water blocked the way of light from the “firmament” to the earth; this was the cause of the darkness in the first day.

Ibn Ezra explicitly claims at Gen 1: 6 that ‘firmament’ refers to the sub-lunar element ‘air’ not to the heaven. However, as we have seen, Maimonides claimed that Scripture applies the same names to different existents in the creation-story. Thus ‘heaven’ and ‘earth’ refer not to the same things in Gen 1: 1 as in the subsequent verses. Perhaps the supercommentator applied the same principle to Ibn Ezra’s interpretation as well.

However, it is more probable that the author identified ‘firmament’ with the “elementary fire” encompassing the other three elements of the sub-lunar world. And a third
possibility cannot be excluded either, namely, that firmament was made to refer to an upper part of the air.

Now ‘firmament’ is said by Scripture to divide “upper waters” from “lower waters.” Eleazar identified thee “upper waters” with the clouds.” This solution was not possible for the anonymous quoted in *Hinneh shakhu* for he posited the firmament above the clouds. So one might wonder how he interpreted the word “upper waters” in Gen 1: 7. (Ibn Ezra himself does not pronounce any explicit judgment about the referent of the phrase.)

The text does not indicate any solution. However, one should not think that there were no possibilities to solve this difficulty. Gersonides suggested that the “upper waters” meant an amorphous heavenly material filling the gaps between epicyclical and exocentric spheres. Thus, elementary fire or an upper part of the air could have been said to divide upper waters from lower waters in this sense. If the author of the present text could be proved to hold the same view it would be an interesting and important case for Gersonides’ reception in medieval Jewish literature. However, I am unable to bring any proof.

The topic of the cosmic cycles comes up the second time in the *Hinneh shakhu’s* selection concerning Ibn Ezra on Gen 1: 5. At this passage Ibn Ezra alludes to a midrash and adds a laconic remark typical of him that the midrash in question “has a secret/mystery [yesh lo sod].

This midrash is identified in the supercommentary with a Talmudic saying: “The world lasts for six thousand years: two thousand years are *tohu va-bohu*; two thousand years are Torah; two thousand years are Messiah.” What is the esoteric or mystical sense of this saying?

And it is possible to say, that the opinion of the midrash is that the world has a term when the Earth is covered with water again as was in the beginning [ba-rishona]. And six thousand years are mentioned that are [to be taken instead of] its square, that is, 36,000. For it is well-known that as much as the sun proceeds in 365 days the zodiac proceeds in 100 years; and 365 multiplied by 100 is 36,500 – [then] it is supposed to return where it was [originally].

The calculation underlying the proposed interpretation is not formulated very precisely in the text; nonetheless, the key points can be understood easily. Closer analogy is drawn between the revolving of the sun and the zodiac; consequently the “great year” is counted as consisting of 36,500 years. The sentence “as much as the sun proceeds in 365 days the zodiac proceeds in 100 years” is probably to be understood this way: “as the sun proceeds in one day out of the 365 days etc.” Such flaws in the wording of the arguments might have been the reasons for Joseph Bonfils’ complaints about the “confused” state of Shlomo Ibn Yaish’s text.

Genesis 8: 22 reads: “On all the subsequent days of earth, seeding and harvest, cold and hot, summer and winter, day and night shall not cease.” Ibn Ezra comments:

**On all the subsequent days of earth** signifying that [earth] has a determined term. How magnificent is the midrash [about] “surrounding eighteen thousand!” (Cf. Ezekiel 48: 35.) Just we do not know one out of a thousand.

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574 Cf. Sanhedrin 97a and Avoda zara 9a.

575 MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 1 v.
A midrash concerning the same verse in Ezekiel (48: 35) is referred to as was done by the anonymous supercommentator quoted above. This is one of the few places where Ibn Ezra does not criticize rabbinic midrashim but happily accepts one of them. At the same time it is far from being clear to what midrash exactly the reference is and in what sense Ibn Ezra finds it “magnificent.” The comment ends again with a laconic remark (“we do not know one out of a thousand”) making the impression that Ibn Ezra accepts that 18,000 unit is the amount of something but he is uncertain about the quantity of one unit.

In the supercommentary we find the following:

HOW MAGNIFICENT IS THE MIDRASH [ABOUT] “SURROUNDING EIGHTEEN THOUSAND!”
“… and the name of the city from the day God is there” (Ezekiel 48: 35). According to the midrash this world exists for 18,000 years. And his intention is to say that the sphere of the zodiac revolves during 18,000 years. But some of the sages say 36,000 years.577

Moses Nagari writes in his supercommentary that he is not familiar with the midrash referred to by Ibn Ezra and he does know Ibn Ezra’s source.578 On the margin of the margin of the manuscript a second hand added a tosefet (“addition”) that identifies the midrash with a passage from the Babylonian Talmud (Sanhedrin 97 b in the name of Rava). The talmudic passage in question does not claim at all that the world exists for 18,000 years; nonetheless the author of the tosefet proposes an interpretation similar to the one in the Hinneh shakhu: the number refers to the length of the cosmic year. (It is possible that Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara’s work was the actual source of the tosefet.)

We have encountered so far three different estimations for the length of the cosmic cycle. 36,000 years appear as option both in Eleazar’s supercommentary and in Hinneh shakhu. Eleazar attributes this estimation to Ptolemy on the basis of al-Farangi’s epitome of the Almagest. The “Arab sages” and Ibn Ezra himself counted with 25,200 years according to Eleazar; this opinion is not reported in Hinneh shakhu. 18,000 years are given as a result of the interpretation of a rabbinic midrash in Hinneh shakhu.

It is worthy of noting that in Macrobius’ commentary on De somnis Scipionis the “cosmic year” (annus mundanus) is approximated to 15,000 years. This is the closest parallel to the midrash I know about.579

We do not have any certain criteria for dating the anonymous authors quoted in Hinneh shakhu, nor can we establish for sure whether the three quoted passages come from the pen of one single writer or two or three. It is possible that at least one of the passages was written by Moses Ibn Tibbon who was probably a major source for Shlomo Ibn Yaish. This hypothesis is corroborated by the fact that Moses Ibn Tibbon’s father, Samuel Ibn Tibbon himself devoted an important chapter of his Maamar yiqqavu ha-mayim to the topic of cosmic cycles and he was probably the very person who introduced this topic into medieval Jewish philosophy. Moses Ibn Tibbon could easily learn the lesson from his father.

In the introduction to this chapter we have discussed Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s polemics against Maimonides concerning the interpretation of the “first three verses of the Torah.” In my opinion this polemics forms the broader context of the interpretation put forward in the

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576 This is the continuation of the quotation from Ezekiel.
577 MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 5 r.
578 MS Vienna, ÖNB, Cod. hebr. 106, fol. 31 r. Weizer could not find a better candidate either; he refers to the same passage (Ibn Ezra, Perushey ha-Tora, ed. Weizer, vol. 1, 43, note 42). Nonetheless, it seems to me that the talmudic passage has no relationship to Ibn Ezra’s comment; therefore, Moses Nagari’s uncertainty is completely justified.
579 Macrobius, Comment. in Somn. Scip. 2. 11. 11; ed. J. Willis, 129.
supercommentary. If Genesis 1:1-3 does not teach creation out of nothing even on the scientific level of discourse then it is very difficult to claim that it would teach the same on the popular level. The literal sense of the passage must be a rather vague concept of creation, since not even the scientific sense refers to creation out of nothing.

Samuel’s motivation was probably to maintain the simple or literal reading of the creation narrative. Maimonides over-interpreted the first sentence of the Bible in Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s opinion. The haircutting distinction between ‘first’ (tehilla) and ‘principle’ (reshit) introduced by Maimonides seemed unnatural to him. Paradoxical it might seem the point of interpreting the “beginning” as the beginning of a cosmic cycle on the scientific level was probably to reassert the literal meaning of the creation narrative on the popular level against Maimonides’ reading in. Ibn Ezra, an uncompromising champion of the literal sense, is made to support Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s position in the quoted supercommentary.

The apparent coincidence in Samuel Ibn Tibbon and Ibn Ezra’s efforts to safeguard the literal sense of the creation narrative might have been an important factor in the popularity of Ibn Ezra within the Tibbonide philosophical tradition and a reason for the very emergence of the Ibn Ezra supercommentaries as an accepted genre of philosophical literature within the movement.

Therefore, it cannot be taken for granted that any of the quoted texts in this section come from the pen of Samuel’s son, Moses Ibn Tibbon. However, the probability is high since the Hinneh shakhu’s dependence on Moses Ibn Tibbon’s last supercommentary is well-documented enough. In any case, it is quite probable that this way of reading Ibn Ezra’s laconic remarks about the meaning of bara and other problems was quite widespread in thirteenth century Provence among Tibbonide philosophers – Eleazar ben Mattityah’s similar interpretation is probably another witness to this intellectual tradition.

The discursive practices evidenced by these texts can be described according to the same lines we have encountered in the case of Eleazar ben Mattityah. Making a statement generally means moving from a field of co-textuality to a field of opinions arranged around a topic or “projected” onto a theoretical “surface.” The biblical texts, the rabbinic midrashim, Ibn Ezra’s commentary, and scientific sources are to be interpreted together: they are made to talk about the same topic – the cosmic cycles – although differences between “opinions” are permitted.

The process of relocating, trans-lating statements from the field of co-textuality to the field of “opinions” is usually more intricate in the case of Jewish sources (including in most cases Ibn Ezra’s commentaries as well) than in the case of philosophical and scientific sources. In the case of scientific sources the process involves “ascension” in the subjective position and concerning the discursive objects: the subject proceeds from perceiving the letters and words to perceiving meanings, theoretical objects. In the case of the Jewish sources there is an intermediary stage which is associated with the literal sense.

Interpreting Ibn Ezra’s comment on, let’s say, the Hebrew verb bara the supercommentator proceeds first form the words of Ibn Ezra (that might be corrupt and might need emendation, or might recall similar texts just by the virtue of the same or similar words appearing in them) to their literal sense, that concern usually the literal sense of the Scripture. Bara means ‘to determine.’ This is a statement about Hebrew lexicography that shares an enunciative field with statements of similar kind. A second step, a second “relocation” is needed to arrive at a theoretical field where Ibn Ezra’s statement may meet “Aristotle” or “Ptolemy’s” opinion.

Similar processes can be observed concerning the interpretation of biblical verses and rabbinic midrashim. First their literal sense has to be clarified: the sense beyond the text. Only after this first step the philosophical-scientific reinterpretation of the statements can take
place. What we have called tentatively “imperative of literal interpretation” versus “imperative of scientific interpretation” in the Prolegomena can be identified with these steps. At this point the scientificity of exegesis can be treated as well. As long the practice of “relocation” or “translation” specified above was believed to result in knowledge as opposed to a naive, unprofessional, or, to use the medieval term, “vulgar” understanding of texts we can point out the existence of an episteme established in the domain of exegesis among certain medieval Jewish intellectual circles. As long as these practices are at least partly formalized into explicit rules we can speak about a science of exegesis. And we can try to situate its ideological context.

Turning back to the present example, the reinterpretation of Ibn Ezra’s comment about the literal sense of the Hebrew verb bara in Genesis 1: 1 as an allusion to the theory of cosmic cycles is a quite impressive realization of both the “imperative of literal exegesis” and the “imperative of scientific exegesis.” Although it is not stated explicitly in the texts, no doubt that interpretations proposed were meant to form a piece of knowledge as opposed to naive or vulgar understanding.

Were the rules of the transformation, or, at least, some of the rules, formulated explicitly as well? The following comment by Maimonides on a possible way of communicating esoteric doctrines concerning maase merkava is instructive:

I shall interpret to you that which was said by Ezekiel the prophet, peace be on him, in such a way that anyone who heard that interpretation would think that I do not say anything over and beyond what is indicated by the text, but that it is as if I translated words from one language to another or summarized the meaning of the external sense of the speech.\(^ {580}\)

Maimonides apparently claims that he encoded the esoteric interpretation of Ezekiel 1 into a peshat-styled exegesis of the text. I don’t want to push too far the significance of this particular passage in Maimonides. Nonetheless, it can hardly be doubted that the supercommentators approached Ibn Ezra’s literal exegesis of bara as an encoded text and they tried to unfold its esoteric implications. And Maimonides’ authority, if not exactly the sentence quoted above, could easily stand behind this practice. We will return to this topic in the conclusion of the present part.

The ideological consequences of these texts are more specific than in the case of the previous examples. The point was not only that philosophy and natural sciences are present in biblical and talmudic texts. Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s thesis about the possibility of cosmic cycles was contested within the Tibbonide school as well. We have seen that Moses of Salerno, writing perhaps a couple of decades earlier than Eleazar ben Mattityah censured Samuel Ibn Tibbon for holding this opinion.\(^ {581}\) The supercommentators quoted in Hinneh shakhu, whoever they were, promoted Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s approach in this question.

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580 Maimonides, GP, intr. to Part Three; tr. Pines, 416.
581 Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s interpretation of the creation-story was rejected by Moses of Salerno, a disciple of Jacob Anatolio and the earliest known commentator of GP. Cf. his comment on GP II, 30 (written around 1250-1260): “And even if the sage Rabbi Samuel Ibn Tibbon followed this view [i.e. that God “created” many worlds before the present one] in his treatise that he wrote about “Let the waters gather.m” at the beginning of the text, and he says that he found a pearl among many things [i.e. he understood the esoteric meaning of a midrash], you should know that the way of Moses, the son of Maimon is the way of Moses, the son of Amram, that is to say, the creation of the world after complete nonexistence and its creation concerns its entirety, both the upper and the lower worlds, and not only the elements as some people think.” (MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 687, fol. 220 v). Abba Mari ben Eligdor (Provence, end of the thirteenth and beginning of fourteenth centuries) also contrasts Maimonides and Ibn Ezra’s interpretations of Genesis 1: 6 and prefers Maimonides to Ibn Ezra (MS Oxford, Bodleian, MS Opp. 572, fol. 84 v).
Chapter 4: Sen Bonet de Lunel / Avvat Nefesh: The “Edges of the Ocean”

Bonet takes a different approach in this case as well. He agrees with the previous supercommentators that the true sense of *bara* according to Ibn Ezra is ‘to determine,’ ‘to decide’ or ‘to delimit.’ However, he proposes a simpler explanation not involving the topic of cosmic cycles:

AND THIS IS THE EXPLANATION OF *bara*: ‘TO DETERMINE/TO DECIDE’ [g-z-r] LIKE IN “AND HE SHALL CUT THEM… [u-bare othen]” (Ezekiel 23: 47).

But God forbid that I should accuse this sage [Ibn Ezra] that he would believe in the eternity of the spheres. He means only that the Torah was given to the multitude; therefore, only the sensible things are mentioned by it explicitly. As for the obscure things, such as the world of the spheres and the separate [intellects] they are not mentioned except in an allusive way [be-remez].

It was indeed his view that everything was generated by the grace of God, blessed be He, and they [i.e. the heavenly bodies] shine out of his emanation. And the proof for this is what he says later, NAMELY, ONLY ONE THING WAS CREATED EVERY DAY: ON THE FIRST DAY – LIGHT. And it is well-known that light is from the emanation of the heavenly bodies. Now if the light is created, then the heavenly bodies are also created, since they never existed without light, although [they might appear to have no light] if the recipients are unable [to receive their light] as will be explained in the section about the fourth day [of creation]. And if the heavenly bodies are created – they are the noblest part of the spheres – then the spheres themselves must be created as well. This was indeed the intention of the sage.582

We have seen that Eleazar ben Mattityah and an anonymous quoted in *Hinneh shakhu* claimed that Ibn Ezra associated the meaning of *bara* in Genesis 1:1 with the meaning of *u-bare* in Ezekiel 23: 47. Bonet accepts the same explanation without any further justification. By Bonet’s time this exegetical solution must have been widely accepted among the readers of Ibn Ezra.

At the same time, in Bonet’s opinion, Ibn Ezra did not think of the “determination” of the cosmic cycle, but God’s decision for starting the physical process that resulted in the world we know today. Explaining Ibn Ezra on Gen 1: 2 Bonet paraphrases Gen 1: 1 thus: “Before God decided [gazar] the existence of dry land the whole earth was covered by water.”583

The replacement of “in the beginning of …” with “before” might reflect the influence of Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s *Maamar* just like in the case of Joseph Caspi (cf. supra). At another place Bonet writes the following:

[“In the beginning God created heaven…”] as if [Scripture] said, “before God decided [gazar] the edges of the firmament” – which are connected to the edges of the Ocean, as he [Ibn Ezra] says in another place – “BECAUSE the whole earth WAS COVERED WITH WATER” as he says in the second verse.584

582 MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 50 r.
583 MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 52 v.
584 MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 50 r (already quoted in previous section).
Bonet refers to Ibn Ezra on Gen 1: 6 where “the sage” acknowledges the value of a rabbinic midrash.\footnote{585}{The source is probably Pirquey Rabbi Eliezer, chapter 3; cf. Ben-Menahem, Mi-ginzey Vatican, 113.}

How magnificent are the words of that man who says that the edges of the Sun are together with the edges of the Ocean! And this ‘firmament’ is the air. For when the light became strong on earth and the “wind” [ruah] dried up the [water] from the earth, the heat turned into its opposite and the firmament was made.

Bonet proposed a quite original interpretation of this passage and he incorporated it into his own explanation of the creation-story. For the sake of clarity I will quote his own commentary here where he puts together his ideas that are found at different places in his supercommentary on Ibn Ezra:

The explanation of the second day. \textit{LET THERE BE FIRMAMENT INSIDE OF THE WATERS} – the intention is that this is the ‘firmament’ what is the middle part of the air that was generated and became solid by virtue of the reflection of the radiation from the heavenly bodies especially from the Sun being the principal actor in the world.

And its saying \textit{INSIDE THE WATERS} means that this firmament was generated by [fol. 62 r] the means of water out of which the vapors were ascending by the force of the heavenly bodies up to the middle part of the air. And there they became solid and took the form of air. To this [process] our rabbis of blessed memory [of the talmudic period] alluded saying “the intermediate layer of water solidified and the firmament was made.\footnote{586}{Bereshit rabba 4: 1; cf. also Talmud Yerushalmi, Berakhot I, 2 c.}

Or, the intended meaning of \textit{INSIDE THE WATERS} is that the firmament is dividing the actual waters [lit. “the waters belonging to the species” ha-mayim ha-miniyim] that are below it from the waters that are above it, as will be explained; for this reason [Scripture] says AND [GOD] DIVIDED THE WATERS THAT ARE BELOW THE FIRMAMENT FROM THE WATERS THAT ARE ABOVE THE FIRMAMENT.

For ‘division’ does not concern only the place while the forms of the [divided things remain] the same. On the contrary, division concerns the form; hence \textit{THE WATERS THAT ARE BELOW THE FIRMAMENT} are actual waters and \textit{THE WATERS THAT ARE ABOVE THE FIRMAMENT} are [waters] only potentially. When the ascending vapors, which are wet, are collected and squeezed together due to the great coldness of the air there, the water becomes actual again and this is rain.\footnote{587}{MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 61 v – 62 r.}

The midrash quoted by Ibn Ezra about the edges of the Sun being coincident with the edges of the Ocean is taken by Bonet to mean that the edges of the \textit{firmament} are coincident with the edges of the Ocean. The emphasis on the Sun’s significance in terrestrial processes in the first paragraph of the quotation above is probably meant to justify the actual substitution of the Sun with the firmament in Bonet’s quotation of the midrash on fol. 50 r (see above). The firmament is caused by the heavenly bodies, especially by the Sun; therefore, in the rabbinic tradition “the edges of the Sun” has to be understood as “the edges of the firmament.”

Once this exegetical device is accepted Bonet can formulate the proposition that the firmament’s division of upper and lower waters does not concern so much the locations of the two kinds of waters but their physical qualities. The lower waters are not the same sort of
water as the upper waters. The first type is the “normal” water; what we can find in rivers, lakes, and seas. The “upper waters” are only potentially water; that is to say, although they can become water (when it is raining), they are principally not water but water turned into air; vapors, clouds, etc. The “edges” of firmament are together with the “edges” of the Ocean – this image suggests continuous changes, smooth transit from one physical realm to the other. The vapors that are located on the surface of the Ocean can be described already as the “edge” of the firmament. These vapors ascend to the middle part of the air where they form clouds – the firmament in the proper sense – and they can regain their original substantial form, i.e. water, and returning to the Ocean in the form of rain.

**Figure 3:** The first two days of creation according to Sen Bonet de Lunel / Avvat Nefesh

At the end of the first day

At the end of the second day

Interpreting God’s division of the waters as division in substantial form comes most probably from Maimonides’ GP II, 30. The following remark in Aristotle’s *Meteorology* might have been a source of inspiration for both Ibn Ezra’s and Bonet’s reading of the midrash: “So if ‘Oceanus’ had some secret meaning in early writers, perhaps they may have meant this river that flows in a circle about the earth.” (I, 9) Aristotle means by “this river” the cycle of water’s evaporating into the air and return to the earth in form of rain.

Bonet elaborates his ideas further in his commentary on the first day where he combines exegetical solutions taken from Maimonides’ GP with Ibn Ezra’s commentary and Aristotle’s *Meteorology*:

And after that [Scripture] mentions the other elements in the order of their natural places, that is to say, fire, air, water, and earth. **AND DARKNESS** for darkness mentioned at this place in this verse is identical with the elementary fire. And it is called so because it is not visible at its place which is very close to the lowest sphere as is proved in natural sciences. And [Scripture’s] saying, [there was darkness] **ON THE SURFACE OF DEEPNESS** [TEHOM] that is to say, the upper part of the air. For the air is divided into three parts as it is proved in natural sciences, and [Scripture] calls the upper one ‘deepness’ [tehom] because eyesight fails to penetrate it truly just like it is the case with the deepness of water that cannot be perceived by the sense of seeing.
Or we can say that ON THE SURFACE OF DEEPNESS that is to say, the deepness of water.

AND THE SPIRIT [RUAH] OF GOD that is to say, the air; and the SPIRIT is associated with the SURFACE OF THE WATERS because of their natural places as is said WAS HOVERING ON THE SURFACE OF THE WATERS. If so, the aforementioned DARKNESS must be of necessity above the air.

And ‘spirit’ [ruah] is attributed to God [i.e. “the spirit of God”] because it was sent by God to dry the earth in order to be disclosed. And the phrase HOVERING is ‘smooth movement,’ like in “hovering above its younglings” (Deut. 32: 11).

And the passage AND GOD SAID, “LET THERE BE LIGHT” – that is to say, “and [God] had said before.” And the LIGHT mentioned is the one that comes by the virtue of the heavenly bodies. And it is mentioned in order to inform [us] how the earth was disclosed and the dry land became visible that happened by the virtue of the heat from the [light] of the heavenly bodies. 588

Interpreting tehom “deepness” as the upper part of the air is a rather unexpected, original exegetical proposal not testified in any other source as far as I know.

The reader should also notice that Bonet offers an alternative explanation of tehom as well. This is in accordance with his approach to the Holy Scripture as a divine text. Human interpreters can never be completely sure that their explanation exhausts all the senses intended by God. Therefore, alternative explanations are permitted even if they are mutually exclusive. “And God knows which of them is the proper [explanation]” as Bonet writes at the end of his comment on the second day. 589

As we have seen already, Bonet admitted the enigmatic character of creation out of nothing as an article of faith. The biblical account of the event was apparently no less enigmatic in Bonet’s eyes. In practice that meant experiencing an order in the text, which, nonetheless, escaped human knowledge and resisted clear descriptions. We shall return to this phenomenon.

In the passage quoted first in the present section, Bonet emphasizes the orthodoxy of Ibn Ezra. He did not believe that Genesis 1:1 was about creation out of nothing, nonetheless he doubtlessly accepted the doctrine of creation out of nothing. The argument put forward is based on the assumption that Ibn Ezra meant creatio ex nihilo when he said, “light was created on the first day” at the end of his comment on Gen 1:1. Ibn Ezra’s orthodoxy was also emphasized in Hinneh shakhu; however, the supercommentator did not propose an exegetical argument to prove this point.

Ibn Ezra’s conclusion about the meaning of bara, which came about in a grammatical-semantic context is also re-employed by Bonet in a philosophical-scientific context. However, unlike Eleazar ben Mattityah and Hinneh shakhu, Bonet’s field of application is not natural science but theology: God decided the existence of the firmament and inhabited land. Consequently, the theory of cosmic cycles is not chosen to build the overall theoretical framework of the interpretation. Bonet made a different strategic choice than Eleazar ben Mattityah and Hinneh shakhu within the same exegetical game.

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588 MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 61 r.
589 MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 62 r.
Moses Nagari summarizes Ibn Ezra’s comment on Genesis 1: 1:

Now in order to explain Ibn Ezra’s opinion concerning this verse and the subsequent ones I will put forward an introduction.

And I say:
Know that in spite of the fact that he [Ibn Ezra] believes in the creation [hiddush] of Existence both in its entirety [lit. “its universality” kelaluto] and concerning its parts, and he did not have in mind a different intention [while explaining the creation-story], still, nonetheless he thinks that due to the fact that the Torah – according to his opinion – was given to the multitude, [the Torah’s] intention is revolving around the explanation of the sensible things that are close to the apprehension [fol. 5 r] of them [i.e. the vulgar]. Therefore, this verse in his opinion intends only to teach the creation of the sensible things after they had been non-separated according to their own nature, and in absolute sense they do not transcend that apprehension/perception.

And the ‘heaven’ mentioned in this [verse] is the firmament which is generated by the reflection of the heat of the sun. And the ‘earth’ refers only to its dry part. And bara does not mean according to him generation out of nothing a finite amount of time ago but only separation of one thing from the other when each of them receive their special forms by which they are substantiated after having the universal and common existence before. And the word bereshit is governed by it [i.e. by the verb bara] despite the fact that it is a finite verb. And the ‘and’ in the verse “and the earth” (Gen 1: 2) is superfluous; thus the second verse is connected to the first one.

And its explanation shall be the following:
“After the universal and common being was produced [by God] and received by the particulars and penetrated into its parts, namely, the separate intellects, the heavenly substances with their “hosts” [i.e. the stars] and matter [hiyyuli] with its four forms, still before the individual ascension that made the existence of the aforementioned firmament necessary and perfected its special form, the primordial earth according to the correct speculation, so the earth was void and empty and necessarily devoid of inhabitants.\(^{590}\)

The last paragraph is probably the longest paraphrase of Genesis 1: 1 attested in medieval Jewish philosophical literature.

Moses Nagari reconstructs Ibn Ezra’s position in the framework of the philosophy of Judah Romano and ultimately that of Thomas Aquinas. The distinction between ‘universal bringing into existence’ and obtaining the particular forms is discussed by Judah Romano in his commentary on Genesis. The idea itself is based on the Liber de causis that was translated by Judah Romano from Latin into Hebrew.

The first proposition of the Liber de causis establishes the thesis that the higher a cause is in the hierarchy of causes the more lasting are its effects. The most lasting and common and widespread characteristics of reality must be caused by the highest cause – God himself. Not everything is intelligent and not everything is alive, but everything exists. Moreover if something ceases to be intelligent or alive it does not cease by this to exist.

\(^{590}\) MS Vienna ÖNB, Heb. 106, fol. 4 v – 5 r.
Therefore existence must be caused by the highest cause, whereas life and intelligence by lower causes.

Moses Nagari’s distinction between the emanation of “universal and common existence” and that of “specific forms” is probably derived from the Liber de causis. It is referred to in the introduction of the supercommentary:

What has been emanated from God without intermediary is the existence of all the spiritual substances because their noble and particular existence is pure from matter and [two illegible words] strong is the rule of their existence with Him not that they would turn away from Him as is explained in the Book of the Flowers of the Godhead [sefer pirhei elohut].591

Sefer pirhei elohut is the title given to Liber de causis in Judah Romano’s Hebrew translation completed in Rome around 1325.592

The following quotation from Judah Romano’s commentary on the creation-story illuminates the doctrinal context of Moses Nagari’s position:

The intention of Moses our master – peace upon him – in this sentence [i.e. “In the beginning…”] is to teach us knowledge concerning the universal emanation [ha-haspa’a ha-kelalit]. And in the subsequent sentences [his intention is to teach us] knowledge concerning particular generations [ha-haviyot ha-peratiyot]. […] And the explanation of the sentence in general is that the First Cause emanated all the existents higher or lower first. I mean by “lower” the first matter with its four forms. But the emanation of spiritual existence, I mean the separated intellects and the souls of the spheres, precedes the emanation of corporeal existence. […] That is to say, according to their belief, the first separate intellect emanated the second [intellect] and the first sphere with its soul by the power of the first cause. And the second [intellect] brought into existence the third [intellect] and the second sphere with its soul. And so on up to the last one [intellect] whose relationship to the intellectual faculty [of human soul] is like the relationship of every intellect to the soul of its sphere. And the spheres emanated [fol. 3 r] the existence of the first matter and its forms. And when the fifth element was brought into existence time was generated, for time is the number of the motion when we perceive [lit. look at] it under the aspect of before and after and it is counted.

But some sages of the [non-Jewish] nations who are not very far from us in time and place, I have seen them [or I have understood them] to disagree with this system [seder] saying that every existent insofar it is existent is emanated from the first cause without intermediaries.

And they were inspired by Plato’s saying that the Form of existence prepares the existence for every existent. And after the existent receives the existence from the first cause it also receives other emanation and perfection from the [created] existent that is before him [in the hierarchy]. They follow the aforementioned philosopher in this respect as well who said that the Form of intelligence emanates intellect to every intelligent after having received existence from the Form of existence. However, the way of them [the recent sages] is not completely the same as the way of the aforementioned philosopher, for he [Plato] meant by the Form of existence a unique and universal form existing outside of the mind [lit. intellect – huts la-sekhel] and being separated from every way of the particular existence and encompassing all

591 MS Vienna ÖNB, Heb. 106, fol. 1 r/b.
592 Cf. Vogelstein and Rieger, Geschichte der Juden in Rom, 444-445; Steinschneider, CB, 1834.
of them in a universal way. And similarly by the Form of intelligence he meant a unique and universal form that is separated from all the ways of the intellection and encompassing all of them. But these [more recent scholars] mean by the form of existence the First Cause and by the form of intelligence the separated intellects.593

Judah Romano juxtaposed two alternative views of creation. The first is Avicenna’s theory of emanation being itself a modification of Farabi’s older theory. Maimonides’ own vision of emanation was based on this theory as well. In post-Maimonidean Jewish philosophy a version of the theory is usually taken for granted. It must have seemed natural for Judah Romano to start the discussion of creation with this theory.

At the same time it should be remembered that an emanation theory is not necessarily a theory of creation in medieval Jewish philosophy. As a rule the topic of the first, dramatic moment of creation when the border between nothing and being is transgressed is separated from the topic of emanation. The classical statement on this topic is to be found in GP II, 17: Creation cannot be compared to any natural processes; it is a miracle that no human understanding can grasp in its entirety. Farabi’s and Avicenna’s theory of emanation are rather taken as a theory describing how God maintains the order in an already created world.

However, the theory is invoked sometimes to explain how a multitude of creatures could derive from the one and simple divine essence. In this context Avicenna’s version of emanation theory could indeed be a model of creation for post-Maimonidean philosophers. In the next chapter we shall see an example for this. Ibn Ezra, Maimonides, and Samuel Ibn Tibbon did not insist on the proposition that existence is received without intermediaries from God.

The Latin scholastics unanimously rejected Avicenna’s theory by formulating the principle “only God can create.” Avicenna’s version of the emanation theory implied in the scholastics’ reading that God enabled the angels to create out of nothing – a clearly unacceptable proposition for them. Thus, there was a sort of consensus among the Latin scholastics about the thesis that God’s bestowing existence on the creatures is a direct process with no intermediation of angels. However there were considerable disagreements concerning the details of the doctrine: to what degree Avicenna’s theory can be refuted and the Church’s doctrine can be proved without the help of revelation, whether to be and to be created is the same thing for the creatures, whether being created is an accident superadded to the essence of the things and so forth. I will argue that Judah Romano’s words fit the best Giles of Rome’s version of the theory.

Judah Romano knew very well what he was talking about referring to the “scholars of the nations not far from us in time and place.” He translated from Latin into Hebrew long passages from Aquinas, Giles of Rome, and others. These translations show that he was a competent reader of Latin scholastic texts; he was most probably able to understand Latin texts by himself and he had access to scholastic manuscripts.

The Christian scholars to whom he probably refers can be identified with Aquinas and Giles of Rome. In his Summa contra gentiles Aquinas clearly claims that creatures receive existence directly from God:

Impossibile est autem quod causa secunda ex propria virtute sit principium esse in quantum huiusmodi; hoc enim est proprium causae primae; nam ordo effectuum est secundum ordinem causarum. Primus autem effectus est ipsum esse, quod omnibus aliis effectibus praesupponitur et ipsum non praesupponit aliquem alium effectum; et

593 MS New York, JTS, Lutzki 2362, fol. 2 v – 3 r.
Similarly in *Summa contra Gentiles*:

Causa igitur propria essendi est agens primum et universale, quod Deus est. Alia vero agentia non sunt causa essendi simpliciter, sed causa essendi hoc, ut hominem vel album. Esse autem simpliciter per creationem causatur, quae nihil praesupponit: quia non potest aliquid praeexistere quod sit extra ens simplciter. Per alias factiones fit hoc ens vel tale: nam ex ente praeeistente fit hoc ens vel tale.²⁵⁴

Aquinas argued that creation and preservation should be distinguished as two separate divine actions. In creation, the differences between the created things are coming from the part of God; whereas in preservation the differences between the created things emerge from themselves: each of them receive as much as they can of the divine providence. Accordingly, creation is a direct activity of God whereas preservation is meditated through the angels and natural order.

Giles of Rome rejected this opinion of Aquinas. He argued that creation and preservation are not two separate divine actions. Moreover, the differences between the creatures come from the part of the creatures in both cases. Giles completely identified ‘being’ with ‘being created.’ For the things apart from God ‘to be’ means ‘to be created.’ Developing Aquinas’ doctrine to a radical direction Giles also declared that being is not only *realiter* different from the essence but that it is an “additional thing” (*res adita*) to the essence. Therefore, in Giles theory, creation is a process in which God bestows the universal and common being (which is the same as “being created”) on the essences of the created things that receive it according to their capacities.²⁵⁶

At the same time Giles does not deny that besides the universal and common being God also emanates other perfections on the creatures not directly but through intermediaries that distribute the perfections in a hierarchical order. Giles again emphasizes the unity of divine action. God emanates the maximum perfection on everything without distinction; however, the things receive the emanated perfection only to the extent they are capable to do so. “Being” or “being created” is a minimum of perfection that is received by everything that exists directly from God. On the other hand, in order to get further perfections the created things need a hierarchical order of reception in which secondary causes appear besides God. These causes differentiate the originally homogenous divine influx. Giles refers again to the Dionysian corpus to establish these points:

Propter quod sciendum quod, si volumus bene imaginari quomodo Deus operatur istos effectus mediabantibus agentibus naturalibus, imaginemur, sicut nos docet imaginari Dionysius, 4 De divinis nominibus, quod Deus uniformiter operetur omnia, sed si est diversitas in rebus hoc est propter secunda agentia mediabantis quibus operatur Deus […] Deus ergo uniformiter operatur, sed ipsa secunda agentia propter eorum diversitatem <non> uniformiter operantur et non uniformiter recipiunt impressionem divinam. Unde Dionysius de divinis nominibus preassignato capitulo, imaginatur quod

²⁵⁴ De Potentia q. 3, a. 4.
Deus non ratiocinans nes preelicens, sed omnia uniformiter operatur. Sicut sol, quantum est de se, omnia uniformiter illuminat, si autem non omnia uniformiter illuminantur, hoc est propter diversitatem recipientum, sic omnia Deus uniformiter agit, sed si non omnia uniformiter aguntur, hoc est quia ipsa materia non et uniformiter disposita et ipsa secunda agentia, que uniformiter cooperantur ad productionem rerum, non uniformiter recipiunt motiones divinas.\(^{597}\)

At the beginning of his *Theoremata de esse et essentia* Giles indeed uses a formula that has strong Platonists connotations: “Omne esse vel est purum per se existens et infinitum vel est participatum in alio receptum et limitatum.”\(^{598}\) Judah Romano translated long passages from this text including the quoted sentence into Hebrew.\(^{599}\) Giles of Rome is probably the principal authority whom Judah Romano has in mind describing the view of the Gentile scholars “not far from us in time and space.”

Moses Nagari’s interpretation of Ibn Ezra reads the distinction between direct emanation of existence and meditated emanation of other properties into Ibn Ezra’s text. His vision of creation as the reception of “universal and common being” by the separate intellects, the heavens and the first matter and its four elements seems to presuppose the distinction between existence and essence. This point needs further elaboration.

God does not create a simple existent in the first moment of creation in Moses Nagari’s vision but a tripartite world consisting of angels, heavenly spheres and the sub-lunar world consisting of the four elements. The differences between the three parts of the world are apparently not coming from the part of God but from the recipients themselves. This is the natural way of understanding the text although this point is not made explicit by the author.

This fact seems to suggest that Moses Nagari’s words are closer to Giles of Rome’s position than to Aquinas’ one. The differences among the created things do not come from God but from the essences that receive the common and universal being from God.

But how can the “recipients” differ from each other already before their reception of existence? How can non-existing things differ from each other? How can these differences account for such an important feature of reality, namely the differences between angelic, astral and terrene substances? Isn’t it more logical to assume with Aquinas that the differences came from the part of God, so He alone is responsible for the ultimate structure of the world?

On the other hand, the reader might ask, how can difference proceed from the completely simple divine substance? Aquinas’ solution in fact only points to the fact that creation is a mysterious process that we do not comprehend completely – this is what a medieval critic would probably say. Once it is the case one can be inclined to try out other theoretical options as well that might lead closer to the impenetrable mystery of creation than Aquinas’ view.

A basic ambiguity characterizes the monotheistic notion of creation: The doctrine implies on the one hand that God is the absolute lord of the universe. However, at the same time it also establishes the independent existence of the created world and by this also the possibility of imperfection and evil. Aquinas’ solution emphasizes the first aspect: the differences between created things must be due to the will of the Lord of creation. However


another possibility is also inherent in the “historical a priori” of medieval theories on creation: the differences among the creatures are the causes of the presence of imperfection and evil in the created world. Therefore, one might argue, it is more advisable to disassociate God from these differences.

The miracle of creation is that imperfect things can exist besides God. Once this miracle is accepted – and no doubt that Thomas Aquinas, Giles of Rome, Judah Romano, and Moses Nagari all accepted it – it is not such a big deal to suppose that God’s creative activity in fact consists in bestowing actual existence on essences inherently different from each other. An aspect of creation is to claim autonomous existence for the created world: this autonomous existence can be imagined as a logical space that defines certain differences among the essences of the possible things that can be brought into existence. This logical space does circumscribe God’s omnipotence in a sense – God cannot create impossibilities.

To sum up, Moses Nagari’s position seems to be in agreement with Giles of Rome’s one. This fact reveals to us something of the regional differences between early fourteenth-century Ibn Ezra supercommentators. Sen Bonet de Lunel was influenced by non-Thomist scholastics, such as Peter John Olivi, Durandus of Saint Pourçain, and William Ockham. During the same period Moses Nagari in Italy was under the influence of Thomist theologians, such as Aquinas himself and Giles of Rome. Jewish philosophers in Italy were more exposed to Thomist influence than their colleagues in Southern France or Spain.

It is also remarkable that Moses Nagari made the same strategic decision as Sen Bonet de Lunel despite the obvious differences in doctrine. He reused Ibn Ezra’s statement on the meaning of bara in a theological rather than physical context.

However, there is an important difference that concerns archeological analysis. As a matter of fact, although there is no reason to think that he did not understand Ibn Ezra’s grammatical and semantic comments, Moses Nagari skipped the grammatical part of Ibn Ezra’s commentary and turned directly to theological questions. This fact in itself is not very significant. The integrity of the grammatical level of understanding the text is doubtlessly respected in Moses’ work (unlike in certain types of mystical exegesis where words are disintegrated into letters that are subsequently treated as numbers or images). The decision to mention or ignore something in a particular text is not relevant in itself for the purposes of archeological analysis.

But this example is not an isolated one. Retrospectively we can realize that in the supercommentary on be-reshit Moses Nagari also skipped grammatical considerations – he did not worry about the meaning of preposition be- which was such an important topic for other supercommentators – and hurried to the theological implications.

This might indicate a small gap in the episteme of post-Maimonidean biblical exegesis. For Eleazar ben Mattityah Hebrew grammar was still a productive field: he proposed original ideas and theories. For other supercommentators Hebrew grammar was no longer productive, but it still retained its role in establishing a scientific style of exegesis. You have to take Hebrew grammar into consideration if you want to build your biblical exegesis on secure grounds. Moses Nagari practically ignored this task. This is not to say that he denied the importance of grammar in exegesis. But the scientificity of exegesis was no longer established through explicit grammatical discussions.

600 A sentence in Moses Nagari’s supercommentary on Genesis 1: 1; s. v. “elohim” will be quoted in a subsequent chapter.
III. Elohim

Introduction

Ibn Ezra’s comment continues:

**GOD/ ELOHIM:**

Since we find *eloah* [in the singular] we know that *elohim* is a plural form.

And this is rooted in a linguistic convention [*derekh ha-lashon; lit. “way of tongue”*]. For every language has a way of [expressing] respect / superiority [*kavod*].

In the Romance language [*loaz*] the respectful way of speaking is when the person of lower rank uses plural forms in the presence of a person of higher rank. And in the language of Ishmael [=Arabic] superiority is expressed when the person of higher rank speaks in the plural as a king.

Now in the Holy Tongue [=Hebrew] superiority is expressed by using plural forms concerning the person of higher rank. Such is the case with *adonim* and *bealim* [“lords, owners”] when [Scripture] says “crude lord” (Isaiah 19:4) or “and his owner takes it” (Ex. 22: 10). The same is true of [the morphologically plural but semantically singular prepositional forms such as] ‘on him,’ ‘toward him,’ ‘up to him’ [*alav, elav, adav*].

This is why Scripture says *bara* [‘created’ in the singular] and not *baru* [‘created’ in the plural].

And from speculation (*toshiya*) we know that speech is called ‘tongue,’ because it seems to come from the [tongue]. And thus the upper soul of man is called ‘heart’ – in spite of the fact that [heart] is corporeal whereas [the soul] is not corporeal – since the heart is the first site for the [soul]. And since all the actions of God are realized through the angels who fulfill His will, He is also called so [i.e. *elohim*]. And at the verse “my Name is in him” (Ex 23:21) I will explain something of the mystery of the Name.

Don’t pay attention to the words of [Saadyah] gaon who says that man is superior to the angels. I have already explained in my *Sefer ha-yesod* that all his arguments are void. We know that nobody is more elevated among the humans than the prophets. And Joshua prostrated in front of the angel of God and said, “What will my lord tell his servant?” and Zechariah did the same. And also Daniel. And so on.

And the sense of “God of hosts” [*elohei ha-tsevaot*] is like “the God of gods” [*elohei ha-elohim*].

And the sense of *elohim* is like “king” [*melekh*]. And those men who are engaged in jurisprudence are also called *elohim* for this reason. And this name is a common noun not a substantial / proper [name]. And from [the root of *elohim*] there are no [verbs] either in the future or in the past tense.

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601 Cf. Ps. 114: 7, etc.
602 *Loaz* might refer to Spanish, Italian, Provencal, French or even to Latin in the present context. These languages were not clearly distinguished by Jewish authors of the age. More than a century later Joseph Caspi criticized the “language of the Christians” for the Italians do not understand the French etc. whereas Hebrew is understood everywhere in the Jewish world.
603 In these phrases the nouns ‘lord’ and ‘owner’ are morphologically in the plural, whereas the adjective and the verb governed by them are in the singular. Disregarding the sense (and English grammar) the two phrases can be rendered as **“the lords, the crude one” [adonim qashe] or **“and his lords takes it” [ve-laqah bealav] respectively. Ibn Ezra’s point is that *be-reshit bara elohim* belongs to the same type of expressions.
Don’t think that the angels are of fire and wind on the basis of “who makes His angels winds” (Ps. 104: 4). For this is not the literal sense \textit{peshat} of the quoted verse. First David spoke about the work of creation. And he started with the light and said, “he put on light” (Ps. 104:2) and after “stretched out the heavens” (ibid.) – that is the firmament – and the water is above it and fire and snow and wind. And he said that the wind was the messenger of God to go wherever He sends it, and similarly the fire is one of his servants, and he said, “He founded the earth on its base” (Ps. 104: 5) – this is the dry land. And thus it is written, “The wind of the tempest does His words” (Ps. 148: 8).

The first paragraphs of Ibn Ezra’s comment are probably meant to be an implicit criticism of a widespread Christian claim, namely, that the grammatically plural form “\textit{elohim}” is an allusion to the mystery of the Holy Trinity. God is one and three; this is why Scripture says \textit{elohim} in the plural and \textit{bara} in the singular.

Ibn Ezra’ strategy to reply to this argument is first to admit that \textit{elohim} is indeed a plural form. However, Ibn Ezra maintains that no inference can be drawn from this fact concerning any plurality within the divine being. Two considerations are mentioned: first, the plural form can be simply a linguistic convention for expressing respect; second, the word \textit{elohim} denotes primarily the angels or separated intellects acting as intermediaries in the process of creation. There is indeed a mystery alluded to in the plural-singular phrase \textit{elohim bara}; but this mystery is not the Holy Trinity but the fact that the only God creates through his many angels.

The latter point leads Ibn Ezra into further discussions concerning the nature of angels. The “\textit{gaon}’s” [Saadyah’s] view concerning the superiority of man over angels is vehemently rejected. Moreover, Ibn Ezra corrects the opinion of those who believe on the basis of Psalms 104: 4 that the angels are corporeal existents.
Chapter 1: Eleazar ben Mattityah

Caspi’s comments do not enter deep philosophical problems:

THE FIRST SITE that is to say, the root of the soul is in the heart, even if its dwelling place is in the brain. AND FROM [THE ROOT OF ELOHIM] THERE ARE NO [VERBS] EITHER IN THE FUTURE OR IN THE PAST TENSE that is to say, even if it is a common noun, there is no verb [attested in Hebrew] from its root.604

Shlomo Ibn Yaish’s supercommentary does not contain any single comment on the passage. These authors did not mobilize their knowledge at the reading of this passage.

On the other hand Eleazar’s supercommentary offers long and complicated explanations again. He incorporates long citations from Ibn Ezra’s and others’ works into his supercommentary. These quotations are precious witnesses concerning the textual history of Ibn Ezra’s commentaries and raise a number of philological problems.

THE HEART BEING THE FIRST SITE FOR THE UPPER SOUL [neshama]. He has explained it already at the verse “and what is crooked cannot be repaired” (Eccl. 1: 15). He said:

For heart is the dwelling place of the spirit [ruah]. And it is created first in the body. For it is analogous to the king. And brain is the commander of the army. Heart became a synonym [kinney] of wisdom and of intellect and of the orientation in the thoughts of the mind [lit. “the taste of the thoughts of the mind” – taam mahshavot ha-bina] because of its being the first site of the upper soul of man. And similarly speech is called ‘tongue,’ because speech comes from the [tongue].

AND AT THE VERSE “MY NAME IS IN HIM” (EX 23:21) I WILL EXPLAIN SOMETHING OF THE MYSTERY OF THE NAME.

He said:

The power of God’s will in the angels is compared to the light of the sun in the moon. For if the moon shines at night and someone says, “The sun is shining,” he is right, because [the sun] is the cause. And if he says, “The moon is shining,” he is also right, because [the moon’s light] is the caused thing. It is also compared to the light of the soul coming from the eye. When you push the edge of your eye with your finger at night in an absolutely dark [place] and you move [your finger] then a sphere of light comes out and that is the light of the soul and [also] the light of the eye.

And God alone is one. And the angels are in God and they are not corporeal in any way. Only the stars are corporeal. That’s why the Hebrew speakers say, “and the angel of YYY appeared to Gideon,” and later “and YYY said to him [Gideon], go with these forces…”

And when the soul is appropriate for the “honor” [kavod] then images, forms, and visions are generated in it [fol. 167 r] by the word of God. And the sense

604 MS Vat. ebr. 36, fol. 51 r. The Paris MS suffers from homoteleuton here (fol. 4 v): the text between the two “even if” [af al pi] is missing.
of “my Name of honor” is [the one] that receives the honor. And this is the sense of “my Name is in him” as well.

DON’T PAY ATTENTION TO THE WORDS OF [SAADYAH] GAON. In the Book of Beliefs, in the fourth scroll [megilla], Rabbenu Saadyah gaon says:

God privileged man. He created him in the middle of the globe [that is in the] middle. And the middle is the most privileged [place], and the subsistence of the species is dependent on it. For we see in the case of flowers and plants and all kinds of fruits that their seeds are contained in the middle of their [body] in order to sustain their species. And even in case of the young of the bird, it is produced from the middle of the egg, which is the yolk. Now man’s privilege does not lie in the body; for [his body] is not more decorated or splendid than [the body] of other creatures. His privilege consists in his intellect that is planted in the middle of his body, that is, in his heart, by means of which he discerns [good and bad] and improves his manners. And he apprehends with his intellect all the spheres and their movements – while they themselves [the spheres] do not apprehend their own essence – and finally his intellect attaches to his God and apprehends what not even the [separate] intellects [=angels] can apprehend. He even performs signs and miracles – look, his heart is greater than all the rest of the creatures!

I have found in some of the manuscripts of [Ibn Ezra’s commentary on] the par. “behold I send an angel to keep you” (Exodus 23: 20) [the following:]

Ibn Ezra says,

If the opinion of the gaon [is true, then] since the protected is greater than the protector – isn’t it true that Jacob, Moses, and David protected their cattle?! And how is it possible that the noble and pure [substances – i.e. the angels] were created for the sake of the impure [i.e. man] that does not know even his own soul whether it is a substance or an accident. And concerning the host of the heaven he does not know their number besides the 1025 [stars that we know], and why one place is full of stars whereas other places are devoid of them. And if [the gaon thinks that man knows more than the angels], because of [man’s] knowledge of criminal law – this [criminal law] is meant to correct the vices. Or if because of the excellence of his [man’s] fingers [i.e. in producing artifacts] – behold the net of the spider and the houses of the bees. And if because of the fruit that has its seed inside, his argument [proofs] the opposite. For, the noblest part of an apple is the one that is eaten because it has already proceeded from potentiality to actuality whereas the seed is still in potentia. And behold, Michael [the archangel] is called “the prince of Israel.”

In the second part, chapter eleven [of The Guide of the Perplexed] Rabbeinu Moses says,

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605 Eleazar quotes (and shortens) the Ashkenazi, pre-Tibbonide Hebrew translation of Saadyah gaon’ Book of Beliefs and Opinions. In the Tibbonide text and in the Arabic original I could not find the quoted passage. For the “Ashkenazi” translation see MS Vat. ebr. 266, folios are not numbered, unfortunately. If I count correctly the passage appears on fol 59 r-v at the very beginning of the fourth book (megilla).
It is completely false to assume that the existence of the higher and more perfect thing would be for the sake of the less significant thing.”

And in part three, chapter 13:

Even the perfect are perplexed about finding what the purpose of this existent is; for it is not possible for the natural things to exist unless they have a purpose. And they thought that human race was alone [the purpose of universe] in order to worship God and that the spheres were revolving only for [humanity’s] sake and in order to produce what is needed for man. All the more [the same holds] for other animals and plants for Aristotle has proved already that plants were created for the sake of animals.

But it is obvious for those who reflect on this view what is wrong with it, namely, that if they are asked they admit that God is able to make man without any of these preconditions. If so, what is [man’s] advantage of having these things once we suppose that they are not ends in themselves but they are for the sake of something that cannot exist without each of them? And even if we accept their reasoning, the question must be asked, “What is the purpose of worshiping God?” He will not gain any more perfection by being worshipped and apprehended by all of his creatures! And He would be no less perfect if nothing existed besides Him!

The true doctrine in my opinion is that we should not believe that any of the existents are for the sake of man. Rather all the existents are due to the will of God: some of them are intended for their own sake and some of them for the sake of something else.

Elohim is a common noun [toar] for it can be governed, e.g. elohei olam [“the God of the world”]. And it can be found in singular: “Is not God [eloah] high as heaven” (Job 22: 12). And also in plural: “holy gods.” That’s why the angels and the judges are also called so. And there is no verb [derived from its root] either in past or future tense as is the case with other adjectives, such as “rich” or “wise.” That’s why it is connected to the substantial name [i.e. the tetragrammaton, as in the phrase YYY elohim “the Lord God”]. These things are explained in Exodus.

The first quotation from Ibn Ezra on Ecclesiastes 1: 15 is verbatim and presents no further philological problem.

The passage cited from GP III, 13 demonstrates well Eleazar’s way of summarizing texts. It is made up of verbatim quotations from Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s Hebrew translation of the Guide. However, the individual sentences are often separated from each other in the original and long passages are omitted. Nonetheless, the fragments quoted by Eleazar do build up a meaningful unit. He condenses the complicated and long discussion in GP III, 13 into seven or eight sentences that reflect truthfully the skeleton of Maimonides’ argument.

Eleazar’s quotation from Ibn Ezra’s comment on Exodus 23: 21 is much more problematic than the previous cases. He does not specify whether he is citing the long or the short version of the commentary. Since the long version was more widespread (and commented on in Eleazar’s supercommentary as well) it is to be assumed that an unspecified reference was meant to refer to the long version. In the long version of Ibn Ezra’s Exodus-commentary we find the following:

Behold, I give you an example. All the astrologers [hakhmey ha-middot] accept the complete proof that the substance of the Moon is a body that receives light from the
Sun. Because [the Moon] in itself does not shine. [...] So we know that the light of
the Moon illuminates the air at night. If Reuben says, “This is the light of the Moon,”
he speaks truth. And if Simeon says, “This is the light of the Sun,” he speaks truth.

This text certainly resembles the first paragraph of Eleazar’s quotation. But it contains
further discussion concerning astrological phenomena that do not appear in Eleazar’s text and
it does not treat other important topics that are discussed in Eleazar’s quotation. It is not very
probable that Eleazar simply invented these lines and attributed to Ibn Ezra. It is more
probable that he had a different text of Ibn Ezra’s commentary.

If we check the short version of Ibn Ezra’s commentary the result will be confusing.
In the comment on Exodus 23: 21 we find nothing resembling Eleazar’s quotation. However,
in the comment on Exodus 23: 20 a long passage has a sufficient number of connections to
Eleazar’s quotation to be identified as a possible source:

[1] I will tell you now the mystery of the sublime and terrific Name and the mystery of
the angels.

And I will prepare a parable for you concerning the light of the soul that
proceeds from the eye.

Know that the eye has seven grades and the innermost of them is a white seed
[? gargar lavan]. And light is not corporeal. And the light of the soul needs another
light that is external.

And if you were able to understand how the eyes could see many different
forms in one instant and how can the white seed [? gargar lavan] contain the heavens,
then you would start to understand / to be enlightened / to be illuminated [le-haskil].

[2] Look at the Sun, for the light coming from it ..., and it is the activity and its
substance is not deficient.

Moreover, there are proofs that the light of the Moon is from the Sun, since it
does not have light in itself.

[3] And God alone is without pair [aher lit. “other”]. And the angels are in God, and
they are not corporeal by any means. Only the stars are corporeal. That’s why the
Hebrew speakers say, “and the angel of YYY appeared to Gideon,” and later “and
YYY said to him [Gideon], go with these forces...”

[4] And when the soul is appropriate for the “honor” [kavod] then images, forms, and
visions are generated in it by the word of God. And the sense of “YYY is His name!”
(Exodus 15: 3) is the “honor” [kavod] because Everything is the Honor. And the sense
of “my Name of honor” is [the one] that receives the honor. And this is the sense of
“my Name is in him” as well.

The topics treated in the text can be arranged into four groups:

[3] “God” and “angel” as interchangeable words in biblical passages.

All of thee four topics are treated in Eleazar’s quotation as well. However, there are
significant differences. First of all, the order of the topics is different. Eleazar’s text testifies
the following order:

606 In the omitted his passage Ibn Ezra explains some astronomical phenomena, such as eclipse and new moon. It
has no relationship to Eleazar’s quotation.
It is not very likely to suppose that Eleazar himself changed the thematic order of the quoted text. This is not the sort of change he usually introduces to the texts when he quotes them. Moreover, there is no obvious motivation for such a change. It is more convenient to suppose that his Ibn Ezra-manuscript contained a version different from the modern editions.

This conclusion is strengthened by further considerations. [3] and [4] is basically identical in both versions. In [4] Eleazar omits the enigmatic remark on Exodus 15: 3. This is in accordance with his general strategy of shortening the quoted texts. In [3] Eleazar has a significantly different reading: instead of *be-lo aher* ("[God alone is] without pair") he reads *ehad* ("[God alone is] one") The graphical similarity between *aher* and *ehad* can easily explain the emergence of the variants: either an original *ehad* was miscopied as *aher* and a subsequent scribe tried to save the sense by adding *be-lo*, or the original *aher* was misread as *ehad* and *be-lo* was subsequently deleted to achieve better sense. Eleazar’s reading seems to me superior; the sentence *ha-shem levado hu be-lo aher* sounds a bit awkward in Hebrew, whereas *ha-shem levado hu ehad* makes perfect sense.

As for [1] and [2] despite of the thematic unity the wordings and the contents are so different in Eleazar’s version and in the shorter recension of the Exodus-commentary that the former can hardly be a quotation of the latter. In [1] Eleazar’s Ibn Ezra describes how the light of the soul can be observed in a dark room. In [2] Eleazar’s version has more resemblance to the long commentary on Exodus 23: 21 than to the short commentary *ad loc*. Moreover, the printed edition contains further elements not mentioned in Eleazar’s quotation – although this might be due to Eleazar’s deliberate omission of them. However, this consideration obviously cannot apply to those sentences that appear in Eleazar’s text but not in the printed edition. It is not probable that these sentences would be interpolations by Eleazar.

All these evidences suggest that Eleazar indeed quoted from a different version of Ibn Ezra’s commentary than the printed ones. [3] and [4] were substantially identical in Eleazar’s Ibn Ezra-manuscript and in the printed editions of the short commentary. However, [1] and [2] appeared in different order and contained additional sentences in Eleazar’s Ibn Ezra.

I am inclined to believe that Eleazar’s manuscript was a text of the longer version of Ibn Ezra’s commentary on the Exodus. An unspecified reference to the commentary on Exodus means normally the longer recension. Moreover, some of manuscripts preserve contaminated versions of the Exodus-commentary; that is to say, passages from the short commentary were inserted into the long commentary in the process of transmission. In fact, one manuscript of the longer version, MS Vat. ebr. 106 (fifteenth century) does contain the passage from the shorter version on Exodus 23: 20 (quoted above). It is possible that Eleazar’s manuscript contained the long commentary interpolated from a version of the short commentary different from the printed edition. However, the possibility that Eleazar simply quoted the shorter version cannot be excluded either.

I am not aware of any manuscript at the moment that would testify Eleazar’s version. Needless to say, further research might shed more light on the question.

The next long quotation from Ibn Ezra is introduced with a remark “I have found in some of the manuscripts…” Eleazar consulted many manuscripts of Ibn Ezra and the cited text appeared only in some of them. Eleazar’s quotation is in fact a clever abridgment of a much longer and more complicated passage again. His method is the same as what he did with
Maimonides’ GP III, 13. The main line of the argument is truthfully reflected with sentences that are verbatim the same or almost the same in the original with the omission of a considerable part of the original.

The source has an interesting history within the oeuvre of Ibn Ezra. It is a long and unfriendly criticism of Saadyah gaon’s thesis concerning man’s superiority over the angels. A shorter version of the text is attested in the printed edition of the shorter recension of the Exodus-commentary at Exodus 23: 20 (inserted right before the passage quoted above), in some of the contaminated manuscripts of the longer commentary on Exodus 23: 20 (thus MS Vat. ebr. 106) and in the longer version of the commentary on Genesis 1: 1.

The editor of the last text, Michael Friedlaender argues persuasively that this essay against Saadyah gaon is a later interpolation to the long commentary on Genesis. In fact it can be an interpolation in the shorter or in the longer versions of the Exodus-commentary as well. It is difficult to tell which the “original” place of the text is, and perhaps, it makes little sense to look for one. The essay against Saadyah can stand in itself and can be inserted to many places within the corpus of Ibn Ezra’s writings.

It is quite probable that the scribe who inserted the polemics against Saadyah gaon into the long commentary on Genesis 1: 1 was lead by similar considerations as Eleazar ben Mattityah himself when he quoted the same discussion in his supercommentary on Genesis 1: 1. Ibn Ezra talks about the angels in both of the shorter and longer recensions of his commentary, so it is logical to recollect his full treatment of the topic either in the form of supercommentary or interpolation. The difference between the two forms is not absolute. It is possible that the interpolation was originally meant to be a supercommentary on the margins of a manuscript of the long commentary on Genesis and it crept to the text itself only in the subsequent copies.

Philosophical aspects of Eleazar’s supercommentary will be discussed in the concluding section of the next chapter.
The most interesting aspect of Bonet’s supercommentary is the lemma again:

**WE FIND “OTHER GODS” [ELOHIM AHERIM] ETC.**

AND FROM SPECULATION [WE KNOW] THAT SPEECH IS CALLED ‘TONGUE,’ that is to say, the name *elohim* is a common noun [referring to] God rather than a substantial name. It is a substantial name for the angels and it is transferred to judges and politicians just like speech is called tongue because it comes from [the tongue]. Similarly God is called *elohim* [‘angels’] because all of his works are [completed] through the angels as intermediaries.

Bonet definitely quotes the short commentary (the paragraph “And from speculation…” is not attested in the long commentary) and witnesses the reading *elohim aherim* not attested elsewhere as far as I know.

Moses Nagari

Moses Nagari’s supercommentary on the quoted passage reads:

Know that all the activities that are derived necessarily from an actor are either coming from its essence without intermediaries or the actor intends the action through intermediaries that are posited between the actor and the thing acted upon. Now when the prophetic sayings allude to an activity of the activities derived necessarily [from an actor] through intermediaries, sometimes they do not mention the first actor and they teach the necessary existence [of the activity only] from the intermediary. And sometimes they connect [the activity] to the thing that made it to receive from the order – this [i.e. the thing received] being their necessary subsistence [derived] from the first actor – without mentioning the intermediaries even if there are many of them. And this becomes evident if you consider it.

It should also be known that some [fol. 5 v] existents have weaker existence. It is impossible and awkward that the strong light of That One who radiates brightness itself should fall on them. Therefore His planning / arranging wisdom decided the existence of intermediaries contributing in bringing them into existence because of the impossibility [of the influencing the weaker beings] without [the intermediaries’] contribution.

Now according to the view of Ibn Ezra the Torah intended to explain the nature of the existence of [only] those things that come into being and pass away – they are among the lowest [lit. “last”] kinds of being. Therefore, according to Ibn Ezra the [Torah] alluded by “[elohim created] heaven and earth” to [the fact that] their being produced and brought into existence is related to the spiritual substances [atsamim ruhaniyim]. The word *elohim* refers to them [to the spiritual substances] and to the fact that they are causes [lit. “actors” *poalim*] nearer to them [i.e. to the lower beings], even if they are not first causes but intermediaries.

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607 This reading does not appear in any version of Ibn Ezra’s text as far as I know. It seems that in Jedaiah’s text Ibn Ezra derived from the plural form of the adjective *aherim* (‘other’) that *elohim* is a plural form.

608 The verb *yadanu* ‘we know’ is missing from Jedaiah’s quotation. This might be a simple lapsus.

609 MS Vat ebr. 104, fol. 52 r.
And even if deeper speculation finds closer [causes] than them it is possible to relate [the word *elohim*] to them since [their] origin is from the attribute of simple divine activity. Indeed, the Torah relates [the word *elohim*] to them because they are stronger in existence and they are less far from the one that pours light from the divine attribute [i.e. God] than the things different from them.

If so, accordingly, *elohim* appearing in this verse is not a substantial name of God – blessed be He – but an adjective / common name / attribute referring to the separate intellects as [we said] before.

And in order to teach that He – blessed be He – is the one who truly brings them into existence and the [creative] activity attributed to the other beings besides Him mentioned above is only a contribution – not that they would be first causes – [Scripture] says *bara* [“created” in the singular] not *baru* [“created” in the plural].

And in order to support his previous statement Ibn Ezra brings up two analogies.

The first is that speech is called tongue, even if [this fact] does not necessitate that there is necessarily a first [cause of speech] besides the soul – only its activity is attributed to [the tongue] and this is why [speech] is called [tongue] for it is a cause of it and its existence is perceived more easily [than soul’s existence].

And the second one is that the soul is called sometimes heart in spite of the fact that there is substantial difference between them, namely difference between substrate and superimposed thing [*ha-nasu min ha-nose*]. And the name of that particular organ is applied to it because it is the first dwelling-place of the spirit [*ruah*], that is to say, it pours and transmits life and motion and sensation to the other organs and he does not receive [these things] from them. And since the aforementioned activities that are emanated [*yeatselu*] from it are sustained in the animal body [*ba-guf ha-nafshiyyi*] as long as it keeps to be attached to and to be united with the soul without separation from it, it is correct what Ibn Ezra claimed, namely that [heart] is the first site of it.  

In this text Moses Nagari seems to assume that God bestowed existence on the lower world through the intermediaries of angels. This was the reason for the appearance of the word *elohim* interpreted as “angels” instead of the tetragrammaton in the creation narrative. At the same time the singular form of the verb *bara* alludes to the fact that there is a single ultimate cause behind the angels: God. This teaching is attributed to Ibn Ezra by Moses Nagari.

Was he right? A marginal note on fol. 5 v of the Viennese manuscript objects:

It seems to me that it was not Ibn Ezra’s opinion that the word *elohim* would allude here [i.e. in Gen 1:1] to the angels. He meant that it refers to God; however, since the actual [existence] of this existence is emanated by God through the separate intellects, He is also referred to by their name. And this is evident from the analogies of the tongue and heart that Ibn Ezra put forward in order to meditate over them.  

The author of this remark took for granted Avicenna’s account of creation through intermediaries. In fact, Moses Nagari does not seem to disagree with Avicenna in this text, although, as we have seen before, in the previous passages he carefully distinguished between the emanation of “universal and common existence” that comes directly from God and the emanation of further perfections that are mediated through angels. What is the reason for this inconsistency?

610 MS Vienna ÖNB, Heb. 106, fol. 5 r-v.
611 MS Vienna ÖNB, Heb. 106, fol. 5 v; on the right margin.
Upon a closer look it seems that there is no real inconsistency here. The direct emanation of being is creation; however, according to Ibn Ezra’s interpretation Genesis 1: 1 does not refer to creation out of nothing but a natural process in the sub-lunar world. That is to say, the topic treated in this passage is the reception of further perfections after the emanation of simple existence has been accomplished. Moses emphasizes that we are dealing here only with “lower existents” to which “heaven and earth” refer according to Ibn Ezra:

Now according to the view of Ibn Ezra the Torah intended to explain the nature of the existence of [only] those things that come into being and pass away – they are among the lowest [lit. “last”] kinds of being. Therefore, according to [Ibn Ezra] the [Torah] alluded by “[elohim created] heaven and earth” to [the fact that] their being produced and brought into existence is related to the spiritual substances

There is no reason to believe that Moses Nagari did not understand or ignored Ibn Ezra’s remarks to the effect that “heaven” meant ‘atmosphere’ and “earth” meant ‘inhabited land’ in the biblical verse – he pointed this out at the proper places in the supercommentary. And the passage quoted above makes it quite clear that the generation of these things “according to the view of Ibn Ezra” is at stake in the whole argument.

The following sentence is quite remarkable: “And even if deeper speculation finds closer [causes] than them it is possible to relate [the word elohim] to them since [their] origin is from the attribute of simple divine activity.” Unless my translation and interpretation is completely mistaken this sentence implies the existence of beings that are closer to God than the separate intellects. The adjective “closer” means obviously “closer to God.”

What are these beings closer to God than the intellects? There are hardly any other candidates than the sefirot. In Part One I have quoted two passages from Moses Nagari’s supercommentary that indicate quite explicitly that the author was familiar with and accepted theosophical Kabbalah. He mentions baaley ha-sefirot “the followers of the doctrine of sefirot” in the commentary on his introductory poem. The sentence quoted above points to the possibility that Moses Nagari posited the sefirot between God and the angels in the hierarchy of beings although the sefirot are not mentioned in his supercommentary on Exodus 3: 15 and other passages describing the hierarchy of being.

A possible source for this idea is the Kabbalah of Menahem Recanati, who flourished at the end of the thirteenth and the beginning of fourteenth century in Italy. Recanati criticized the “essentialist” conception of the sefirot and argued that the seven lower sefirot are “instruments” or “vessels” through which God acts. Thus he posited them in between God and the angels.612

The immediate source can be Judah Romano again, who mentions that according to some Jewish scholars the sefirot are the ideas in the divine mind. One can wonder whether Judah Romano wanted to invent a topic comparable to scholastic discussions about intradivine ideas by turning to the doctrine of sefirot.613

Moses Nagari and Eleazar ben Mattityah

The theory of emanation was an account of both the presence of good in the lower world and the possibility of evil. Eleazar’s quotations from Ibn Ezra emphasize the first aspect. God’s bestowing his power on lower existents is the miracle of good. Something of lower rank is able to carry out the will of a higher existent if he is bestowed the capacity for doing so. This is how the divine order is realized on earth.

612 Cf. Idel, Kabbalah: New Perspectives, 143.
613 See on this Sermoneta, “Jehuda ben Moshe ben Daniel Romano, traducteur de Saint Thomas,” 246.
Ibn Ezra’s treatment of the topic is centered on names: who is entitled to bear what name. The divine names had no magical efficiency in themselves in Ibn Ezra’s theology. They were taken to be signs of attributes or divine powers. When God shares one of his names with his creatures on the pages of the Holy Scriptures this is a sign that certain power is entrusted on the creatures in question in order to implement the order intended by God in the world.

This was probably motivated by the political imagination of Ibn Ezra’s days. The caliphs of Baghdad transmitted their power on rulers of lower ranks in the form of written documents. The power of the caliphs was only nominal in the period; nonetheless, their role in legitimatizing the actual ruler was by no means only a formality. The whole system of political ideas was organized around the idea of power originating in the heaven and transmitted through intermediaries along a descending hierarchical scale to the actual executors of it. The sultan or emir who was the actual political leader had to get a license from the caliph who was a “successor” of Muhammad who got his powers from the archangel Gabriel (identified sometimes with the Active Intellect) who got it from God Himself.614

Ibn Ezra’s remark about the heart being the ruler and the brain being the vizier within the human body obviously evokes this imagery. On the other hand the political imagination about the descent of power was obviously inspired by the emanation theory. Parallels between cosmic order, political order, and the order within the human bodies were often pointed out. The miracle of power was the miracle of transmission, that is to say the miracle of the appearance of something of higher origin within the framework of the lower world.

Eleazar ben Mattityah was apparently satisfied with this approach to the theory of emanation. He was content with summarizing Ibn Ezra’s text without adding his own remarks – what he did not refrain to do at other passages as we have seen.

Moses Nagari emphasized another aspect of the theory. For him the question was not how the good enters the lower world but how it withdraws in order to let the imperfect things to exist. The “strong light of the first cause” could not be born by the “weaker” existents: this is why the intermediaries are posited whose function is to block the light that is too strong for the lower beings. Moses Nagari’s words can be compared to the Platonic demiurges’ withdrawal from creating the imperfect world.

The idea of hierarchy was the idea of an enigmatic order. The higher existents transgressed their own level of existence in order to bestow perfection on the lower levels in one of the possible formulations. Or, the higher existents withdrew to their own level of existence in order to make the existence of lower existents possible according to an alternative formulation. Order is characterized by certain instability: the things have their own places in principle, but, as a matter of fact, they are involved in operations continuously transgressing their settled places.

The enigmatic character of the hierarchy of being as described by Eleazar ben Mattityah and Moses Nagari has two separable, though connected, aspects. The more general consideration is that hierarchy appears as a rigid and definite and powerful order that leaves no place to resistance. But, at the same time, this order is still instable and indefinite as a consequence of the transgressions and withdrawals built into the idea. The more specific consideration is that different domains, such as human body, social order, astronomical order, and supernatural order reflect and mirror each other. For example, Nature contains an enigmatic account of Society, and vice versa. The Supernatural is encoded into all domains: for medieval scholars, such as Eleazar ben Mattityah or Moses Nagari, Nature was not only an object of propositional knowledge or a deposit of resources capable of human exploitation. It was an enigmatic symbol of the supernatural.

Nature was an exemplary place of experiencing order as hierarchy. This experience was certainly dependent on culture: a medieval Jew had to consume a considerable amount of studies in geometry and astronomy before he or she could see with his or her own eyes the superior order in the movement of the sky. The studies themselves were carried out in symbolic frameworks dependent on cultural premises. Nonetheless, the reward of the studies was not only propositional knowledge or competence in manipulating symbols but the ability to see the hierarchy of things.

And this hierarchy had social, political and religious messages as well. We have seen the correspondences between natural and political order implied in Ibn Ezra’s comments. The hierarchy of things experienced in nature could call into question the validity of social order encoded into symbols. We have a political order – but does it conform to the “natural” hierarchy suggested by the experiences of natural sciences? Is a better arrangement possible and desirable? We have a religion – a system of cultural symbols that cover society, nature, and the supernatural alike – but is it in accordance with the order, social, natural, and supernatural, suggested by the experience we have of the real nature? Is a better arrangement possible and desirable?

In the Prolegomena I have criticized the notion of an “Arabic-Aristotelian cultural environment” that supposedly formed an intellectual challenge to Judaism which was answered by Ibn Ezra and Maimonides’ biblical exegesis. Now I want to adjust the criticism. Although, the phrase “Arabic-Aristotelian cultural environment” is not a very fortunate one, the idea definitely has a kernel of truth.

Geometry, astronomy, medicine were sciences cultivated in much wider circles than Aristotelian natural philosophy. And a competence in these sciences could lead to the experience of order in Nature with all its subversive consequences. The hierarchy of Nature could be re-coded into the hierarchy of political and symbolic (religious) order. Nature became a theolio-political issue to use Marc Richir’s expression.615

Marc Richir, a contemporary Belgian philosopher standing in the tradition of Husserlian phenomenology, describes the concept of “sublime” (introduced to modern philosophy by Immanuel Kant’s Critique of Judgment) as an encounter between a “symbolic institution,” meaning an established system of cultural codes, and a “field of phenomena,” meaning non-domesticated, “savage” experiences resisting symbolic encoding. The experience of sublime is not possible according to Richir without a culture (“symbolic institution”); on the other hand, the “sublime” relativizes and destabilizes the symbolic institution by opening up new dimensions of reality not regulated by the available symbolic systems. At the same time, the sublime implies an enigmatic promise of order: it appeals to human beings to think and act in new ways and may create a new sense of community between human beings. Thus the experience of the sublime can call for a new community, a new encodement and can be the starting point of a new or modified symbolic institution.

I think Richir’s analysis can shed light on the “problem of Greek sciences” in medieval civilization. Discovering order in nature was an enigmatic experience that was not easily conceptualized. Moreover, this experience questioned the established symbolic institutions by pointing to a “natural” order – no matter how enigmatic – that could serve as a firm reference point in criticizing political, social and religious realities. The experience of Nature could also create a new sense of community between the initiates, the “intelligent men” as opposed to vulgar people.

Not Arabic-Aristotelian philosophy as such, but Nature as a place of experiencing the “sublime” threatened Jewish beliefs and institutions.616 Adapting the Aristotelian

616 Speaking of Maimonides in the original context one should consider the bimaristan [hospital] of Cairo where Maimonides actually worked together with other Jewish, Christian, and Muslim physicians. The bimaristan was
philosophical tradition was perhaps a first step in dealing with the problem rather than the problem itself – which is not to deny that Aristotelianism was an inherently dangerous weapon. Alain Boureau demonstrated on the example of the scholastic debate concerning the “unique form” how an Aristotelian “onto-theology” developed by Thomas Aquinas and others during the second half of the thirteenth century combated both “naturalist” and “eschatological” intellectual trends at the Paris university at the same time. Aristotelian “onto-theology” could regulate and stabilize the new experience of nature, and thus prepare the way for channeling the new excitements into reliable directions. A reconsideration of the history of Jewish Aristotelianism from this point of view is desired, but cannot be carried out here.

A more systematic application of Marc Richir’s ideas on medieval Jewish philosophical texts than the present experiment may lead to new, surprising conclusions. In the present, very much limited investigation I would like to point out only one more possibility.

Richir speaks about different “constellations of the sublime.” This is the point where Richir’s approach can be linked to a Foucauldian methodology. The experience of the sublime as hierarchic order was certainly dependent on the overall “archeological configuration” of medieval philosophy and sciences. The task is to define the particular archeological configuration.

This task we leave for the next part. But in anticipation, I will outline the key consideration. Supernatural order was encoded into natural order. In other words, studying the order of nature was a road towards understanding the hierarchy of the supernatural world. Metaphysical or theological knowledge was displayed in Nature no less than in the books of Aristotle or in the Bible. Perhaps taking Nature as a great symbol of the Supernatural was a discursive precondition of experiencing “the sublime” of natural order in the specific medieval way.

This practice, namely taking Nature as a symbol of the Supernatural or as a mnemonics of the Supernatural, was founded in the overall archeological structure that we shall describe as “spirituality.” The key point is that within the model of “spirituality” knowledge is not only propositional knowledge acquired once for all, but a series of recollections for the purpose of building knowledge into one’s self. The self needed mnemonics that displayed the knowledge necessary for spiritual perfection. Books, buildings, religious rites and even Nature itself were employed for this purpose. Further discussions will follow in the next part.

certainly an eminent site of experiencing nature – independently of confessional premises – but it was hardly an institute for teaching Aristotelianism. See on this: Goitein, A Mediterranean Society, vol. 2, 240-272; esp. 247-253.

617 Cf. Boureau, Théologie, science et censure, 39-86; esp. 43-45 and 64-68.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

There is no single theme of creation of the world in the early Ibn Ezra supercommentaries. The actual discussions concern topics as diverse as the nature of time, the length of cosmic cycles, or the hierarchy of being. Nonetheless certain patterns can be established.

We can distinguish a textual and a doctrinal focus in the supercommentaries and register their stable relationship. Treating the problems of the origin of universe, nature of time, theory of cosmic cycles or hierarchy of being meant first and foremost dealing with a couple of authoritative texts. A field of 'co-textuality' was made up by pointing to links between a group of texts. We can identify a set of textual statements that concerns textual criticism, cross-references – real or imagined – between different texts, and short glosses specifying the meaning of phrases or words.

The field of co-textuality is connected to a doctrinal field in quite intricate ways. A process of decoding or translating texts into doctrines, mostly “opinions” of authorities takes often place. This process is partly conditioned by the field of 'co-textuality’ but it can also establish textual connections on its own account.

To say that the individual interpretations were dependent on the cultural background and intellectual preferences of the supercommentators is to state the obvious. Nonetheless, Ibn Ezra’s text was not a “mirror” in which everybody saw himself or herself. The intellectual operations involved in the exegesis were far more complex.

The supercommentators did not impose ruthlessly their own preconceived ideas on the text. On the contrary, their ideas were invented in situ as direct responses to Ibn Ezra’s words. They were not pre-conceived ideas that were invented independently of Ibn Ezra’s text. In this way, Ibn Ezra’s commentaries on the Torah functioned as a “thinking machine,” a heuristic tool for composing thoughts and making statements. The point of writing a supercommentary was to invent thoughts and not to infuse one’s preconceptions into an authoritative source.

This is not to deny that the intellectual framework in which Ibn Ezra’s words were made to say something was a determining factor and that it was dependent on the cultural-intellectual background. (One can legitimately speak about a cultural appropriation of Ibn Ezra’s commentaries in this sense.) But the whole process was not completely controlled by an all-controlling subject, individual or collective. In other words, there was an element of unpredictability in the manifold transformation described in the chapters below. Much depended on the individual decision of the exegetes – whether to take a sentence as a statement about natural philosophy or theology, whether to take a word as a name of a mystical object or an allusion to an enigmatic doctrine, etc. – but the statement still brought about something new which was not accessible except through Ibn Ezra’s text.

Moreover, no matter how diverse interpretations were put forward in the supercommentaries there is a constant element: a relationship to biblical and rabbinical texts. This is the most shocking in the case of natural philosophy – we can talk about a “biblical physics” on the analogy of “biblical theology.” A discussion about the nature of time, the length of the cosmic year, or the hierarchy of being is intimately connected to such questions as the meaning of be-reshit in Genesis 1: 1, the meaning of “one thousand generations” in Deuteronomy 7: 9, the halakhic debate about the beginning of Shabbat in the Talmud, or an aggada about the Torah existing for two thousand years before creation.

This fact indicates a complex and intricate process of epistemologization. Knowledge of natural sciences was brought within the orbit of biblical knowledge – biblical commentaries became places where knowledge of natural sciences could be acquired.
Religion invaded natural sciences. Although the formal principles of Aristotelian natural philosophy were not modified by the Ibn Ezra supercommentators the *episteme* was changed by the appearance of a new field of discursive practices, namely interpreting biblical sentences as statements on natural philosophy.

Or, rather, natural philosophy invaded biblical exegesis? It changed the *episteme* of biblical and talmudic exegesis? This perspective is also legitimate. The authoritative texts of biblical exegesis were no longer only the Talmud and rabbinic midrashim. “Greek sciences” also gained certain authority. Interpreting the “opinions” of Aristotle, Ptolemy, etc. became established discursive practices of biblical exegesis. The *fusion* of the two discursive formations is evident, although it is not clear what hierarchy, if any, operated in it. An Ibn Ezra supercommentary was a place where the fusion of biblical exegesis and “Greek” sciences could take place.

We have seen that a manifold process of epistemologization went on in Jewish biblical exegesis during the twelfth century. Saadyah gaon, Ibn Ezra, and Maimonides each in its own way related biblical exegesis to philosophy and sciences. However, all the twelfth-century efforts failed in one important aspect: they did not have a textbook presenting the principles of the new “science” of Bible with an established authority that could have served as a secure point of references in scientific research.

In medieval times such a textbook was a *sine qua non* for the existence of a science. The normalization of scientific discourse, that is to say, the practices that regulated the education of scholars and guaranteed that they understand each other, was achieved in the Middle Ages through authoritative texts that were the “scripts of foundation” of a particular science. This practice was partly motivated by the belief in the intellectual and spiritual superiority of the “founding fathers” and also perhaps by the fact that some of the authorities were perceived as “incarnations” of the values shared by a scholarly community.

Both Ibn Ezra and Maimonides respected the talmudic sages, the tradition of Greco-Arabic sciences and the rich Andalusian Jewish cultural heritage in their own ways. However, they did not have a common authority, a common point of reference, a common “script of foundation” that could incarnate their common values and could regulate their discursive practices.

Time solved the problem. During the thirteenth century *some* of the twelfth-century masters and texts became *the* authorities of Jewish philosophy and philosophically oriented biblical exegesis. Maimonides, first and foremost, and Ibn Ezra, second to no one except for Maimonides. They *incarnated* the common values of the intellectual community of Jewish philosophers – they were soon to be talked about as the greatest of sages, fountains of knowledge, comparable to prophets, and even the angels of God. We have encountered already a couple of texts attesting the *sublimation* of Maimonides and Ibn Ezra’s persons.619 Few more examples will come in the next part. Some of their works had the same fortune and were talked about as containing the greatest mysteries that no mortal can apprehend completely.

Thus Ibn Ezra’s commentary became one of the basic textbooks of the new “science” of biblical exegesis. On the basis of the examples analyzed in the previous chapters we can attempt to describe in what ways it *normalized* biblical exegesis as a science.

The first important mechanism was securing the position of literal exegesis. Here we have to make a difference. As has been pointed out in the Prolegomena, the Hebrew word *peshat* and its derivates are used in a quite chaotic way in the texts themselves. The mere

619 This can be compared to the process of sublimation of the Greek gods in Homer and Hesiod described by Marc Richir, *La Naissance des dieux*, 74-76 and 103. On “incarnation” see Richir: *Du sublime en politique*, 84-107.
appearance (or lack) of the word in texts say practically nothing about literal exegesis as discursive practice.

On the other hand, it is quite obvious that in all of the supercommentaries analyzed above a set of statements about the grammar and lexicography of biblical verses are implied and respected. An early Ibn Ezra supercommentator does not disintegrate words into letters, does not use gematria and other middot of rabbinic exegesis and does not rely on rabbinic midrashim in order to erase the “hard facts” of Hebrew grammar and lexicography. To relocate a grammatical statement in another enunciative field, such as theology, metaphysics, natural sciences or neo-Platonic mysticism, and to propose “esoteric” interpretations on the basis of such operations is not the same as to ignore Hebrew linguistic in biblical exegesis. Maimonides was much less systematic in this respect than Ibn Ezra. Therefore, the very existence of the genre Ibn Ezra supercommentary in thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Maimonideanism is quite a significant fact.

The second mechanism was regulating the fusion of biblical exegesis and “Greek” sciences. Notwithstanding the great diversity of the ideas proposed in the early supercommentaries around the words bereshit, bara, and elohim, they all follow Ibn Ezra’s thematic guidance learnt simply from his commentary. Ibn Ezra indicated the points where philosophic-scientific material could enter biblical exegesis. I wonder whether Eleazar ben Mattityah and the anonymous sources collated in Hinneh shakhu would have expand Ibn Ezra’s definition of bara as “to determine” into a theory about cosmic cycles had Ibn Ezra not added the remark “and the wise will understand it.” Such remarks authorized the supercommentators to perform the fusion of biblical exegesis and “Greek” sciences.

A third mechanism was regulating the esotericism of “divine science.” We have described briefly in the Prolegomena a key dilemma of Maimonideanism. On the one hand epistemologization of biblical exegesis was most welcomed since it belonged to the very essence of Maimonideanism. On the other hand, epistemologization threatened the spiritual character of religious knowledge: Maimonides declared that the divine science was not like medicine or geometry, but as a matter of fact, as more and more Aristotle was admitted into it, divine science looked more and more like medicine and geometry – a domain of technical knowledge. Maimonides’ insistence on the impossibility of systematic disposal and the necessity of using allusions and “flashes” was meant to counterbalance this tendency.

Therefore, “divine science” contained a part – presumably, its most noble and difficult part – where the usual ways of organizing a body of knowledge into a science could not be applied per definitionem. This opened the way in front of a chaotic flow of “esoteric” texts of dubious quality. We have seen in Part One how Caspi complained about the pretentious esotericism of his contemporaries and how he tried to disassociate himself from this practice. Bonet also declares at the beginning of Avvat Nefesh that he will not play esoteric games. These are clearly signs of the inflation of esotericism.

Thus, esotericism needed regulation. We have seen Maimonides’ remark in the introduction to Part Three of GP to the effect that his esoteric interpretation of maase merkava was encoded into a series of peshat-like comments. In the light of this remark Ibn Ezra’s great commentaries on the Torah could not but appear as similar series of esoteric interpretations encoded in the form of peshat. Moreover, Ibn Ezra himself quite clearly alluded to the possibility of esoteric interpretation here and there in his commentaries and did much more than elusive remarks in certain passages. Therefore the option to make those commentaries a thesaurus of esoteric exegesis must have recommended itself. Ibn Ezra’s insistence on literal exegesis was no hindrance in the light of Maimonides’ remark.

Introducing Ibn Ezra as an authority in the “secrets of the Torah” posited certain limitation on the practice of esoteric exegesis. Anybody can say that “a secret is alluded to” in this or that verse of the Bible. On the other hand, writing a supercommentary on “Ibn Ezra’s
secrets” needed considerable preparatory work including studies in Hebrew grammar, natural sciences and philosophy. Ibn Ezra’s commentaries again indicated points where such exegesis was legitimate (cf. the remarks yesh lo sod “a secret belongs to it”) and by comparing such remarks to other passages in the commentaries (or in Maimonides’ GP) a reader could at least speculate about the intended meaning.

This way esoteric interpretation could be regulated without being systematized. Ibn Ezra’s commentaries imposed a thematic uniformity on esoteric exegesis – at least the key biblical passages and the first steps were the same to all the readers. Moreover, writing a supercommentary on Ibn Ezra offered the possibility to prove one’s competence in the subjects required for esoteric interpretation (Hebrew philology, natural sciences and philosophy). This was the background of the “Ibn Ezra game” that can be observed in Caspi’s introduction.

We can formulate a preliminary answer to the research question formulated at the beginning of this study (“What was the role of the early Ibn Ezra supercommentaries in the savoir of medieval Jewish philosophy?”). Ibn Ezra’s biblical commentaries played an important role in normalizing biblical exegesis as a science. Using Ibn Ezra’s text as a “thinking machine” for inventing exegetical ideas guaranteed the scientificity of the discourse. On the one hand, Ibn Ezra’s comment left a sufficient amount of “blank spaces” especially in esoteric exegesis to inspire innovative solutions and not to bind the mind to a rigid and automatic dogmatics. On the other hand, it delimited the exegetical possibilities and methods thus giving some substance to the idea of the “science of Torah” in which not everything is possible and arbitrary solutions can be separated from legitimate ones. Writing a supercommentary on Ibn Ezra meant doing scientific biblical exegesis. And it also meant an encounter with a sublime mind and a sublime text that was of virtually infinite sense – therefore a humble commentary was the appropriate way of approaching it.

In the next part we will try to put these conclusions into a wider context and to deepen the explanation outlined above into several directions.
Part Three: Scripture and Philosophy

Chapter 1: “And the Canaanite was still on the land:” Did Moses Write the Torah?

Among Muslim critics of Judaism the idea that the Pentateuch is not identical with Moses’ original writing was widespread. They related a story according to which the original Torah was burnt when Jerusalem was taken by the Babylonians. The text presently read by the Jews was actually written by Ezra. An important twelfth-century Jewish convert to Islam, a younger contemporary of Ibn Ezra, Samawil al-Maghrebi brought further arguments for Ezra’s being the real author of the Torah. These arguments were taken over by other Muslim writers as well and were widely circulated.\(^{620}\)

An orthodox Jewish writer had to work out a strategy for defending the authenticity of the Mosaic laws against such criticism. However, to assert that every letter of the Torah was written by Moses was not the only way to achieve this end. In the Babylonian Talmud there is an important passage where some of the rabbis admit that the last eight verses of the Pentateuch relating Moses’ death and funeral were not written actually by Moses but added to the text by Joshua (Baba batra 15a). The same opinion is repeated in the famous Leningrad Codex, the oldest extant manuscript containing the whole text of the Hebrew Bible (from the year 1008 / 1009). Another talmudic passage relates that Israel has forgotten the Torah in biblical times until Ezra the priest returned from the Babylonian exile to the land of Israel with a copy of it and reintroduced the Mosaic laws. It is also mentioned in the Talmud concerning several passages in the Pentateuch that are traditionally written with dots that Ezra doubted their authenticity but did not dare to erase them completely. Although it is not explicitly stated in the text this talmudic passage leaves the reader with the impression that some talmudic rabbis attributed some editorial activity to Ezra.\(^{621}\)

Thus rabbinic tradition itself opened the way for compromising the dogma of Mosaic authorship. Some of the Jewish apologists might have thought that it is a better strategy to admit that not all the words of the Pentateuch reflects Moses’ original words in order to save the key statement, namely, that the laws are all coming from Moses’ pen.

Perhaps the most famous comment of Ibn Ezra concerns Genesis 12: 6. This sentence of the Bible states that when Abraham entered the Holy Land “the Canaanite was already/still on the land” – ve-ha-kenana az ba-arets. The Hebrew word az can mean both ‘already’ and ‘still.’ Ibn Ezra writes:

**AND THE CANAANITE WAS ALREADY / STILL ON THE LAND:** It is possible that the Canaanite took the land of Canaan from someone else and if it is not so, it has a secret and whoever understands it should be silent about it [ve-ha-maskil yiddom].

Rejecting the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch Spinoza pointed to Ibn Ezra (*Aben Hgezra*) as a medieval predecessor of his opinion in chapter 8 of his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*:

[…] the author of the Pentateuch who is almost universally supposed to have been Moses. The Pharisees are so firmly convinced of his identity, that they account as a heretic anyone who differs from them on the subject. Wherefore Aben Ezra, a man of enlightened intelligence, and no small learning, who was the first, so far as I know, to

\(^{620}\) On this person see Friedrich Niewöhner: “Are the Founders of Religions Impostors?” in *Maimonides and Philosophy*, 237-240.

treat of this opinion, dared not express his meaning openly, but confined himself to dark hints which I shall not scruple to elucidate thus throwing full light on the subject.

The words of Aben Ezra which occur in his commentary on Deuteronomy are as follows: "Beyond Jordan, &c … If so be that thou understandest the mystery of the twelve … moreover Moses wrote the law … The Canaanite was then in the land … it shall be revealed on the mount of God … then also behold his bed, his iron bed, then shalt thou know the truth." In these few words he hints, and also shows that it was not Moses who wrote the Pentateuch, but someone who lived long after him, and further, that the book which Moses wrote was something different from any now extant.

To prove this, I say, he draws attention to the facts:

1. That the preface to Deuteronomy could not have been written by Moses, inasmuch as he ad never crossed the Jordan.

2. That the whole book of Moses was written at full length on the circumference of a single altar (Deut. xxvii, and Josh. viii:37), which altar, according to the Rabbis, consisted of only twelve stones: therefore the book of Moses must have been of far less extent than the Pentateuch. This is what our author means, I think, by the mystery of the twelve, unless he is referring to the twelve curses contained in the chapter of Deuteronomy above cited, which he thought could not have been contained in the law, because Moses bade the Levites read them after the recital of the law, and so bind the people to its observance. Or again, he may have had in his mind the last chapter of Deuteronomy which treats of the death of Moses, and which contains twelve verses. But there is no need to dwell further on these and similar conjectures.

3. That in Deut. xxxi:9, the expression occurs, "and Moses wrote the law:" words that cannot be ascribed to Moses, but must be those of some other writer narrating the deeds and writings of Moses.

4. That in Genesis xii:6, the historian, after narrating that Abraham journeyed through the and of Canaan, adds, "and the Canaanite was then in the land," thus clearly excluding the time at which he wrote. So that this passage must have been written after the death of Moses, when the Canaanites had been driven out, and no longer possessed the land.

Aben Ezra, in his commentary on the passage, alludes to the difficulty as follows:- "And the Canaanite was then in the land: it appears that Canaan, the grandson of Noah, took from another the land which bears his name; if this be not the true meaning, there lurks some mystery in the passage, and let him who understands it keep silence." That is, if Canaan invaded those regions, the sense will be, the Canaanite was then in the land, in contradistinction to the time when it had been held by another; but if, as follows from Gen. chap. x. Canaan was the first to inhabit the land, the text must mean to exclude the time present, that is the time at which it was written; therefore it cannot be the work of Moses, in whose time the Canaanites still possessed those territories: this is the mystery concerning which silence is recommended.
5. That in Genesis xxii:14 Mount Moriah is called the mount of God, a name which it did not acquire till after the building of the Temple; the choice of the mountain was not made in the time of Moses, for Moses does not point out any spot as chosen by God; on the contrary, he foretells that God will at some future time choose a spot to which this name will be given.

6. Lastly, that in Deut. chap. iii., in the passage relating to Og, king of Bashan, these words are inserted: "For only Og king of Bashan remained of the remnant of giants: behold, his bedstead was a bedstead of iron: is it not in Rabbath of the children of Ammon? nine cubits was the length thereof, and four cubits the breadth of it, after the cubit of a man." This parenthesis most plainly shows that its writer lived long after Moses; for this mode of speaking is only employed by one treating of things long past, and pointing to relics for the sake of gaining credence: moreover, this bed was almost certainly first discovered by David, who conquered the city of Rabbath (2 Sam. xiii:30.) Again, the historian a little further on inserts after the words of Moses, "Jair, the son of Manasseh, took all the country of Argob unto the coasts of Geshuri and Maachath; and called them after his own name, Bashan-havoth-jair, unto this day." This passage, I say, is inserted to explain the words of Moses which precede it. "And the rest of Gilead, and all Bashan, being the kingdom of Og, gave I unto the half tribe of Manasseh; all the region of Argob, with all Bashan, which is called the land of the giants." The Hebrews in the time of the writer indisputably knew what territories belonged to the tribe of Judah, but did not know them under the name of the jurisdiction of Argob, or the land of the giants. Therefore the writer is compelled to explain what these places were which were ancienly so styled, and at the same time to point out why they were at the time of his writing known by the name of Jair, who was of the tribe of Manasseh, not of Judah. We have thus made clear the meaning of Aben Ezra and also the passages of the Pentateuch which he cites in proof of his contention.

Modern scholars question the correctness of Spinoza’s reading of Ibn Ezra. For example they point to the following passage of Ibn Ezra’s commentary on Genesis 36: 31 “And these are the kings who ruled the land of Edom before a king arose for the sons of Israel”:

Some say that this passage [parasha] was written in prophecy. And Yitzhaki says in his book that in the days of [King] Yehoshafat this passage was written. And he explained the generations in an arbitrary way [lit. “according to his own will”]. This is why his name was Yitzhak for whoever hears him laughs [yitzhaq] at him. […] God forbid that the thing would be as he said concerning the days of Yehoshafat. And his book is worthy of being burnt. […] And the truth is that BEFORE A KING AROSE refers to Moses, the king of Israel, as is written [about Moses]: “And he became a king within Yeshurun” (Deut. 33: 5)

Spinoza; Tractatus Theologico-Politicus, 120-123.
In this passage Ibn Ezra rejects the opinion of a certain Yitzhak who named his book *Sefer Yitzhaki* who claimed that the passage narrating the kings of Edom was written in the time of the Judean king Yehoshafat, centuries after Moses. Ibn Ezra criticizes vehemently this view and condemns the book as worthy of being burnt. Thus, some scholars argue, Ibn Ezra rejected the idea of non-Mosaic authorship of the Torah. Consequently, a different interpretation must hold for his comment on Genesis 12: 6 as well. 624

However, what is truly remarkable in the quoted passage in my opinion is that Ibn Ezra was not the only one who apparently questioned the Mosaic authorship of certain passages of the Pentateuch among the twelfth-century Jewish exegetes. Perhaps, this idea was not as original and not as provocative as modern scholars usually assume. 625

Ibn Ezra certainly did his best to maintain the thesis of Mosaic authorship of those passages where there was no obvious reason to question it – as was the case with Genesis 36: 31 for example. But at other places, he probably preferred to admit that they were not written by Moses rather than to propose a far-fetched solution. The reader should also recall the fact that Ibn Ezra definitely denied that Isaiah wrote chapters 40-66 of the book named after him.

At the same time it is possible that compared to some of his contemporaries, such as Samawil al-Magherebi or the author of *Sefer yitshaqi* referred to in the quotation above Ibn Ezra held a quite conservative view. As we have pointed out already it is very difficult to establish the original context of Ibn Ezra’s exegetical ideas due to the loss of his contemporaries’ writings. 626

Right or wrong Spinoza’s reading of Ibn Ezra was not unfounded. It was based on a similar reading of the “sage’s” words by generations of supercommentators in the Middle Ages. The possibility that Spinoza actually read supercommentaries on Ibn Ezra cannot be excluded.

In the following paragraphs I will translate the relevant passages from the early supercommentaries with short explanatory remarks when necessary. After that we shall proceed to discuss how their attitude to the biblical past is manifested through this problem.

**Joseph Caspi**

Joseph Caspi does not comment on this passage

**Eleazar ben Mattityah: Biblical Criticism as Divine Revelation**

Eleazar ben Mattityah’s supercommentary on Genesis 12: 6 is one of the most interesting texts in the whole corpus of medieval Jewish literature. It is surprising that it has received so little attention so far. The text reads:

And the Canaanite was still on the land. And if this is not so then it has a mystery and whoever understands it should be silent about it.

He does not say, “will understand it” [as he usually does], but “should be silent about it.” Indeed, it was very hard for him to reveal it. However, [commenting] on the Torah-portion “These are the words” [=Deut. 1:1 – 6: 11] he told the secret. And these


626 For estimating the loss cf. Simon’s article referred to in the previous footnote.
are his words there, in that section, at the verse “everything, that God commanded
him, to them…” [=Deut. 1:3]:

If you understand the secret of the “twelve,” and the secret of the “and Moses
wrote” and “the Canaanite was still on the land” and “on the mountain of ‘God-
is-to-be-visited’” and “and behold! his bed was an iron bed…,” then you will
know the truth.

I searched for an explanation of his words from the mouth of the scribes and
from the mouth of the books, but none of them could answer. Therefore, I will speak
according to my own understanding [lit. heart].

It is well-known that when Yeshurun [=Israel] was in the Babylonian Exile,
then the Torah was forgotten until Ezra came, the priest, who was fluent in the Torah
of God. He restored [the Torah] for them. And he did not change a word concerning
the commandments that were commanded by God to Moses. However, concerning the
details of the stories, where no harm follows from the addition of some words, – like
these ones, mentioned above – this prophet [Ezra] was not so strict. And it is possible
that these additions were inspired by the mouth of God – just like in the case of the
Masorah, and the Verses, and the Accents.627

And now I will explain, what we find [above].

“The twelve” – these are the sons of Jacob, of whom it is written: “for God saw
my distress…” “for he heard…” “now he will strict…” “now I will praise…” [Gen.
29: 32-35] and so on.628 It is possible that Moses had a doubtless knowledge from the
Holy Spirit concerning the inner thoughts of the [Biblical] mothers, and he extended
the story [according to his knowledge from the Holy Spirit]. So Ezra did the same!
And similar is “and Moses wrote.” [Ex. 24:4, etc.] In this case [the author] did not
write “and I wrote” as [Moses] says elsewhere “and I wrote on the tables.” [Deut.
10:2] Therefore the “and Moses wrote” and “Moses died” and the similar expressions
are the words of the copyist of the Law [ma’atiq ha-dat]. Similarly [in the book of
Psalms]: “The prayers of David ben Yishay are completed – Blessed be God for ever,
amen and amen” [cf. Ps 72: 20 and 89:53] are the words of the copyist of the psalms,
and of the collector of them – when the book is finished he praises God who has kept
him alive, and says “the psalms of XY are completed.”

“And the Canaanite was still on the land.”

I saw only empty words concerning this, but it is not proper to mention them.
My opinion is as follows:

It is well known that the Canaanites possessed that land in the days of Moses.
Now, in this case what need is for Moses to write “still”?! Thus, he [Ibn Ezra] was
forced to comment that: “[it is possible] that [the Canaanites] took the land from
others.” And that would be the reason for [God’s] saying to [Abram]: “[go to] the land
that I will show you” [Gen. 12:1] rather than saying simply “to the land of Canaan,”
for it had not been conquered [by the Canaanites] by that time. And when,

627 The Hebrew codices of the Bible contain several later additions to the text such as vowel-marks
(“punctuation”), accent-marks, a critical apparatus on the strangely written words (“Masora”), and signs defining
the spatial distribution of the text (marking the ends of the sentences, paragraphs, etc.). These additions were
attributed either to Ezra or to Moses himself by the medieval authorities.

628 The reference is to the (“popular”) etymologies of the twelve sons of Jacob. For example, when Shime’on
was born, his mother, Leah, thought: “God heard [shama]’ that I was neglected…” that is why she gave the
name Shime’on to him. Now the question is that how is it possible that Moses had knowledge of Leah’s inner
thoughts.
nevertheless, it is said [in the next sentence] that “they emigrated and went to the land of Canaan” [Gen. 12:5] this is said only on account of the later name.

“[…] but if it is not the case, then a secret belongs to it” that is, these are the words of the copyist of the Law [and not of Moses], and he had to say “still,” because in the days of the copyist the land had not been ruled by the Canaanites any more but by the king of Babylon. And the copyist wrote it as an addition [172 r] to the matter. And similar is “on the mountain of God-to-be-visited” [Gen. 22:14]. The full quotation is the following: “And he [=Abraham] named that place: ‘God-visits’ similarly to what is said even today: ‘on the mountain of God-to-be-visited’.” If these are Moses’ words explaining [the meaning] of this name, then why does he say “even today”? This implies that the reason for [Abraham’s] giving the place this name was the fact that he [foresaw] the future, namely, that “today” it is [a centre for pilgrims, where] “God-is-to-be-visited.” But in the days of Moses there were no pilgrims at all! Therefore, it must be an addition of the copyist living in a later time when there were already pilgrims.

“And behold! his [the giant’s] bed is an iron bed…” [Deut. 3:11] If these are the words of Moses, then why does he need to explain the greatness of this victory [over the giant] to his own contemporaries, and why does he support the story by referring to his [the giant’s] bed commemorating his might as if he were saying “if you do not believe to me, then go to the city of Ammon, and see his bed”?! [The giant] was killed in that very year [when Moses finished writing the Torah], and the whole people saw it! Therefore, they must be the words of the copyist of the Law.

Behold, I have explained the secret to you according to my capacity. And he [Ibn Ezra] says: “[whoever understands it] should be silent about it.” [And the reason for it is] that one should not weaken the [reputation] of our Torah in the eyes of the multitude. And see how much the [Talmudic] Sages did hesitate about the eight verses describing Moses’ death [before declaring that they were not written by Moses] in the chapter “Shutafim” [=Talmud Bavli, Baba Batra 15a]! 

Nonetheless, my heart has been strengthened concerning this explanation due to a vision that I saw during the feast of Sukkoth. I was reading the [book] “Shorashim” by Rabbi David Kimchi, and I found in it a Biblical quotation saying “we-lo 'arat” And I was wondering about the vision, and I said:

“Oh my God, I don’t know from which [Biblical book] this verse is!”

Then I heard a voice saying:

“It is written in the Torah: ‘And Moses did not instruct [lo 'arat] the sons of Israel in the wilderness for seventeen years, while they were in Kadesh. Elihu ben Barakhel [instructed them] instead of him.’”

Then I asked for an explanation of the word [‘arat]. And he answered, “‘arat means ‘to instruct,’ and the alef is instead of a yod just like [in the verse] yit’ammru kol poaley ‘awen [Ps. 94:4] and u-vikhvodam tityammaru [Isai. 61:6]. And similar is [Num. 22:32]: ‘yarat the way to me’ [meaning] ‘to show, to instruct.’ And

629 In the passage of the Talmud referred to the Sages are discussing whether it was possible for Moses to write the last eight verses of the Torah describing his death and the fact that nobody found his tomb, etc. [cf. Deut. 34:5-12].

630 Rabbi David Kimchi (abbreviated as ‘Radak’) lived in the first half of the thirteenth century. The book Shorashim (‘Roots’) composed by him is a Biblical Hebrew lexicon. I did not find the quotation in the printed edition of the work.

631 This sentence IS NOT written in the Torah or anywhere in the Bible (as we know it). Elihu ben Barakhel is a character from the book of Job [cf. Job 32:1-5].
similar is we-‘al yedey resha’im yirteni [Job 16:11], nevertheless, these are two separate roots.⁶³²

Then I asked:
So why did not he [=Moses] instruct them?”
Answer:
“They were wicked.”
“And why Elihu?”
“He lived in the days of Job, and Job lived in the days of Moses.”⁶³³
Then I asked:
“And why is this sentence missing from our Torah?”
Answer:
“Ezra censored it in order not to weaken the reputation of the Torah in the eyes of the multitude.”⁶³⁴

Eleazar ben Mattityah’s actual arguments are remarkably similar to Spinoza’s one despite the four centuries dividing the two authors from each other. It is not very probable that Spinoza read Eleazar’s text; however, he could easily have access to later supercommentaries, such as various versions of Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara’s work. Except for the “mystery of the twelve” there are only minor differences between Spinoza and Eleazar’s explanations. Moreover, the ultimate conclusions are also the same: both Spinoza and Eleazar attributes the final redaction of the Torah to the biblical Ezra.

In the Prolegomena we have pointed out the tension between two forms of rationalism in the thought of Ibn Ezra: “philological” rationalism detects where the text is problematic whereas “philosophical” rationalism tends to dictate what the text should say.⁶³⁵ It was the first type of rationalism that led to the conclusion that certain parts of the Torah could not be written by Moses. Eleazar ben Mattityah shared Ibn Ezra’s rationalist approach: the conclusion was inevitable for him as well.

The results of “philological” rationalism presented a challenge to the “philosophical” one. The five books of Moses as we know them today are the work of Ezra, not Moses. Why do we call it the “Torah” of Moses? Moreover, how can this statement be reconciled with an important principle of Maimonidean theology, namely, the superiority of Mosaic prophecy, that played an important role in apologetics? If Moses did not write the Torah then how can this book be superior to any other of the same genre? Ibn Ezra did not offer an explicit answer to these problems. Eleazar had to work out his own solution.

The solution is based on a distinction between the “essentials” of the Torah and between its non-essential aspects. The laws are the essential message of the revealed books; Eleazar argues that the text of the laws were not touched by Ezra. They are verbatim the same in Ezra and in Moses’ versions of the five books. Ezra “modernized” only inessential parts such as stories, historical remarks, explanations, etc. And even these modifications were carried out under divine control.

Thus Eleazar discovers a hidden story behind the surface of the biblical text: the story of textual transmission in the framework of salvation history. The people of Israel revolted against the authority of Moses and for seventeen years they were lead by Elihu. This fact was

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⁶³² One thing should be remembered from this detailed grammatical explanation: the verb ‘arat does not occur in the text of the Hebrew Bible at all!
⁶³³ This is a widespread assumption in the rabbinical literature.
⁶³⁴ MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 171v – 172r. The last paragraph relating Eleazar’s vision is missing from the other manuscript that I could consult (MS Vat. ebr. 249).
recorded in Moses’ books. During the centuries of the two kingdoms the books of Moses were lost due to the infidelity of the Israelites. After the Babylonian exile God revealed the books of Moses to Ezra again; however, Ezra introduced minor changes to the text. He deleted the passage about the Israelites’ revolt against Moses, because he wanted to erase the memory of this event in order to strengthen the authority of the laws. Further changes were intended to make the text more intelligent to the post-exilic readers. These are the anachronisms detected by Ibn Ezra. The inconsistencies of the text are resolved in a consistent account about textual history.

Eleazar’s vision appeared on the day of a religious feast when he was studying David Kimhi’s *Book of the Roots*. This work is a biblical Hebrew lexicon. Why was Eleazar reading it? Was he actually memorizing this book? Memorization requires great mental concentration that can result in a hypnotic, dream-like state of consciousness. Memorization, meditation and visionary experiences were intimately connected in medieval thought. Did the vision appear to Eleazar in the midst of such concentrated intellectual efforts? It is impossible to answer these questions with certitude. We will return to this topic in different contexts. The differences between Eleazar and Spinoza’s approach will be discussed at the end of this chapter.

**Shlomo Ibn Yaish the Younger / Moses Ibn Tibbon**

In the shorter recension of Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara’s supercommentary (*Hinneh shakhu*) we read:

*AND THE CANAANITE WAS STILL ON THE LAND: IT IS POSSIBLE THAT THE CANAANITE TOOK THE LAND OF CANAAN FROM SOMEONE ELSE AND IF IT IS NOT SO, IT HAS A SECRET AND WHOEVER UNDERSTANDS IT SHOULD BE SILENT ABOUT IT. It is known that the word ‘still’/ ‘already’ [az] signifies a definite time, that is to say, that [the Canaanite] did not dwell in it before; this is why Ibn Ezra writes, [namely,] because of the word az, that the Canaanite took the land of Canaan away from someone else, that is to say, that he did not build it [?she-lo benaa]. AND IF NOT SO, but he built it, IT HAS A SECRET/MYSTERY, that is to say, you cannot but say that [the Canaanite] was not in the [land] when this verse was written; therefore Moses did not write it. And don’t be surprised about the opinion of the sage [Ibn Ezra] because he alludes to the fact at another place that there are thirty two verses [fol. 5 v] in the Torah that Moses did no write, that is to say, after Joshua expelled the Canaanite from the land, then he wrote this verse. And this is the meaning of az: that [the Canaanite] was not there at the moment.

Or it is possible to say that the word ‘Canaanite’ [refers] to one of the seven powers that are in the body, [and it] was ruling the land due to the spoiling effect of the air [baavur ippus ha-avir]. For it is well-known that the seven nations [that ruled Canaan before the Israelites’ conquest] are the seven powers of the body according to the esoteric sense [lit. “according to the hidden way – al derek ha-nistar”].

In the long version of Shlomo Ibn Yaish’s supercommentary this passage is further elaborated:

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637 MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 5 r-v.
AND THE CANAANITE WAS STILL ON THE LAND: IT IS POSSIBLE THAT THE CANAANITE TOOK THE LAND OF CANAAN FROM SOMEONE ELSE AND IF IT IS NOT SO, IT HAS A SECRET AND WHOEVER UNDERSTANDS IT SHOULD BE SILENT ABOUT IT. It is known that the word **az** signifies a definite time, that is to say, that [the Canaanite] did not dwell in it before; AND IF NOT SO that is to say, Canaan did not take it from someone else but he dwelt there from the day Noah distributed the land to his son IT HAS A SECRET explanation: you cannot but say that [the Canaanite] did not dwell in the [land] when this verse was written; therefore Moses did not write it but someone else wrote it – and this is Joshua. For he [Ibn Ezra] alludes to the fact at another place that there are thirty two verses [fol. 5 v] in the Torah that Moses did no write, because after Joshua expelled the Canaanite from the land, then he wrote this verse. And this is the meaning of **az**: that [the Canaanite] was not there at the moment.

For if you say that Moses wrote it, look, it is written ‘still’ [**az**] which means that still in Abraham’s days [the Canaanite] was there but not in the days of the [author]. And in [Moses’] days [the Canaanite] was there! So it is certain that Moses did not write it but Joshua wrote it.

And if you say, look, it is written, “do not add anything to it and do not remove anything from it [i.e. from the words of the Torah]” because no man is worthy of adding to the words of Moses; the answer is that the admonition [fol. 243 r] refers only to those things that has relevance for the commandments [she-yesh bo isorekh be-guf ba-mitsvot] but concerning those things that have no relevance for the commandments the principle does not apply [lit. “no suspicion against adding”].

Or it is possible to say that this word “and the Canaanite was still on the land” is due to the spoiling effect of the air [**baavur ippus ha-avir**]. For it is well-known that the seven nations [that ruled Canaan before the Israelites’ conquest] are the seven powers of the body according to the esoteric sense [lit. “according to the hidden way – **al derek ha-nistar**”].

Shlomo Ibn Yaish’s supercommentary in both recensions testifies two interpretations. The first can be safely identified with that of Moses Ibn Tibbon. Judah Mosconi a supercommentator from the second half of the fourteenth century could still read Moses Ibn Tibbon’s work and he testifies that Moses Ibn Tibbon interpreted Ibn Ezra on Genesis 12: 6 in accordance with what we have read in Shlomo Ibn Yaish. Therefore, it is quite probable that Moses Ibn Tibbon’s was Shlomo Ibn Yaish’s source in case and even the wording might reflect Moses Ibn Tibbon’s original work.

**Pseudo-Caspi**

Although there is no conclusive argument available today that would establish the date of Pseudo-Caspi’s supercommentary, I will quote this text as a contrast to the previous interpretations.

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638 MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 242 v – 243 r.
639 In MS Munich, BS, Cod. hebr. 61, fol. 130 v the author of an anonymous supercommentary (cf. Part Two, chapter six) fiercely criticizes those supercommentators who attribute the denial of Mosaic authorship of these verses to Ibn Ezra.
640 MS London, Montefiore Library, 49, fol. 38 r: והנה זה באור אשר בארו אלה פה לא חפצתי בו ולא ישר בעיני שכלי ואע״פ שגדולים חקקי לב בחכמה נטוそれに מדעת ומכללם החכם ר׳ משה ן׳ תבון
AND THE CANAANITE WAS STILL ON THE LAND: IT IS POSSIBLE THAT THE CANAANITE TOOK THE LAND OF CANAAN FROM SOMEONE ELSE AND IF IT IS NOT SO, IT HAS A SECRET AND WHOEVER UNDERSTANDS IT SHOULD BE SILENT ABOUT IT. It is well-known that the whole world is one individual. And there is a proof, namely, since a man is composed from his head to his end, and the proof is that if you hit a man on the finger of his foot his whole body will feel it. And if [you hit him] on his head his whole body will express [the pain]. Similarly the lower world, the middle world, and the upper world, which is the throne of the glory / honor and it is said of it: “my face they will not see.” The only difference is found concerning God that He is not in body like the human intellect [is in the body] and that the nobler surrounds the baser which is the opposite with man.

So if this is the case, there are three worlds only in the human species and the world in its entirety is under the power of God although through intermediaries. Thus heart is in the middle of the body. And how [could] Scripture say, “and the Canaanite [was] still [on the land]”? meaning that when God ordered Abraham to go [there] and to inherit [the land], he went [there] and found the Canaanite to rule the land. So it seems that it was not under the power of God at that time. This is why it is problematic for this sage [Ibn Ezra]; and he explained that it [fol. 62 v] is possible that he [the Canaanite] came and took it away by war and this is why it says ‘at that time’ [az]. AND IF IT IS NOT SO, IT HAS A SECRET that is to say, that it is the opposite of the [previous] interpretation; therefore it is not proper to talk about it for it is similar to the view of those simple minded who say “God has left the land.” (Ezekiel 8: 12 and 9: 9) This is why he says “whoever understands it should be silent about it” for this is contrary to our faith / Torah.641

The key for understanding this explanation is the reference to Ezekiel 8: 12: “God has left the land.” In fact, the author probably alludes to Maimonides’ interpretation of this verse in GP III, 17 (opinion 2). Maimonides expounds Aristotle’s view of providence following Alexander of Aphrodisias’ interpretation. According to this Aristotelian theory divine providence concerns only the species in the lower world, not the individual. Maimonides concludes this section of GP III, 17 with the remark that Aristotle’s opinion is referred to in the passage quoted from Ezekiel.

Pseudo-Caspi extends the idea of microcosm / macrocosm to human race itself. There is a “lower world,” a “middle world,” and an “upper world” within the human race. These three classes of human beings do not receive the same amount of providence from God.

The three classes probably correspond to three geographical areas. Pseudo-Caspi has in mind probably a wide-spread theory of the different climates of the inhabited lands playing important role in Ibn Ezra’s thought.642 The first geographical climate is the extreme north and the extreme south. According to Maimonides’ words in GP III, 29 these lands are inhabited by uncivilized people who are still idolaters. This is due to the fact that the climate of these territories influences the brain of the humans living there to the effect that they are hardly able to grasp any abstract idea.

The second zone corresponds roughly to the Mediterranean basin and Persia. It is populated by civilized people who confess monotheistic beliefs due to the better natural conditions that enable them to form more subtle concepts. However, the best conditions for

641 MS Florence, BML, Plut. 2. 42, fol. 62 r-v.
intellectual work prevail in the Land of Israel. This is the place where man can get the closest to God.

Maimonides held the theory that the amount of providence an individual can receive from God is dependent on the extent he or she actually contemplates God. The prophets are under the special protection of God due to their perfect attachment to the Active Intellect. Other religious people are less protected according to the degree they are able to recognize intellectual truth (GP III, 17-18).

I think Pseudo-Caspi combined these two ideas in the supercommentary quoted above. If the Land of Israel is the place where one can achieve the highest degree of intellectual perfection due to its excellent natural conditions then divine providence must be the strongest in the Land of Israel.

In this context Pseudo-Caspi was able to see why Ibn Ezra was so much bothered by the statement “and the Canaanite was still on the land.” The Canaanites were idolaters who could hardly be under the special protection of God. If they possessed the land, then the land was not “under the power of God” according to Pseudo-Caspi. The underlying idea is probably the following. Just like human soul exercises its power over the body through the heart God exercises His power over the lower world through the angels and the heavenly bodies. This scheme can be applied to the “three worlds” of the human race as well. That is to say, the population of the noblest land, the land of Israel receives the principal divine providence from God and it transmits it to the other lands – hence the parallelism between “heart” and “land” in the second paragraph of the quoted text. Now if an idolatrous people such as the Canaanites possessed the Holy Land in Abraham’s time then how could God’s providence be transmitted to the inhabitants of the rest of the world? Has God left the land?

I think this was the problem Pseudo-Caspi saw in the meaning of Genesis 12: 6. If the Land of Israel is not inhabited by proper people then the whole idea of divine providence in the lower world is threatened. How could Abraham be called from the Chaldean Ur? If the Canaanites took away the land by war from a people who had presumably better religious behavior one can still argue that divine providence could reach Abraham before the Canaanites’ conquest. But if the other alternative is the case, namely that the Canaanites lived in the land from the days of Noah then even this explanation will not work.

What was Pseudo-Caspi’s answer to the problem? The text does not say anything about it. Maybe the author was content to point out the problem without solving it.

Pseudo-Caspi had apparently less interest in “philological” rationalism than Eleazar ben Mattityah and Moses Ibn Tibbon. His exegesis is rational, but this is the second type of rationalism that substitutes the prima facie meaning of the text with a highly conceptualized and theoretical account. Pseudo-Caspi was no less “radical” or “courageous” in rationalism than Eleazar or Moses Ibn Tibbon. This is not the reason for his indifference towards the problem of Mosaic authorship. The reason is rather the lack of interest in “philological” rationalism.

Sen Bonet de Lunel / Avvat Nefesh

A similar trend is represented in Bonet’s comment with important differences:

IT IS POSSIBLE THAT THE CANAANITE TOOK THE LAND OF CANAAN FROM SOMEONE ELSE that is to say, the word az can have two meanings. The first is that at the time Abraham

However, the reader should note that Pseudo-Caspi’s explanation is not allegorical. He does not decode the seven nations of Canaan as signifying something different from the literal sense; he rather puts the text into a theoretical context and tries to render the implications of it in conceptual language. He does not say at all that the Canaanites or Abraham are not to be understood literally.
was wandering in the land the Canaanite was already there but not before. And this is what he [Ibn Ezra] says, “he took it from someone else.” Or it can mean that at the time Abram was wandering in the land, the Canaanite was there, but this was written later, when [the Canaanite] was no longer there. And this is what he says, “and if it is not so, it has a secret” for he means that Moses did not write it; on the contrary, it was written after [fol. 76 v] the land was conquered. And this is his opinion about many other verses. And most of their secrets are dependent on this [passage] as he says at the beginning of Deuteronomy.

But we are not fond of him concerning this opinion, for the whole Torah was written by Moses from the mouth of God without distinction or change.

Bonet interprets Ibn Ezra’s words in a way similar to Eleazar ben Mattityah and Moses Ibn Tibbon. However, he rejects Ibn Ezra’s opinion. At the beginning of Deuteronomy Bonet returns to the topic and adds a further comment:

But we are not fond of him concerning this interpretation for we think that Moses wrote all [the Torah] from the mouth of God. And because [fol. 129 r] they were soon to cross the Jordan God commanded him to use such a language as if they already crossed the Jordan and because of the future generations that would live in the Land of Israel [he used such a] language that they would understand where those things were said.

In other words, Bonet refutes Ibn Ezra’s argument by saying that the anachronisms found in the Torah do not indicate non-Mosaic authorship but divine providence and foreknowledge: the prophet adopts the perspective of the future generations when he relates the events of his own age.

Moses Nagari

I have argued in part one, chapter four that Moses Nagari’s comment is a response to Bonet:

AND THE CANAANITE WAS STILL ON THE LAND: IT IS POSSIBLE THAT THE CANAANITE TOOK THE LAND OF CANAAN FROM SOMEONE ELSE ETC. Because the word az signifies temporal limit in such a way that the thing it refers to exists only in that limited time. Therefore, if the word az refers to the time Abraham was wandering in that land and [Scripture] says ‘az’ because before that time the Canaanite was not found on that land, then he took it from someone else. And if this [interpretation] can be maintained then it is possible that Moses wrote it, for this [historical event] was known to the prophet and perhaps to everybody. And if the word az do not refer to the time Abraham was wandering in that land but to other time then he [Ibn Ezra] thinks that someone else wrote it. And this [verse] is similar to other verses that were written by someone else according to his judgment. And he says WHOEVER UNDERSTANDS IT SHOULD BE SILENT ABOUT IT, because he grasped the fragility of this intention that most scholars would reject it, but nonetheless, his investigation necessarily resulted that it must be true.

And even if we are not fond of him concerning this point since it is proper to believe with a necessary faith that Moses our master – peace upon him – wrote [the Torah]
from be-reshit to yisrael [i.e. from the first word to the last one] without exception, not even one letter [was written by someone else] – I have decided to write an apology for him [Ibn Ezra] that “they should not talk badly about God’s anointed one [meshiah ha-shem].”

He thinks that the things apprehended from the future or present that are hidden from sense perception do not add any perfection to the prophet and it is not even the divine intention [that the prophet should] instruct others by telling them [the future or present hidden from the senses] because it is not necessary for the prophet that he should apprehend them.646

Moses Nagari explains that in Ibn Ezra’s opinion there is no need to require knowledge of future in true prophecy; this is why Ibn Ezra did not solve the problem of anachronisms by referring to prophetic foreknowledge.

Ezra ben Shlomo on the “Secrets” of Ibn Ezra

The explanations quoted so far can be divided into three groups:

1. The first interpretation in Shlomo Ibn Yaish which reflects most probably Moses Ibn Tibbon’s opinion and Eleazar ben Mattityah claim that Ibn Ezra denied the Mosaic authorship of Genesis 12: 6. The supercommentators agree with him and they do not consider it heresy.

2. Sen Bonet de Lunel and Moses Nagari claim that Ibn Ezra denied the Mosaic authorship of Genesis 12: 6 but they disagree with him and consider his position heretic.

3. Pseudo-Caspi and the second interpretation in Shlomo Ibn Yaish do not relate the sense of the comment to the problem of Mosaic authorship. They believe the ‘secret’ consisted in attributing an esoteric sense to the verse.

The three groups represent two approaches to Ibn Ezra’s text. The first two groups take the “secret” mentioned by Ibn Ezra to refer to a non-traditionalist view, whereas the third group takes it to refer to an esoteric interpretation of Scripture. These two possibilities for interpreting Ibn Ezra’s usage of the word ‘secret / mystery’ (sod) were explicitly spelled out by Ezra ben Shlomo, a supercommentator from the second half of the fourteenth century at the beginning of his supercommentary Sod ha-shem le-yirav:

The aforementioned Ezra ben Shlomo says:

I will tell you now a general rule [kelal] on which your heart should rely in every place where you see the sage Abraham Ibn Ezra of blessed memory to say “and it has a secret / mystery.” So I will not have to [repeat it] every time when Ibn Ezra says “and it has a secret.”

[So when he says] “and it has a secret” without explaining the secret with obscure words as he does in this passage […] in all these cases when he says “it has a [secret]” or “I will allude to a secret” and he says obscure words after as an allusion to the secret then the reader should investigate [fol. 5 v] and get know the opinion of the sage concerning that secret. However, if he does not add obscure words after having said “it has a secret” then the intention of the sage is only to reject a midrashic interpretation.

646 MS Vienna, ÖNB, hebr. 106, fol. 32 r.
[derash] in a polite way for the sage did not want to say without qualification that our rabbis of blessed memory were simply wrong.647

In other words, Ezra ben Shlomo is of the opinion that if Ibn Ezra does not add further explanation no matter how obscure concerning a “secret” interpretation then his point is simply to reject a traditional interpretation. Otherwise the reader should look for an esoteric-philosophic interpretation of the biblical passage.

The texts quoted concerning Genesis 12: 6 all pre-date Ezra ben Shlomo’s work and there is no reason to assume that any of the authors knew or accepted Ezra’s rules of interpretation. But these rules were not unprecedented innovations. The early supercommentators were perfectly aware of both possibilities in understanding Ibn Ezra’s comments.

We shall discuss the problems of esoteric-non-literal interpretation in the next chapter. In the present chapter we focus on the problem of biblical criticism in medieval times. Spinoza’s opinion will be contrasted with Eleazar ben Mattityah’s view. This comparison will reveal some key differences between the approaches of the medieval and the early modern authors.

Remembering the Past: Spinoza and Eleazar ben Mattityah

Spinoza and Eleazar ben Mattityah are in a remarkable agreement in denying Moses’ authorship of the Pentateuch and in hypothesizing Ezra’s authorship for the ultimate version. They arguments also overlap to a great extent. They read Ibn Ezra’s remarks on Genesis 12: 6 and Deuteronomy 1: 3 in a very similar way.

However, they conclusions are fundamentally different. For Spinoza rejection of the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch means that the biblical text is not a faithful witness concerning the teachings of Moses and the early history of Israel. The miracles related in these books are not testimonies of contemporaries. This fact undermines the spiritual value of the Pentateuch in general. Spinoza concludes in the Theological-Political Treatise that the Pentateuch contains only popular doctrines about God and the world. These ideas may be useful for the vulgar; however, the philosophers should not be influenced by them. The Pentateuch, and as a matter of fact, the whole Bible has no relevance for philosophy.

None of these conclusions follow for Eleazar ben Mattityah. Moses did not write the Torah; nonetheless, Ezra was also a prophet and he probably wrote everything under divine inspiration. More than that, Eleazar himself learnt about Ezra’s authorship from divine revelation. Following the authority of Maimonides, Ibn Ezra, and Samuel Ibn Tibbon he also admits that the Torah teaches the vulgar people vulgar doctrines; therefore, Eleazar would probably not object to Spinoza’s statement about the popular nature of biblical religion. However, Eleazar maintains that the Torah does have an esoteric sense as well for the instruction of the wise. And this instruction is the best available for human beings since it comes from the mouth of God. Eleazar could not but think that no text is more relevant for the study of philosophy than the Torah.

What is the reason for these differences? Eleazar’s text proves clearly that it was possible in the second half of the thirteenth century to develop similar lines of arguments concerning the Mosaic authorship of the Pentateuch as was done by Spinoza in the seventeenth century. Moreover, as we shall see in the next chapter medieval Jewish philosophers often rejected the historicity of certain biblical narratives about miracles and angelic appearances in the literal sense. Eleazar ben Mattityah himself was of the opinion that

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647 MS Vat. ebr. 106, fol. 5 r-v, MS Oxford, Bodleian, MS Hunt. 217 (Neubauer 230), fol. 135 v.
the appearance of the three “men” (Genesis 18) did not happen in the external world, only in Abraham’s imagination. Therefore, medieval Jewish exegetes did not refrain from questioning the historicity of biblical narratives either.

A possible answer is that medieval philosophers had less freedom of thinking than their seventeenth-century colleagues. They were more dependent on the religious community; therefore, they could not afford to go as far in rejecting traditional ideas as Spinoza.

I find this explanation most unconvincing. Medieval Jewish philosophers and exegetes were by no way cowards or opportunists. They often had to face persecutions both from the external world and from within the Jewish community for their unconventional ideas or for the very fact that they were interested in philosophy. In general, medieval people were able to and did dare to formulate non-conventional and heretic notions. They were able to build up social structures that could resist efficiently persecution coming from political or ecclesiastical authorities. And they were often ready to die for the doctrines they held to be true. Persecution could simply not prevent the invention and circulation of heretic ideas in the Middle Ages.

Another possible answer is that medieval Jewish philosophers were not as consistent as Spinoza in this matter. In other words, it was a mistake on their part that they attributed esoteric philosophic meaning to the Bible in spite of the fact that they realized the non-philosophic nature of the exoteric sense. They should have declared that the Bible has no relevance for philosophy as Spinoza did.

This alternative is not very convincing either. You might call it “inconsistency” or “mistake” what the medieval Jewish philosophers thought of the Bible’s philosophic sense. But this mistake was a genuine one. It was repeated by generations of Jewish philosophers from Saadyah gaon’s time to Abarbanel and Messer Leon. This “mistake” was hardly due to some intellectual failure or lack of rigor in thinking. Instead of blaming the medieval authors for inconsistency it is more promising to try to find out how they could be consistent in these issues.

I think the difference lies in Eleazar’s and Spinoza’s different approaches to remembering the past in general. In the Mishnah, tractate Pesahim we read the following:

In every generation man has to consider oneself as if he himself went out from Egypt [i.e. during the exodus] for it is written: “And you shall tell your son on that day, ‘Because this is what God did for me when I came out of Egypt.’” Accordingly we are obliged to thank, praise, adore, glorify, extol, honor, bless, exalt, and reverence that One Who did these miracles to our fathers and to us, Who has brought us out from servitude to freedom from sorrow to joy from mourning to feast day from darkness to great light from slavery to redemption, so we say in front of Him, halleluiah.648

This sentence has been incorporated into the Pesah Haggadah read every year during the feast of Passover. There is no reason whatsoever to doubt that medieval Jewish philosophers including the Ibn Ezra supercommentators observed the feast of Passover just like other Jews did. Probably all of them knew by heart this sentence and they did their best to realize the religious obligation commended by it. In other words the Ibn Ezra supercommentators considered themselves to be saved from the land of Egypt, the house of slavery by God. At least at the feast days they imagined themselves to have been lead out of Egypt by Moses just like it happened to their forefathers.

Remembering the past was in fact a ritual re-enactment of the past. This was the basic mode of remembrance for medieval Jews, vulgar and philosopher alike. It is my hypothesis

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648 Mishnah, Pesahim 10: 5. This obligation was codified in Maimonides, Mishneh Torah, Hilkhot Matsa 7: 6.
that this way of remembering the past influenced medieval Jewish biblical exegesis as well. When Eleazar ben Mattityah read for example Exodus 34: 29-35 then he imagined himself to be one of the sons of Israel seeing Moses descending from the mountain with the tablets of the laws in his hands and with a shining face. How could he doubt that Moses indeed talked to God and that he received the outmost perfection possible for human beings during these talks?! Can anybody be cleverer than Moses?! If we have some philosophical knowledge is it possible that Moses did not know even more than us?!

The authority of Moses was established through such a practice of remembering the past. The point of remembering was to participate in the past. The subject who remembered became incorporated in the event remembered. In mainstream Christianity this practice centered on the rite of the Eucharist: the believers were literally incorporated in the event by consuming the bread that was the real body of Christ according to standard theological definitions. This is how Christ’s commandment “Thus you shall do for the sake of my memory” was realized. The Jewish way of remembering the Exodus is clearly analogous to the Eucharist from this point of view (the Jews are obliged to look upon themselves as if they were personally delivered from Egypt) although the theological background is very different.

This subject should be treated in the broader context of spiritual knowledge in the Middle Ages. As has been already pointed out in the Prolegomena medieval thinkers generally held the view that in order to get access to the most important dimensions of reality one has to perform a spiritual transformation. It is not the natural subject who is able to know the truth but the transformed subject. The same rule held for the historical knowledge as well. To understand the events of the Exodus you have to perform a spiritual transformation: you have to look upon yourself as if you were delivered from the house of slavery… This spiritual turn was the pre-condition for the accession to the past. Remembering the past was a spiritual experience. It is not by chance that Eleazar ben Mattityah partly gained his knowledge about the forgotten past of Israel through a vision.

I think Eleazar just like the other medieval Ibn Ezra supercommentators were taught from their childhood to remember the biblical past of Israel in the way outlined above. The vision of past achieved through a spiritual transformation determined their approach to the biblical text. Whatever was related in the Bible was full of meaning and significance. Reading the Bible meant participating in mysterious events of Israel’s history. Philosophy was a tool for deciphering the mysteries of the past.

Eleazar just like other medieval readers was not blind towards the anachronisms evidenced by the Pentateuch and other biblical texts. However, these anachronisms did not form objections against the authenticity of the Torah. They were rather allusions to further mysterious events for him, which were not told directly in the Bible and in rabbinic traditions. The original Pentateuch related that Moses left the camp of Israel for seventeen years and Elihu known from the book of Job took over his office for this time. The Pentateuch was completely forgotten by Israel in monarchical times so God had to reveal it again to Ezra the priest after the Babylonian exile. Ezra adjusted some of the biblical stories to the needs of his audience probably not without divine approbation. The memory of the people’s revolt against Moses was erased not to teach bad example to future generations. These were important and meaningful events for Eleazar from which he learnt further facts about how God and the saints of ancient times handled several problems.

To sum, the anachronisms of the Pentateuch opened a new field of remembering for Eleazar ben Mattityah. This new field could be assimilated easily to the already known past of Israel. Therefore it did not pose a serious challenge to the mental set of medieval Jewish philosophers. Whether a text was revealed by God through Moses or Ezra, whether an event take place in reality or in prophetic imagination did not make too much difference from the
point of view of the central enterprise of medieval Jewish biblical exegesis: to understand the mysterious events of the past.

The medieval apostates who refused the authenticity of the Torah probably did so because they were attracted to other forms of religious memory than the Jewish one. They believed that the true mysteries of the Jewish past could be better understood from a Christian or Muslim perspective. Therefore they preferred the Christian or Muslim versions of biblical past to the Jewish one. The only possible exception is Hawayi [Hiwi] al-Balkhi who might have rejected the Jewish Bible without accepting Christianity or Islam. However, we know too little about this enigmatic person to assess his case.

Spinoza did not share the same approach to past. He rejected all forms of religious remembering. I think the following passage of the *Theological-Political Treatise* is quite revealing:

Some of the Jews believe that the actual words of the Decalogue were not spoken by God, but that the Israelites heard a noise only, without any distinct words, and during its continuance apprehended the Ten Commandments by pure intuition; to this opinion I myself once inclined, seeing that the words of the Decalogue in Exodus are different from the words of the Decalogue in Deuteronomy, for the discrepancy seemed to imply (since God only spoke once) that the Ten Commandments were not intended to convey the actual words of the Lord, but only His meaning. However, unless we would do violence to Scripture, we must certainly admit that the Israelites heard a real voice, for Scripture expressly says, Deut v:4, “God spake with you face to face,” i.e. as two men ordinarily interchange ideas through the instrumentality of their two bodies; and therefore it seems more consonant with Holy Writ to suppose that God really did create a voice of some kind with which the Decalogue was revealed. The discrepancy of the two versions is treated of in Chap. VIII.\(^{649}\)

In Chapter 8 returning to the same subject Spinoza writes:

A comparison of the decalogue in Deuteronomy with the decalogue in Exodus, where its history is explicitly set forth, will be sufficient to show us a wide discrepancy in all these three particulars, for the fourth commandment is given not only in a different form, but at much greater length, while the reason for its observance differs wholly from that stated in Exodus. Again the order in which the tenth commandment is explained differs in the two versions. I think that the differences here as elsewhere are the work of Ezra, who explained the law of God to his contemporaries, and who wrote this book of the law of God, before anything else.\(^{650}\)

The change of Spinoza’s strategy in accounting for the differences between the two versions of the Decalogue evidences in my opinion the basic difference between his exegesis and the medieval one. For Ibn Ezra, Maimonides and the Ibn Ezra supercommentators the key question was “What did happen on Mount Sinai?” They proposed theories about the nature of the voice heard by the people about the differences between Moses’ and the people’s experiences and about prophecy in general.\(^{651}\) The contradictions between the two versions of the Decalogue were treated in this theoretical context. In his youth Spinoza also approached the problem in this way.

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\(^{649}\) Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, 16.

\(^{650}\) Spinoza, *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, 131.

However, the mature Spinoza took a different approach. The question was no longer what happened on Mount Sinai but what happened to the text of the Pentateuch. The heroes of Spinoza’s story were not Moses, Aaron and the other biblical characters but the anonymous scribes who transmitted the text from generation to generation and introduced changes into it. The contradictions between the two versions of the Decalogue were explained in terms of textual history, not metaphysics, logic or theory of prophecy.

I think the reason for this change was that Spinoza did not perform the talmudic commandment to consider himself as if he were liberated by God from the slavery in Egypt. When he read the Bible he did not think of himself as partaking in the events. Consequently, the mysterious character of the events did not appeal to him. He identified the biblical stories as belonging to the popular or vulgar level of culture, just like the medieval authors did. However, unlike his medieval predecessors Spinoza did not see any reason to suppose the existence of an esoteric message working behind the “popular” stories. Therefore, the biblical texts could not but appear to him as exposing the superstitions of simpleminded and uneducated people.

He developed a new way of remembering the past in which the remembering subject consistently maintains a critical distance from the events remembered. Spiritual transformation was no longer permitted to play any role in remembering the past. Its place was taken by method – a key word for Spinoza no less than to Descartes. Hence Spinoza’s deep interest in the “correct method” of biblical exegesis in chapter seven of the *Theological-Political Treatise*.

Michel Foucault writes somewhere that Descartes has “liquidated” the pre-modern ideal of spirituality.⁶⁵² Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise* did the same job concerning biblical exegesis and in fact concerning remembering the past in general. Emphasis on the correct method as the solely way of accessing the truth systematically closed the possibility of perceiving that dimension of the biblical texts in which the medieval exegetes were the most interested. Having performed the spiritual transformation it was a self-evident truth for the medieval commentators that the Bible is full with sublime mysteries. Having replaced spirituality with methodology it became a self-evident truth for Spinoza that nothing mysterious is contained in the biblical texts.

Further aspects of this problem will be discussed in the next chapter.

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Chapter 2: “And God appeared to Abraham…:” History and Vision

Genesis 18 relates that Abraham was visited by three men who revealed him the birth of his son Isaac and the punishment threatening Sodom and Gomorrah. Ibn Ezra comments:

The people of erring spirit say that God is the three men and He is one and He is three but they are not separated. And behold they have forgotten “and the two angels went to Sodom.”

And the commentators say that God appeared to him [i.e. Abraham] in a prophetic vision and after he looked around and saw three angels: the first came to announce the good news about Sarah and the other two went to Sodom; the first one to destroy it and the second one to save Lot.

Ibn Ezra quotes “the commentators” who treated the appearance of God in Gen 18: 1 and the three men / angels visiting Abraham from 18: 2 on as two separate visions. Ibn Ezra does not reject explicitly this interpretation and does not propose an alternative either.

Maimonides in GP II, 42 claims that the events described in Genesis 18 happened to Abraham in prophetic vision. He formulates the general principle that whenever Scripture mentions the appearance of angels or God Himself in corporeal form it is to be understood to have taken place in prophetic vision even if it is not pointed out explicitly in the biblical text. Maimonides emphasizes that Jacob’s fight with the angel related in Genesis 32 happened also in prophetic vision.

Nahmanides commenting on Genesis 18 criticized vehemently Maimonides’ position:

If it happened only in a dream, he saw only [three] men who ate meat; so how can [Scripture] say “And God appeared to him”?! For God did not appear to him in vision or in thought! Such thing is found nowhere in the prophecies! Moreover, according to his words Sarah did not knead dough and Abraham did not prepare meat and Sarah did not laugh, but all of these were only in vision. If this is the case then most of this dream was like a false dream; for what did he gain by seeing all these things?!

And similarly he [Maimonides] said concerning “And somebody fought with him [i.e. Jacob]” (Gen 32: 25) that the whole [story] is a prophetic vision. And I don’t know why Jacob was limping at sunrise, and why he said “I have seen God face to face and I survived” (Gen 32: 31). The prophets were never afraid of dying because of prophetic visions! And he saw already greater and nobler visions than this one, for he saw the sublime Name many times in prophetic visions.

Moreover, in accordance with his opinion we have to say the same concerning Lot, namely, that the angels did not come to his house, and he did not bake bread for them, and they did not eat it, but all these were a vision. And even if Lot could reach the level of prophetic vision how could the sinful and wicked people of Sodom become prophets, for who told them that [two] men came to his house?! And if the whole was Lot’s prophetic vision, then “and the angels urged him… ‘Rise and take your wife…’ and he said, ‘Save your life…”’ (Gen 19: 15-17) and “behold, I have

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653 Ibn Ezra, Short commentary on Genesis 18: 1 according to MS Vat. ebr. 106 fol. 24 r. The reference to the “people of erring spirit” in the first sentence is censored from the printed editions.
favored you” (Gen 19: 21) and all the [rest of the] chapter was vision, so Lot must have stayed in Sodom. And if you think that the events happened by themselves and the speeches were in every case only in vision – these words are contradicting Scripture; it is forbidden even to listen to them not to mention to believe them.\footnote{Nahmanides ad Genesis 18: 1.}

Nahmanides objects that (1) Abraham’s supposed vision contained many superfluous elements what is not the case with other prophetic visions; (2) the story of Lot’s escape from Sodom cannot be interpreted as having taken place only in vision; (3) Jacob could not be harmed in the fight with the angel and (4) Jacob’s survival of the encounter with the angel would not be a big deal if all these happened only in vision.

Nahmanides’ criticism relies on two premises: in a prophetic vision every element must be meaningful, this is why the “superfluous” elements of Abraham’s supposed vision form an objection against Maimonides’ opinion; and an interpretation that creates two big gap between the literal / popular sense of Scripture and the reconstructed historical events is not tolerable. The later premise – made explicit in the last sentence of the quotation – supports points (2) – (4) in Nahmanides’ refutation.

In the non-quoted continuation of the commentary Nahmanides allows that the angels are incorporeal beings and consequently they cannot be seen by corporeal eyes. However, he argues that supernatural bodies can be created by God to represent the angels in the lower world. These bodies can be seen by corporeal eyes and by everybody: unlike in the case of prophecy the vision of such angelic bodies is accessible to everybody who has eyes not only to spiritually superior persons such as prophets. Nahmanides concludes that Abraham’s visitors and the angel fighting with Jacob must have been such angelic bodies.

Eleazar ben Mattityah’s supercommentary was probably written only a couple of years after the publication of the final version of Nahmanides commentary on the Torah. Eleazar ben Mattityah comments on Ibn Ezra ad Genesis 18: 1:

\textbf{AND HE IS ONE AND HE IS THREE BUT THEY ARE NOT SEPARATED}\ And it is known that Aristotle, the head of the philosophers, said,

\begin{quote}
The first substance has no multiplicity and no change and He is no body and no power in body and no accident pertain to Him of the accidents that can pertain to bodies.
\end{quote}

This is what he said in the \emph{Book of Principles}\footnote{This refers probably to work written by al-Farabi.} and in \emph{Metaphysics}.

\begin{quote}
AND THE COMMENTATORS SAY THAT GOD APPEARED TO HIM IN A PROPHETIC VISION AND AFTER HE LOOKED AROUND AND SAW THREE ANGELS.
\end{quote}

Eleazar says:

\begin{quote}
Had I not known the place where this sage [Ibn Ezra] wrote this book of his and the time [of the composition] I would have been of the opinion that he saw the Guide of the Perplexed and drank of its water at part two, chapter forty-two.
\end{quote}

Indeed, both of them composed their books in the 260\textsuperscript{th} cycle.\footnote{By a `cycle’ [mahzor] the author means the 19 year cycle of the Jewish calendar. The first year of the 260\textsuperscript{th} cycle is the year 259\times19+1= 4922 after the creation of the world according to Jewish computation corresponding to year 1162 of the Common Era.} In the sixth year of the cycle Ibn Ezra composed [his book] and thus he says in his poem at the end of his book: “and I finished it in the four-thousand-nine-hundred-twenty-seventh year – the sixth of the 260\textsuperscript{th} cycle – in Rome, a year of favor a year of liberation for the prisoners.”\footnote{And in the \emph{Sefer Zemanim} [of the \emph{Mishneh Torah}] in chapter 11 of 1167 C. E.} And in the \emph{Sefer Zemanim} [of the \emph{Mishneh Torah}] in chapter 11 of
Qiddush ha-hodesh Rabbi Moses mentions the seventeenth year of the 260th cycle in Fustat / Egypt [Mitsrayim], and the Guide of the Perplexed he composed after the Mishneh Torah. And in fact this sage [Ibn Ezra] started to compose [his commentary] on the Torah in the town of Redhos near England [anglitera] which is the end of the earth, and he mentioned it at the parasha ba el par’oh. Therefore, I know that this sage [Ibn Ezra] did not draw from the water of Moses [i.e. did not read GP]. And I have also realized that Rabbi Moses [Maimonides] was not the first in this interpretation [i.e. to interpret the story as a prophetic vision]. I think this sage [Ibn Ezra] who is not biased / who does not superimpose [new] senses [on the biblical text] did not reject the words of the ancients [=talmudic rabbis] saying that it happened in prophetic vision.

Therefore, I am very surprised about Rav Moses bar Nahman [=Nahmanides], why he did not keep his tongue from talking against the greatest ones of the earth who were erudite sages and who were certainly aware of his questions and objections for they [i.e. the objections] do not go deeply [into the matter] too much. It seems to me that Rav Moses bar Nahman did not pay attention to the words of Rabbi Moses [Maimonides] in part two, chapter 36 [of GP]:

The truth of prophecy pertains to the imaginative faculty from the perfection of the active [intellect] up to the point that the thing appear as if it existed outside [of the mind] and the thing he sees is as if it came to him through sensual perception that is directed to the outside [lit. “that goes out”].

And also in the Sefer Ruah hen, chapter four it is written that

The imaginative faculty is corporeal; just it imagines non-corporeal things in a corporeal way as if a man was standing in front of him and was talking to him and was informing him about the future. And the active intellect emanates on the human [intellect] and from [human intellect] to the imaginative [faculty] up to the point that it apprehends the future things and they appear to him as if they came to him through sensual perception from the outside.

And this is the intention of this sage [Ibn Ezra] as well when he says above, “and when the soul is appropriate for the “honor” [kavod] then many images are generated in it.” And similarly at the verse “And Moses hid his face” (Ex 3: 6) he explains to us that in a prophetic vision the divine intellect was emanated on him [i.e. Abraham] in the imaginative faculty up to the point when he saw by the power of imagination the figure of three men.

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658 1178 C. E.
659 The reference is probably to Rouen.
660 A word pun that cannot be translated into English: lo moshe mi-me moshe “he did not draw from Moses’ water” alluding to the popular etymology of Moses’ name in Exodus 2: 10.
661 The Hebrew phrase lo nasa panim is difficult to translate. Eleazar alludes to part five of Ibn Ezra’s introduction to the commentary on the Torah where Ibn Ezra declares: we-lo essa panim ba-tora; lit. “I will not raise faces in the Torah.” This idiom (“to raise faces”) means normally to be biased, to favor somebody in an unfair way. However, in the context of Ibn Ezra’s introduction it also refers to the practice of other commentators criticized by Ibn Ezra who were searching for new “aspects” [panim] in the biblical texts, that is to say, who invented explanations pointing beyond the literal sense or simple sense [peshat] of the text. Ibn Ezra promises not to follow this practice. Eleazar refers to this promise of Ibn Ezra and also to the fact that Ibn Ezra criticized and rejected rabbinic exegesis ruthlessly – he was not “biased” towards the talmudic rabbis. So if Ibn Ezra did not refuse the talmudic exegesis in this case then it must be indeed well-founded.
And the truth is that three men stood above him and they are three faculties: perfection of morals, and the imaginative faculty, and the active intellect in it. And to the greatest among them that is the divine emanation which is the active intellect [Abraham] said, “Do not go away from your servant, sir” and he did not use plural form for the two faculties were apprehended / understood by him that they would not go away from him. And by his perfection in morals and since his imaginative faculty made him to see them in the form of men he practiced moral perfection concerning them by being magnanimous [toward them] up to the point that their forms were engraved into his mind [lit. “heart”] and his splendor did not turn into devastation [as happened to Daniel; cf. Daniel 10: 8] even if he was weak; the capacity to receive the power of prophecy remained in him concerning the announcement about the son and the announcement about Sodom and to pray for them. And this is the saying [of the talmudic rabbis]: “Abraham, whose power is great, saw them in human form,” that is to say, the imaginative power was making them [i.e. the human figures] through the divine intellect, “what is not the case with Lot” even if it is written concerning Lot, “and the men seized his hand;” “and they stretched their hands.”

I will tell you a principle. When they [i.e. the angels] are among corporeal things they appear in corporeal image to both Abraham and Lot. But when they went away from Abraham and Abraham returned to his place it is written “and the two angels came…” And similarly at dawn before man could recognize another man it is written “and the angels urged [him].” And when he [i.e. Lot] was hesitating [so long] that the sun rose [meanwhile] it is written “and the men seized [his hand].”

And I wish that in Fustat [Mitsrayim] 33 years before the present day I could have investigated the writing of Rabbi David Kimhi bar Moshe of blessed memory who explained this passage according to the intention of his father the gaon of blessed memory and shut up the mouth of those who spoke insolent things about him, but I did not deserve it.

What seems correct in my eyes you will find an allusion to it in the parasha ele shemot [Ex 1:1 -3: ?] [where Ibn Ezra] says that the angel is called in the sublime Name in the way of “my Name is in him.”

First of all Eleazar expounds Ibn Ezra’s criticism of the Christian interpretation of Genesis 18. Ibn Ezra raised only an exegetical objection: two of Abraham’s visitors are explicitly identified as angels by the biblical texts. Eleazar puts forward a philosophical objection against the doctrine of trinity: God cannot be qualified by multitude or accidents; therefore the Christian idea of trinity is a philosophic nonsense.

Eleazar points out the similarity of Maimonides’ and Ibn Ezra’s interpretation of Genesis 18 and proceeds to discuss the chronological relation between Ibn Ezra and Maimonides. He concludes correctly that Ibn Ezra could not possibly be influenced by Maimonides.

This is a very important point for him. He refers to the fact that Ibn Ezra strictly adhered to the literal sense of Scripture and ruthlessly rejected the interpretation of the talmudic masters if they failed to meet the requirements of literal exegesis. However, Eleazar argues, in this case Ibn Ezra did not reject the talmudic exegesis according to which the episode happened in vision – at least according to Eleazar’s reading. This means for Eleazar that the interpretation put forward by both the talmudic rabbis and Maimonides is approved even by the strictest critic of biblical exegesis you can think of. This is why Nahmanides’ attack on Maimonides seems to be arrogant and unfounded in Eleazar’s eyes.

662 MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 172 v – 173 r.
At the same time it has to be pointed out Ibn Ezra’s position does not accord with Maimonides’ one so evidently as Eleazar takes for granted. I think it is more natural to interpret Ibn Ezra’s comment saying that God appeared to Abraham in a prophetic vision first and only after this first vision he saw the three men, in fact, angels, visiting him in a second vision. That is to say, only God appeared in prophetic vision to Abraham; the three angels could have easily been angelic bodies created for this purpose in Ibn Ezra’s opinion as well. However, this objection does not come to Eleazar’s mind: he assimilates Ibn Ezra’s view to Maimonides’ one completely.663

It is remarkable how Eleazar uses Ibn Ezra’s authority in the argument. Ibn Ezra is depicted as a faithful exponent of the literal sense who rejects consistently superimposed interpretations. Therefore, if you want to make it sure that your own philosophical interpretation is not far-fetched, that it does not read anything into the text then a good method is to use Ibn Ezra’s commentary as a counter-check. This consideration could be an important motivation for writing supercommentaries on Ibn Ezra for post-Maimonidean philosophers.

Eleazar remarks that Nahmanides’ objections against Maimonides are not very much relevant. He also mentions the fact that he saw in Egypt a manuscript containing David Kimhi’s defense of the Maimonidean interpretation but alas, he could not “investigate” it. Perhaps, he means by this that he had no time to copy the relevant passage from David Kimhi’s commentary on the Torah or that he did not have time to memorize it; therefore he is unable to recollect the relevant points of it. This is an interesting testimony concerning the working conditions of thirteenth-century Jewish philosophers. Philosophical and exegetical works were not always easily accessible. About the possible role of memorization in the reading-culture of medieval Jews we shall speak later.

Eleazar’s implicit answer to Nahmanides’ first (1) objection is discernible in the text. Baking bread and preparing meat for the guests are not superfluous elements in the vision. Due to the perfection of his imaginative faculty Abraham saw the angels as real human beings. Therefore he practiced courtesy and hospitality towards them in his vision as he would have done in the case of real visitors. His good character was expressed in these elements of the vision.

The possible answers to the rest of Nahmanides’ objections are not even implicitly contained in the text. Eleazar is content with saying that the objections are not “deep” enough. He might have replied that Jacob’s limping occurred also only in vision, and that the sight of the angel and the fight with him was so scary because Jacob experienced them while he was awake – it was a hallucination not a dream – whereas his other visions were only dreams.

Further points about Eleazar’s interpretation of prophetic visions are revealed in his supercommentary on Exodus 3: 6. He refers to this passage in the text quoted above with the following words:

And similarly at the verse “And Moses hid his face” (Ex 3: 6) he explains to us that in a prophetic vision the divine intellect was emanated on him [i.e. Abraham] in the imaginative faculty up to the point when he saw by the power of imagination the figure of three men.

However, in Ibn Ezra’s commentary as we know it today there is no reference to Abraham’s vision at all. Ibn Ezra does refer to Jacob’s fight with the angel at Exodus 3: 6 a topic that he does not explain in the commentary on Genesis:

663 The last sentence of the quoted passage can be read as an argument for Eleazar’s interpretation: God appeared to Abraham through the angels who can be called by the Name of God as is learnt from Ibn Ezra’s comment on Exodus 23: 21: “my Name is in him.”
AND MOSES HID HIS FACE similarly to “For I have seen God face to face and I survived” (Gen 32: 31). And the gate of the eye is from the gate of heaven for in one moment it is able to see many images far and nearby. This is not the case with the gate of the ears and nose and taste [lit. “palate”] and touch [lit. “hand”]. And because he saw [God] this is why he hid his face.

Ibn Ezra uses the Biblical Hebrew word *shaar* ‘gate’ as a technical term designating the five senses. The second sentence contains an allusion to Genesis 28: 13 where Jacob uses the phrase “the gate of heaven.” However, apparently there is no allusion to Abraham’s vision.

Eleazar comments:

AND MOSES HID HIS FACE. SIMILARLY TO “FOR I HAVE SEEN GOD…” with the sight of his eyes when his soul was appropriate for the “honor” [kavod] and wondrous images were generated in him as is written “and God’s image he is seeing” And about the gate of hearing they [i.e. the talmudic rabbis] say: “two sounds cannot be heard [at the same time].” And this is the case with the other senses as well.

The words of the sage [Ibn Ezra] have strengthened me to pronounce words that support his words even if I am [fol. 181 r] reluctant to talk about them. And the thing is that I call the heaven and earth to witness that my father of blessed memory used to tell me many times, “my son, do you see the shining sun in this house?” And I said, “No.” And he said, “Look, I see the sun shining on the whole house.” And when I put my hands on my eyes then I saw many wondrous images including the moon and stars. And when I fall into deep sleep quickly an image [appeared] to my eyes and I was sitting. Then I heard a voice whispering or a [biblical] verse or something of its measure and I understood that this is the sentence of Elifaz “and an image is in front of my eyes / whispering and voice I hear” when man is alone in purity and his soul is directed towards the “honor” [kavod]. And according to the degree of man in prophecy will be the degree of the image in him. And this is what [Scripture] says, “And God’s image he is seeing.” And this is an expansion of our words in the parasha “va-yera” [Gen 18: 1 ff.].

Eleazar himself emphasizes that this comment is meant to expound his opinion told at Genesis 18:1.

I think this quotation reveals a very important motivation of Eleazar in defending Maimonides’ interpretation of Genesis 18 against Nahmanides’ criticism and in assimilating Ibn Ezra’s position to Maimonides’ one. Eleazar himself had visionary experiences. In the light of his mystic experiences Maimonides’ interpretation of Genesis 18 and other biblical stories as having taken place in prophetic vision must have been very appealing.

What we are encountering in these texts can be analyzed in terms of Michel Foucault’s notion of “forming a veridical self.” All the protagonists of the debate, Ibn Ezra, Maimonides, Nahmanides, and Eleazar ben Mattityah agree in one fundamental point: Scripture tells the truth. The debated question concerns the nature of the truth told by Scripture and the nature of the self – talking through Scripture – that pronounces the truth.

Nahmanides is of the opinion that the truth related in Genesis 18 and 32 and other biblical passages is of historical nature. That is to say, Scripture relates historical events as they happened in the extra-mental world. The self telling the truth is a natural self: it does not need to have supernatural qualities. Even the wicked people of Sodom were able to see the

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664 MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 180v – 181 r.
angels visiting Lot, Nahmanides reminds his readers. At the same time Nahmanides is aware of the philosophical objections against seeing angels – incorporeal beings – with corporeal eyes. Consequently he develops a theory about angelic bodies created for the purpose of being seen by the corporeal eyes to support his interpretation of the relevant passages. Philosophy does play a role in Nahmanides’ exegesis as well. However, this role is not to decipher the allegoric meaning of angelic characters staging in biblical narratives but to explain how and in what sense angels can have bodies.

Maimonides and Eleazar ben Mattityah hold the view that the truth told in these scriptural texts is of visionary character. The self experiencing and relating these events is not the natural but the prophetic self. The wicked people of Sodom could not see any angels with their corporeal eyes. This is the privilege of spiritually superior persons: the prophets. Philosophy has twofold role in biblical exegesis. It provides the exegetes with a general theory of prophetic vision (“and when the soul is appropriate for the “honor” [kavod] then many images are generated in it” – Eleazar quotes this sentence from Ibn Ezra again and again) and it can give guidelines for allegoric interpretation of the actual visions.

Nahmanides objects that such an interpretation undermines the belief in the biblical stories as historical truth: “these words are contradicting Scripture; it is forbidden even to listen to them not to mention to believe them.” Eleazar finds this objection “not deep” enough but it is not clear from the quoted texts what his answer would be to it. Perhaps another text, written by Nissim ben Moses of Marseille in the first half of the fourteenth century can show us what a Maimonidean philosopher could reply to Nahmanides:

PARASHAT VA-YERA ELAV / And an angel appeared to Abraham and they appeared to him in human form as is said “and behold three men [were standing] above him” From the [point of view of the] multitude I call it a miracle, and in general all what was seen and done happened in prophetic vision. And similarly what is following it [i.e. Abraham’s encounter with the three men] even if it follows it in my opinion all of it [happened in] prophetic vision seen by Abraham. And Lot’s angels and his talks with them and their going to his house and [other] matters and their beating [the people of Sodom] with blindness – all these belong to Abraham’s vision. Because Abraham knew very well the morals of Sodom’s inhabitants and their customs, and in a vision all these things were imagined by him.

And after that Scripture relates what was realized of all these things, that is to say, from all the words of this prophecy and its parables. And that is “and God showered [sulfur] on Sodom and Gomorra” “and He destroyed the cities” “and it happened when God destroyed all the cities of the plain that He sent away Lot from the middle of the destruction…” And it is possible that Abraham revealed him the secret [i.e. that Sodom was to be destroyed] and this is what [Scripture] says, “And God remembered Abraham and He sent Lot away…” that is to say, Abraham’s information was the means of Lot’s escape. Or it is possible that Abraham saw in his prophecy that God helped Lot’s spirit to leave the land before the catastrophe. […] As for the destruction of the cities by fire and sulfur and salt – from the [perspective of the] multitude I call it a miracle, and this happens sometimes at earthquakes when the earth is cleft by its sound [cf. 1 Kings 1: 40] and it can happen that fire and sulfur and salt from the hewing of sulfur are carried by the wind and the earthquake. And this indeed happens when the wind gets strong due to the change in the position. And this is what [Scripture] says, “from God from the heaven.” And thus it happened in our time on an island called Ischia [‘shqlh]666 15 miles from the city of

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666 I am grateful to Johannes Niehoff-Panagiotidis for informing me that Hebrew אשקלה can represent an archaic form of “Ischia,” the name of the well-known island nearby Naples. The text probably refers to the volcanic
Naples [napoli] where there used to be some five thousand houses but it was destroyed and cleft and burnt by sulfur and salt and flaring fire. And big smoke emerges from there up to the present day.\textsuperscript{667}

Nissim ben Moses of Marseille makes a clear distinction between those biblical verses that describe visionary reality and those ones that relate historical events. The later group contains nothing miraculous unless viewed “from the [perspective of the] multitude.” God destroyed Sodom and Gomorrah by sulfur and fire and salt. This sentence describes a natural process: it happens that human settlements are destroyed by volcanic activities. The author can even point to a contemporary example of such an event.

Nissim ben Moses does not question at the same time the divine providence working behind the events. The inhabitants of Sodom and Gomorra deserved well their punishment – and perhaps the same is true of the inhabitants of Ischia nearby Naples. Lot’s escape was definitely due to divine intervention – this is clearly stated by Scripture.

However, Nissim ben Moses insists that Scripture does not specify in what way Lot was saved. The story about the angels visiting his house appeared only in Abraham’s imagination. It is a visionary image of a historical reality that could have taken place in many possible ways: Abraham admonished Lot to leave the city; God sent a vision to Lot as well commanding him to escape, etc. The author cannot decide which of the options reflect the actual events; however, he is quite confident that the sentence “and it happened when God destroyed all the cities of the plain that He sent away Lot from the middle of the destruction…” describes the historical event, namely Lot’s actual escape from Sodom.

Therefore, the implicit answer to Nahmanides can be summarized in the following way: It is possible to draw a clear demarcation between those biblical passages that refer to visionary experiences and those passages that simply relate historical events in Scripture. All the events related in the texts belonging to the second group must be believed to have taken place in extra-mental reality. As for the events related in the texts belonging to the first group there is no reason to do so.

Still, nonetheless, visionary texts are true in the sense that they can reflect historical reality – Abraham’s vision about the sins of Sodom and Lot’s escape from the town did correspond to actual sins committed by the Sodomites and to Lot’s actual escape to some degree. Moreover, prophetic visions can also reflect non-historical (philosophic-scientific) truth.

However, the relationship between the words and the realities signified by them is much more complicated in prophetic visions than in the case of the historical passages. A human figure appearing to Abraham can be the corporeal image of the active intellect made up by Abraham’s imagination according to Eleazar ben Mattityah. At the same time it is not necessary that every element of the vision corresponds to some invisible reality: the bread baked by Sarah the meat prepared by Abraham has no function besides demonstrating Abraham’s hospitality towards the guests even if it is an imagined hospitality towards imagined guests. Allegorical interpretation is one way of determining the truth enunciated by prophetic visions. But it is not the only way. Abraham’s hospitality, the Sodomites’ sins, Lot’s escape are all prophetic visions expressing historical reality in Eleazar ben Mattityah’s and Nissim ben Moses’ interpretation: nonetheless, they are not capable of allegoric analysis.

Nissim ben Moses introduces a further dimension into the topic what we called the formation of a veridical self. He makes a distinction between the perspective of the multitude

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\textsuperscript{667} MS Florence, BML, Plut. I. 50, fol. 46 r.
and that of the educated / enlightened / philosophers. The historical events related in Genesis 18-19 are miraculous only from the perspective of the multitude. The philosopher who is familiar with Aristotle’s *Meteorology* and Maimonides’ theory of prophecy will easily identify Sodom’s destruction as a natural catastrophe and the appearance of the angels as prophetic vision.

Nissim’s opinion can be reconstructed in Foucault’s terms in the following way: The self that recognizes the truth is not the self of those people who belong to the multitude. Education and philosophical knowledge are the preconditions for the correct estimations of historical and natural events happening in the contemporary world or on the pages of the Holy Scriptures. Nissim has a key premise: The events related in the Bible and taking place today belong to the same type; this is why an analogy can be drawn between Sodom’s and Ischia’s fate. The same self that is able to recognize and state the truth concerning the present day is the one that can recognize and formulate the truth of Scripture.

**Realism in Exegesis: The Evidence of the Supercommentaries**

This conviction leads to certain “realism” in biblical exegesis. Pieces of truth observed in contemporary (medieval) reality can be used for understanding biblical texts. This was certainly not only Nissim ben Moses’ opinion. For example, in Joseph Caspi’s supercommentary on Ibn Ezra concerning the Joseph-story (Genesis 37: 4) we read:

[And they were unable to tell him] **EVEN SHALOM** that is to say, even to greet him, that is to say, even if Joseph told them ‘shalom!’ when he saw them [i.e. his brothers] they did not reply to him anything. And this is like the proverbial expression [lit. “the custom of the world in saying”] ‘I don’t talk to him except for the greetings’ meaning that the speaker does not want to reveal his hatred as is in his heart to the other. But these ones [Joseph’s brothers] did not talk to him at all. And this is similar to what is written in the book of Kings: “And Absalom did not talk to Amnon bad or good for Absalom hated Amnon because he raped Tamar, his sister.” [fol. 23 v] And [Scripture] said this because so far we have not found that they were talking badly about him and it has not been said so far that they were unable, but [Scripture] has said [only] that they did not talk to his peace. But when [Scripture] says “and they were unable” this was the turning point [haftlagia], that is to say, their hatred grew so much that none of them could answer him shalom any more even whisperingly.

The young (seventeen years old) Joseph Caspi integrates his psychological observations into his exegesis of the Joseph-story with an explicit reference to a proverbial expression that must have been common in late thirteenth-century Provence.

Commenting on the “frogs” invading Egypt as one of the ten plagues Eleazar ben Mattityah describes the crocodiles he saw in the Nile when he was in Egypt and proposes the idea that the “frogs” mentioned in the Bible refer in fact to crocodiles:

Some people say [that the Biblical Hebrew word] **tsefardea** means a species of fish living in the Nile of Egypt and it is called [in Arabic] **al-tahmas** Its shape is like human shape, it has hands and legs and its skin is of many colors and it is three or four

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668 Eleazar Gutwirth makes valuable observations about Joseph Bonfils’ “realism.” Cf. his “Fourteenth Century Supercommentaries on Abraham Ibn Ezra,” in *Abraham Ibn Ezra y su tiempo*, 147-154. However, his claim that realism in biblical exegesis was a distinctively Spanish cultural tradition seems to me completely unfounded. Provencal, Italian, and Byzantine supercommentators were no less realist than their Spanish colleagues.

669 MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 184, fol. 23 r-v; cf. MS Vat. ebr. 106, fol. 40 r-v.
fingers thick, and its length is 30 or 40 cubits. It is not afraid of any living creature but comes out [of the river] to the dry land and catches whatever is good in its eyes and then returns to the Nile. 670

Bonet refers to the “general custom of the monarchs” when he explains Abraham’s encounter with Abimelek, the king of the Philistines:

Since it is an ancient custom [fol. 88 r] that the sages of the generation are at the courts of the kings the sages that were in Abimelek’s house put premises like the aforementioned ones together and drew argumentative conclusions in order to contradict Abraham’s opinion… 671

Commenting on the phrase “the house of slavery” in Exodus 13: 3 Bonet rejects Ibn Ezra’s interpretation and explains the passage by referring to the contemporary practice of discrimination against the Christians’ houses in Islamic countries:

“FROM THE HOUSE OF SLAVERY” FOR [THE EGYPTIANS] BEHAVED WITH THEM AS IF THEY WERE SLAVES I wonder why the sage [Ibn Ezra] did not explain precisely the genitive construction “house of [slavery]” for his explanation fails to highlight [fol. 105 v] the genitive construction. It seems to me that the houses of Israel were marked as different from the houses of the Egyptians by the outlook of their doors and by their lowness. These things were not imposed on the Egyptians’ houses that they had the form of freemen’s houses in order that everybody should know that a slave lives there [in the Israelites’ houses] as is the law [nimus] today in the land of Ishmael concerning the houses of the Christians who live in their land. So this is the genitive construction “house of slavery” wherever [it occurs] in the Torah. 672

All these texts document the “realism” of the Ibn Ezra supercommentators by which I mean the assumption that contemporary experiences can provide the key for understanding biblical texts. This principle is by no ways self evident in Jewish tradition. One can contrast for example Rashi’s midrashic exegesis of the frogs of Exodus with Eleazar’s solution quoted above:

AND THE FROG CAME there was only one frog and [the Egyptians] struck at it and it would split apart into various teeming swarms – this is the midrashic sense. And the literal sense is that the swarming of the frogs is the reason for the singular form. 673

Traditional midrashic literature is rich in such explanations where an apparently minor feature of Hebrew grammar or style (“the frog” in the singular instead of the expected “the frogs” in the plural in the present example [Exodus 8: 2]) is taken as an allusion to a miraculous or strange event not related explicitly by Scripture. In midrashic exegesis the rule is to discover further aspects of the well-known biblical miracles and to look for further miracles alluded to in the biblical texts. Traditional exegesis attempts to maximize the supernatural element in the biblical narratives.

The opposite is true of philosophic exegesis. Medieval Jewish philosophers usually did not deny the possibility of miracles. But they did their best to minimize the role of

670 MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 186 r.
671 MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 88 r.
672 MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 105 r-v.
673 Rashi ad Exodus 8: 2.
miracles in biblical narratives. “A simpleton believes everything” according to Solomon’s Proverbs (14: 15) quoted by Hay gaon already in the eleventh century when he criticized popular stories about wondrous events. In the opinion of medieval Jewish philosophers it was the inclination of vulgar and uneducated people to see miracles in everything. On the other hand it was a sign of good education and sharp intellect to reserve the name ‘miracle’ only to those events that indeed deserved it. The attitude to the miracles was perceived as a watershed between the educated and uneducated people by some twelfth-century Latin Christian authors as well.

In sum, the medieval Jewish philosophers believed that the same self that can recognize the truth today is able to recognize the truth of the Bible as well. It is the philosophically educated self that is able to understand what is happening in the world around us both in terms of natural history, politics, ethnography or human psychology. The multitude and the traditionalists are all naïve persons who do not understand reality. Accession to truth is denied to their selves. Therefore, biblical exegesis “according to the truth” to quote Maimonides’ famous words from the introduction of GP is the job of the philosophically educated self – not the job of the traditionalist or the vulgar.

However, the situation is slightly more complicated. The “philosophically educated self” certainly has access to the truth available in Aristotelian philosophy and natural sciences. But is this all what the Bible is about? Is the divine message simply an improved version of Aristotelianism?

Nissim ben Moses learnt from Aristotelian natural sciences how to understand the destruction of Sodom in terms of natural history. But the biblical story had a further aspect not questioned or doubted by Nissim for a moment: it was due to divine providence that Lot escaped in time from Sodom. Can this lesson be learnt from Aristotelian natural sciences alone? I think no medieval Jewish philosopher was of this opinion. Divine providence is evidenced rather by Abraham’s vision. It is the prophet, not the philosophically educated who has access to this dimension of reality. And this dimension of reality was by far the most interesting and important for the medieval Jewish philosophers, because this dimension was the source of hope for salvation.

Some of the medieval Jewish philosophers, Eleazar ben Mattityah among them, certainly had visionary experiences. These experiences were believed to open a window to a further aspect of reality that cannot be understood and demonstrated in terms of technical philosophy. Medieval Jewish philosophers did not doubt the possibility, the authenticity, and the relevance of such experiences. It was part of their “realism” to look for visionary experiences in biblical texts as well.

Denying the Historicity of Miracles

A further very interesting testimony about interpreting biblical stories as taking place in imagination is to be found in Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara’s supercommentary. Commenting on the Decalogue (Exodus 20: 1) Ibn Ezra rejects the traditionalist interpretation according to which the words ‘remember’ [zakhor] and ‘keep’ [shamor] were sounded simultaneously on the Mount Sinai. The text of the commandment concerning the Shabbat is different in the two versions of the Decalogue: in Exodus 20: 8 we read “remember [zakhor] the day of Shabbat” whereas in Deuteronomy 5: 12 we read “keep [shamor] the day of Shabbat.” According to the traditionalist interpretation the two versions were pronounced simultaneously when God revealed the Decalogue.

Ibn Ezra adduces a number of arguments against this interpretation. One of them is the following:

And the most serious objection: the wise ones know that all the miracles of Moses our master of blessed memory have some partial resemblance \([\textit{dimmayon}]\) in nature, but this miracle has not. And the wise will understand this.\(^{676}\)

Shlomo IbnYaish of Guadalajara comments:

I heard the [following] explanation from my lord, R[abbi] Meir b[en] R[abbi] David of blessed memory \([\textit{hk}\,\textit{m}]\): “All the miracles and signs that were done by Moses have some partial resemblance / imagination \([\textit{dimmayon}]\).” The intended meaning is: “[were done] through imagination.” Not that it was true but that it seemed to happen. And if even the other [miracles by Moses] did not [take place in reality] how could this one [take place in reality]?! This is why he says, “And the wise will understand this.”\(^{678}\)

It is possible that Rabbi Meir ben David was the father of Shlomo Ibn Yaish or his personal tutor. The euphemistic formula \(\textit{hk}\,\textit{m}\) (translated as “of blessed memory” in the text) is to be resolved as \(\textit{hareni kapparat mishkavo}\) “I am the atonement for his lying.” Rashi explains the meaning of this formula: “the trials that come upon me should be for his atonement […] and this is an honorific expression, when somebody mentions his father or master after the latter’s death one has to say this.”\(^{679}\) Leopold Zunz writes that this formula was used especially during the first year after the decease of the father or master.\(^{680}\)

Moritz Steinschneider identifies the Meir ben David mentioned by Shlomo Ibn Yaish with the author of a grammatical work written in Provence in the first half of the fourteenth century.\(^{681}\) In any case it seems to be quite certain that the person referred to flourished in the times preceding the Black Death.

A reference to the “unspeakable things” that certain philosophers proposed concerning the revelation on Mount Sinai in a polemic document from the years 1305-1306 written in Provence might point to the same thesis represented by this text: some of the Jewish philosophers in early fourteenth-century Provence denied the historicity of the miracles taking place on the Mount Sinai:

The heresy has reached such a point that one of those preachers misled by the intellect loudly proclaimed that anyone who believes that the sun stood still for Joshua is simply wrong, a fool who believes in what is impossible. Concerning the voice heard at Sinai, such slander was uttered that all who hear it would have to rend their garments, and all who repeat it would need to make atonement. We have heard many such things about these pernicious men who have all but stripped the Torah of its simple meaning, leaving it naked and bare.\(^{682}\)

\(^{676}\) The word can mean “imagination” as well.

\(^{677}\) Long Commentary on Exodus 20: 1.

\(^{678}\) MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 21 v.

\(^{679}\) Rashi ad Sukka 20 a, s. v. “\textit{hareni kapparat.}” Cf. also Shulhan arukh, Yore Dea, 272: 28.


\(^{681}\) Cf. Steinschneider, CB, 508; see on this more in the introduction to part one.

The “slander” concerning the “voice heard at Sinai” that the author is reluctant to repeat could easily be Meir ben David’s interpretation of Ibn Ezra’s objections against the traditional solution of the “remember” versus “keep” problem leading to the conclusion that all the miracles done by Moses happened only in imagination. This thesis was certainly considered blasphemous by the traditionalist opponents of philosophy.  

A modern reader of Meir ben David’s sentence might be very much tempted to analyze it in terms of Straussian theories about esoteric style and denial of traditional doctrines. I think this temptation should be resisted in this case as well. Medieval critics of the Jewish philosophers certainly perceived such statements as “unspeakable” heresies. Modern scholars should not follow their example in condemning the medieval philosophers as heretics nor to celebrate them as early freethinkers and predecessors of Spinoza and latter biblical criticism.  

Nothing in the quoted text says or implies that Scripture did not tell the truth about the events that happened on Mount Sinai. It was an axiom for the medieval philosophers no matter how radical ideas they held that every sentence of the Scripture if understood correctly is true. The problem was how to understand correctly the sentences of the Scripture. They had to construct both the truth enunciated in the biblical texts and the self that is able to enunciate and to understand that truth.  

Many medieval Jewish philosophers thought that it was wise to conceal some of their ideas from the sight of the uneducated masses or the traditionalist leaders of the community. However, this was not the central problem of their thinking. The genuine problem was to achieve truth not to hide it. Consequently, modern historians of philosophy should concentrate on the question what sorts of truth medieval Jewish philosophers tried to achieve and in what ways they hoped to attain it. Esotericism is an undeniable phenomenon of medieval Jewish philosophical texts; but perhaps it is not the most important and most interesting one.  

Meir ben David’s sentence about Moses’ miracle should be interpreted in the context of “realism” in biblical exegesis evidenced by other Ibn Ezra supercommentaries and biblical commentaries from the period. The supercommentator, Meir ben David, does his best to understand the biblical narrative as enunciating a truth about reality. He assumes that the truth enunciated in the Bible is not fundamentally different from the truth available today. If Aristotle could witness the Exodus he would have seen nothing supernatural. All what happened is that a nation regained its freedom after centuries of oppression and lead by a wise leader, Moses, emigrated from the land of Egypt. At the Mount Sinai the wise leader gave laws to his people as happened many times in the history of other peoples as well.  

This is what an Aristotle, a philosopher could perceive of the events. However, for Meir ben David the story has a further dimension not visible from a purely philosophical perspective. The people of Israel were liberated by divine grace. Moses was not only a wise politician but a prophet as well. However, this dimension of the story is accessible only through prophetic vision. The self who can see the miracles of the Exodus is not the natural self, not even a philosophically educated self, but a spiritually transformed self: a prophet. Maimonides insists in GP II, 33 that as long as the people of Israel saw the theophany on Mount Sinai they must have turned into prophets.  

Ibn Ezra reconstructed the events of the Exodus in the framework of astrological history. The movement of the stars determined that Israel would be subjugated in Egypt for  

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683 Saperstein (ibid., 381, footnote) suggests that the reference is to a less-known letter by Maimonides where the opinion is mentioned that the voice heard at Sinai existed only in prophetic imagination. I think it is more probable that Meir ben David’s sentence quoted in Shlomo ibn Yaish’s supercommentary represents the condemned opinion.  

684 Meir ben David’s opinion is quoted and rejected as a scandalous one in a late fifteenth-early sixteenth-century anonymous supercommentary: MS Paris, BNF, hebr. 190, fol. 128 v.
many more centuries. However, God interfered with the normal course of nature and history and liberated His people in spite of the astrological fate.

In general, according to Ibn Ezra one way of accounting for failures in astrological prognoses is to evoke divine interference with natural order. God has mercy on his creatures this is why a predicted catastrophe does not occur.

In other words, Ibn Ezra’s theory of the Exodus is another instant of “realism” in biblical exegesis. The true miracle of the Exodus was not the ten plagues but the fact that God changed the fate determined by the movements of the stars. And such miracles were believed by Ibn Ezra to take place in the contemporary world as well. What was no longer accessible in the opinion of most medieval Jewish philosophers was the vision at a prophetic level that could provide us with an authentic commentary on the miracles happening in our world. Medieval Jews saw visions, but most of them did not consider these visions to be on par with the prophecies related in the Bible.

Ibn Ezra’s theory of the Exodus was well understood and accepted by the early supercommentators. Following the footsteps of Ibn Ezra Sen Bonet de Lunel proposed an original theory about the relationship between natural law (meaning astrological determinism in the present context), divine providence and divine grace. The movement of the stars determined certain period of time that the Israelites had to spend as slaves in Egypt. This was understood by Bonet purely in terms of mechanic causation. Divine providence also decided about Israel’s subjugation to Egypt not in terms of mechanic causation but of teleological planning. God decided that Israel had to suffer in Egypt in order to achieve better character. However, the time of slavery assigned by divine providence was shorter than the time determined by the movements of the stars. This difference between divine planning and natural causation opened the possibility for divine grace. Once the time decided by divine providence was over God was ready to have mercy on the people of Israel and liberate them before the time determined by astrological fate was to pass. Human freedom now had a role in history: since the Israelites turned to God for help in honest prayers God decided to overpower the stars’ influence in history and to save his people.  

Other supercommentators did not present so refined theories but they did not question Ibn Ezra’s basic notion: the Exodus was a divine intervention into natural and human history.

The opinion of medieval Jewish philosophers can be contrasted with that of Spinoza. The seventeenth-century philosopher thought that biblical stories had little to do with historical reality: they were invented by uneducated people led by their imagination rather than sound judgment and reliable historical information. Spinoza’s question is what the documentary value of biblical reports about miraculous events is, and his answer is that it is zero. In the possible spiritual value of the stories he was not interested.

On the other hand, a medieval Jewish philosopher might have agreed with Spinoza that the miracles reported in the Bible did not happen in the extra-mental world, although this conviction was probably far from being widespread. However, even such a “radical” Jewish philosopher would insist that the miraculous stories are not just conceit of vulgar minds but prophetic visions of great spiritual value. Joseph Caspi and Moses Narboni, two fourteenth-century philosophers who are often depicted as radical Averroists in present day histories of philosophy both emphasized the intellectual and spiritual superiority of Moses. Whatever was shown to Moses in prophecy had unquestionable truth for these philosophers.

There is no reason to believe that Meir ben David quoted in Shlomo Ibn Yaish’s supercommentary was an exception to the rule. His denial of the historicity of Moses’
miracles should not be assimilated to Spinoza’s rejection of miracles. It is much more probable that Meir ben David did not deny that the Exodus was a miracle, a divine interference into the course of history. His point is not to question a fundamental belief of Judaism but to call the attention to the fact that the miracle is much more complicated and mysterious than it is assumed by uneducated people. “The wise will understand” that many of the events related in the Scripture took place only in prophetic imagination. This does not mean that they are fables invented by uneducated people as Spinoza thought in the seventeenth century. On the contrary, they reflect the imagination of the wisest man ever lived on the earth, Moses. Therefore, they certainly have some authority in understanding what happened to the Pharaoh, Egypt, and the people of Israel at the time of the Exodus.

The discussion has led us to the recognition of a very important theme in medieval Jewish biblical exegesis: how the events related in the Bible should be understood maintaining the belief that they are true (prophetic vision versus historical events) and how the self speaking through the Bible should be interpreted (the prophet versus ordinary people). A further aspect of the problem is how the self that is able to understand correctly the Bible is to be constructed (the “wise” reader versus the vulgar one). This topic requires separate and systematic treatment. Before doing so we shall consider some further characteristics of the biblical exegesis evidenced in the early Ibn Ezra supercommentaries.
Chapter 3: Allegory, Publicly Displayed Knowledge, and the Medieval “I”

From Philo to Maimonides: Theories of Allegoric Exegesis

In Epistle 108 Seneca interprets a line from Virgil’s *Georgica*: “fugit irreparabiliter tempus.” Seneca contrasts two ways of exegesis: that of the grammarian and that of the philosopher. The grammarian is involved in philological exegesis. He will point to the stylistic features of the text and analyze it in terms of Virgil’s usage of words and grammatical constructions in other texts.

This is not the philosopher’s way according to Seneca. The philosopher should rather concentrate on the meaning of the sentence. “Time runs irrecoverably;” our best days have already passed and even worse days might be in waiting for us. Therefore, we have to do all our best to prepare against the trials of fortune to strengthen our morals.

The knowledge of the grammarian is rejected by Seneca as vain and useless knowledge. Competence in philology has only a very limited relevance for virtuous life. The honorific name ‘truth’ is to be bestowed only on that sort of correct information that can help us to make ourselves better.

Michel Foucault analyzes Seneca’s words in the context of forming a veridical self in Hellenistic and early imperial philosophy. The truth contained in Virgil’s sentence is not accessible to everybody. The grammarian, the philologist will not be able to perceive the true dimensions of the text. It is the philosopher’s possibility and duty to meditate on the meaning of the sentence, to engrave it into his mind “as if it was a divine oracle,” to integrate its meaning into his life, to measure his life against the text as if the later was “a mirror”, in one word, to make the sentence to tell the truth.

Foucault argues that the philosophical discourse of the first two centuries of our era was centered on the notion of taking care of oneself (*epimeleia tu heautou* or *cura sui*). “Truth” was conceived not only as argumentative and technical knowledge of propositions but as a force that is capable to transform the self of its holder. Truth must be integrated into one’s personal life; it has to be used for building one’s self.

An elder contemporary of Seneca, Philo of Alexandria described the life of a Jewish religious group with references to the concept of “taking care of one’s soul” (*epimeleia tēs psukhēs*) in his *De vita contemplativa*. It is the thesis of Valentin Nikiprowetzky that in this work Philo characterizes his own approach to philosophy and biblical exegesis. This thesis is widely accepted today among Philo-scholars. The following paragraph of the work is quite revealing concerning Philo’s image of biblical exegesis:

And these explanations of the sacred scriptures are delivered by mystic expressions in allegories, for the whole of the law appears to these men to resemble a living animal, and its express commandments seem to be the body, and the invisible meaning concealed under and lying beneath the plain words resembles the soul, in which the rational soul begins most excellently to contemplate what belongs to itself, as in a mirror, beholding in these very words the exceeding beauty of the sentiments, and unfolding and explaining the symbols, and bringing the secret meaning naked to the light to all who are able by the light of a slight illumination to perceive what is unseen by what is visible.
I think Philo’s words can be interpreted in the context of the early imperial ideal of *cura sui*, “taking care of one’s self”. Philo accepts the Platonic doctrine according to which human being consists of body and soul. Therefore, taking care of a human being is taking care of its body and soul. The “express commandments” of the Torah take care of the bodily welfare of Israel: Philo emphasizes the importance of not to neglect the commandments by referring to the body’s rights:

Nay, we should look on all these outward observances as resembling the body, and their inner meaning as resembling the soul. It follows that, exactly as we have to take thought for the body, because it is the abode of the soul, so we must pay heed to the letter of the laws. If we keep and observe these, we shall gain a clearer conception of those things of which these are the symbols; and besides that we shall not incur the censure of the many and the charges they are sure to bring against us.\(^691\)

However, the divine law would not be perfect in Philo’s eyes if it did not take care of the soul as well. This is why it is necessary to suppose another layer of meaning in the text. The allegoric sense of Scripture shows the readers how to take care of their souls. Through allegoric interpretation “the rational soul begins most excellently to contemplate what belongs to itself, as in a mirror.”

The original context in which Philo of Alexandria introduced allegorical interpretation into Jewish biblical exegesis was the philosophical culture of the high strata of Roman society in the early imperial period. According to Foucault’s interpretation – which I find convincing – this culture was centered on the theory and practice of *cura sui* or *epimeleia tu heautu*. ‘Truth’ was constructed as correct information that is meaningful for one’s taking care of oneself. Texts were made to tell this sort of truth. What Philo did with the Torah is analogous to a great extent to what Seneca did with Virgil’s Georgica. The function of the allegoric sense was to provide the reader with a “mirror” while taking care of his or her soul. Allegoric interpretation was a spiritual exercise.

Although it is not clear through what channels, the Philonic definition certainly found its way to medieval Jewish writers as well. In his *Epistle to Yemen* Maimonides contrasts the true religion – Judaism – with the false replicas – Christianity and Islam. The former resembles a human being with body and soul whereas the replicas are like monkeys or statues: they have the outward appearance of a human being but they lack soul or intellect. Similarly, Christianity and Islam has laws, rituals, feasts, and religious doctrines sometimes very similar to Judaism’s ones. But these things have an “inner sense” (*al-bāṭin*) in Judaism what is not the case with Christianity and Islam.

Maimonides refers to Aristotle’s doctrine of first and second perfections. The first perfection concerns the body whereas the second perfection concerns the soul. Accordingly, Maimonides argues, the outer sense of the religious practices and texts serve the purpose of the first perfection whereas the inner meaning is to bring the believers to the second perfection. Christianity and Islam fail to achieve the same results in Maimonides’ opinion.\(^692\)

In the introductory chapter of GP Maimonides applies the same distinction to the various senses of biblical parables. Quoting Solomon’s Proverbs (25: 11: “A word fitly spoken is like apples of gold in settings of silver”) Maimonides compares the inner meaning to the golden apple and the outward sense to the silver settings. The outward sense concerns

\(^{691}\) Philo, *De migratione Abraham*, 92-93.
the well-being of the society. It is intended primarily for the benefit of the multitudes who are incapable of understanding higher truth. The inner sense concerns intellectual perfection. It is intended for the few elected wise.

Thus, Philo’s legacy is evidently present in Maimonides’ account of the “inner” sense of Scripture. However, there are important differences as well. Maimonides objected to the idea of attributing secret senses to every passage of the Torah whereas Philo consistently sought for allegoric sense concerning the whole text. For example, Maimonides thought that Jacob’s dream of the ladder (Genesis 28) definitely had an allegoric sense but he would not think of interpreting the patriarch himself as a symbol of virtues and all the stories about Jacob as allegories concerning virtues as Philo did.⁶⁹³

The reason for this becomes evident if we compare Maimonides’ argumentative strategy in the Epistle to Yemen to Philo’s one. Philo concludes from the pre-supposed perfection of the divine law to the existence of allegoric sense. The divine law is perfect; therefore it must have an allegoric sense. Philo makes repeatedly the claim that it is impossible to think that this or that verse of the Torah concerns only the body and not the soul as well. God / Moses / the divine law cares much more for the soul than for the body; this is why we must suppose that an invisible reality is waiting to be discovered under the veil of visible things in virtually every sentence of the Pentateuch. Polemics against the New Testament or the Koran was obviously not a consideration for Philo for the simple reason that these corpora of sacred literature did not exist in his time.

Maimonides’ argumentative strategy is the opposite. The Torah has an inner sense that brings its reader into intellectual perfection; therefore the Torah is the divine law rather than the New Testament or the Koran. The existence of inner sense cannot be deduced from the presupposed perfection of the Torah; for the conclusion to be proved from the existence of the inner sense is nothing else but the perfection of the Torah. Therefore, Maimonides has to find some independent criteria for claiming the existence of an inner sense in the Torah. And as a matter of fact these criteria will not permit him to attribute inner sense to every biblical sentence.

**Allegorical Exegesis and the Art of Memory**

The Maimonidean theory of allegorical sense outlined above was generally accepted by the Ibn Ezra supercommentators and was a common point of reference for them. We have seen for example Eleazar ben Mattityah’s interpretation of the three angels appearing to Abraham in Genesis 18 in the previous chapter. Eleazar argues that two of the angels stand for Abraham’s moral perfection and perfected imaginative faculty – both of them are preconditions for prophetic experiences according to Maimonides’ theory accepted by Eleazar – whereas the third angel, the most noble of them is a visible symbol of the Active Intellect. This interpretation invented by Eleazar is in accordance with Maimonides’ key ideas. It can be described as a realization of the “Maimonidean research program.”

However, it seems to me that new elements appeared in thirteenth-century Provence that cannot be accounted for as natural developments within the Maimonidean paradigm. It is not easy to set exact geographical and temporal borders for the phenomena described below. I have the impression that the innovative center was Provence and the development cumulated at the turn of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and that Italian and oriental Jews were much less influenced by the new ideas. Further researches are needed to clarify the exact coordinates the innovation which I cannot carry out here.

⁶⁹³ Cf. GP, introduction and II, 25.
Post-Maimonidean philosophers in late thirteenth-early fourteenth-century Provence extended the circle of biblical texts capable of allegoric interpretation far beyond the master’s original ideas. This was partly inspired by Ibn Ezra’s influence: Unlike Maimonides, Ibn Ezra was inclined to attribute astrological, astro-magical or philosophical significance to biblical commandments and sacred objects.\footnote{Cf. Dov Schwartz: Studies on Astral Magic in Medieval Jewish Thought (Leiden and Boston: E. J. Brill, 2005), 9-54.}

However, the key element of the new development cannot be deduced from Ibn Ezra’s works either. Provencal philosophers started to allegorize biblical narratives. For many of them virtually any narrative within the Torah was of allegoric sense, although there was no consensus in this question: Gersonides, for example disagreed with those exegetes who interpreted Adam’s three sons allegorically. On the other hand Joseph Caspi, Levi ben Abraham of Villefranche and Sen Bonet de Lunel did propose such interpretations.\footnote{Cf. Colette Sirat: “La méthode d’exégèse,” in Les méthodes de travail de Gersonide, 219-222.}

The spread of allegoric interpretation in late thirteenth-early fourteenth-century Provence was evidently one cause of the second great outburst of the “Maimonidean controversy” in 1305-1306. Traditionalists attacked “the philosophers” for allegorizing away the sacred history of Israel. Thus allegoric interpretation was put into a polemic context different from Maimonides’ one. For Maimonides claiming the allegoric sense of biblical texts was a way of establishing Judaism’s superiority over Christianity and Islam. In the early fourteenth century the allegoric sense became a battle-cry in an inner Jewish controversy between traditionalists and philosophers.

We have seen how Samuel Ibn Tibbon interpreted the story about the tower of Babel allegorically with the qualification that the events narrated about it did happen literally as well. This approach was applied to many other biblical stories. The phrase ‘according to the hidden/esoteric way’ (al derekh ha-nistar or al derekh ha-hissatter) was coined already in the thirteenth-century to signify this type of allegoric method.\footnote{The phrase al ha-derekh ha-nistar appears in Eleazar ben Mattityah’s supercommentary (MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 169 r).}

Reading a biblical text al derekh ha-nistar did not imply necessarily that the historicity of the text was questioned or it was taken to relate a prophetic vision. We have seen an allegoric interpretation of the seven nations of Canaan quoted in Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara’s supercommentary in a previous chapter:

Or it is possible to say that the word ‘Canaanite’ [refers] to one of the seven powers that are in the body, [and it] was ruling the land due to the spoiling effect of the air [baavur ippus ha-avir]. For it is well-known that the seven nations [that ruled Canaan before the Israelites’ conquest] are the seven powers of the body according to the esoteric sense [lit. “according to the hidden way – al derek ha-nistar”].\footnote{MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 5 r-v.}

There is no reason to believe that the author of this interpretation questioned the historical fact that the Canaanites were on the Holy Land when Abraham migrated there. Nor is it implied that the biblical verse relates a prophetic vision. The reasons for the author’s supposing an allegoric sense must be sought for elsewhere.

The solution that recommends itself is that the interpretation in question was inspired by Ibn Ezra’s remark “it has a secret” [yesh lo sod] in the passage (ad Gen 12: 6) which is explained in the quoted sentences. However, the situation is more complex. The author’s conviction about the allegoric significance of the seven nations was apparently independent of this particular sentence of Ibn Ezra. The author writes, “For it is well-known that the seven
nations are the seven powers of the body…” He refers to an already existing exegetical tradition in order to understand Ibn Ezra’s remark. He does not invent the allegoric interpretation in order to explain Ibn Ezra’s text.

At the same time it is possible, in fact, probable that Ibn Ezra’s commentary was used for justifying the new method of allegoric interpretation. Provencal philosophers happily used the already well-established authority of Ibn Ezra to back their ideas. This could easily be an important factor in the renewed interest in Ibn Ezra’s commentary in the first half of the fourteenth century.

A proper evaluation of the increase in allegoric exegesis concerning biblical narratives in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries lies behind the subject of this paper. In the following paragraphs I will suggest only one idea that might help to understand the background of allegoric exegesis better.

Mary Carruthers in her *The Book of Memory* described the many-faceted role of learned or artificial memory in medieval Latin civilization. It is far from being self-evident that her results can be simply applied to medieval Jewish civilization as well. No systematic study has been devoted to the possible presence or absence of an art of memory in Jewish learning during the Middle Ages so far. Therefore, the following suggestions are built on rather shaky grounds. Nonetheless, I think they are worthy of consideration.

Carruthers argues that in Latin Christendom a basic technique of memorizing texts was to build memory images. In these images visual elements were systematically associated with mental objects. The activity of “reading” a book did not consist only of an elementary understanding of the text but also of “chewing” and “digesting” it through memorization. In other words, for a medieval Latin reader it was a basic intellectual activity to appropriate a text through analyzing it into its components and rebuild it in the form of visual images. The correspondence between visual symbol and mental unit was natural and self-evident in their eyes.

If we suppose that medieval Jewish philosophers practiced an art of memory similar to their Latin Christian colleagues, then they trust in the allegoric method of interpretation is easier to explain. From our modern perspective allegoric interpretations often seem far-fetched, ungrounded, arbitrary or even ridiculous. However, for those people whose mental set was built up of “memory images” the strong relationship between ideas and images must have been natural. Even those biblical narratives that were never interpreted allegorically by Maimonides and Ibn Ezra could easily be perceived as memory images waiting for decoding. These narratives certainly inspired the imagination and the intellect of the medieval Jewish readers to re-discover the messages encoded in them. Maybe the reason for this was that this sort of activity – building and decoding memory images – was an organic part of their everyday intellectual practice.

Moreover, Maimonides’ theory of prophetic vision was generally accepted by post-Maimonidean philosophers. This theory claimed that prophecy was an emanation of the intellect on the imagination. What the prophet apprehends in his ecstasy is translated into the language of “imagination,” that is to say, visual symbols. Influenced by Leo Strauss’ famous essay modern historians of medieval Jewish philosophy usually emphasize the political implications of Maimonides’ theory. The prophet publishes only a simulacra of the truth which is useful for the society. He keeps his true opinions for himself and for the few elected who deserve hearing it. No doubt, Maimonides’ theory has social and political aspects. However, it is possible to view the evidence from a different angle.

I think the true legacy of this Maimonidean theory for post-Maimonidean philosophers was the implication that the link between thoughts and images is natural. Associating

thoughts to visual symbols is not a matter of human convention because this is the key mechanism of prophecy, and prophetic imagery is not invented by human beings but due to the influence of the Active Intellect.

As we have seen in the previous part, the author of *Ruah hen* (middle of the thirteenth century) compared prophecy to geometry. As a corporeal line that we draw on a blackboard is a corporeal image of a mental entity, namely an Euclidean line, similarly the visions seen by the prophets are corporeal images of incorporeal things. If you want to understand Euclid correctly you always have to substitute the corporeal images with the Euclidean objects. The same rule applies to the correct reading of prophetic visions.

In other words, Maimonides’ theory of prophecy was not received by the *Ruah hen* in the context of a political theory about concealing and revealing the truth. It was received in the context of a scientific research program that strove to decipher the corporeal images of traditional literature (both biblical and rabbinical) in terms of incorporeal entities. The question for the author of the *Ruah hen* is not how to conceal the truth from the vulgar but how to understand correctly the prophetic texts. Political considerations are subordinated to this basic aim: if you ask, why do the prophets speak in parables at all, then the social-political necessity for concealing the truth might be invoked as one possible answer.699

It is but typical that Moses Ibn Tibbon in the introduction to his commentary on the aggadot refers to the theory of noble lies when he wants to justify his statement that one is permitted to disagree with the *prima facie* meaning of talmudic sentences on scientific topics.700 The rabbis of the talmudic period sometimes talked as if they accepted the widespread opinions of their age in order to be understood by the multitude. Sometimes they even fabricated false doctrines to eradicate some false doctrine widespread among the people like the physician who heals the malady by its opposite. The point of Moses Ibn Tibbon’s remarks is not to invite the reader to follow the practice of the talmudic rabbis but to defend the Talmud against the criticism of the Christians and to prepare the ground for Ibn Tibbon’s refusal of the literal sense of talmudic sentences.701 The story is not about politics; it is about exegesis.702

**Allegorical Exegesis and the Medieval “I”**

However, there is a further aspect of medieval Latin culture that might help us understand what was going on in Jewish biblical exegesis. Mary Carruthers argues that the medieval self was constructed through the art of memory. Knowledge in general was perceived as the things worthy of remembering. Carruthers analyzes how Latin Christian civilization developed techniques for the public display of memorable things through buildings, images, liturgy, rites, and manuscripts. Personal memory was drawn from publicly displayed sources. The “medieval I” was a remembering self: memory was the art of drawing

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699 In my reading of GP, I, 31-34 Maimonides evokes the social and political necessity of concealing certain truths only as one reason among many others for the esotericism of the prophets and talmudic rabbis. That is to say, Maimonides’ original position was basically the same as that of the post-Maimonidean philosophers in this issue.


702 Cf. also Joseph Caspi, *Mishneh kesef*, 38-39. Abelard’s introduction to his *Sic et non* also evidences a similar strategy for justifying the very existence of contradictions within patristic literature.
from the available sources and to integrate it into one’s own practice: composing new texts, delivering sermons or simply living a pious life.\textsuperscript{703}

Memory in fact often meant what we would call realization or enactment of pre-established patterns: a moral test was successfully passed if the ethical knowledge was successfully recollected and integrated into one’s behavior in the appropriate moments. Life was a series of exams for the medieval self; passing or failing these exams was believed to be dependent on the success or failure to draw correctly from the commonly available sources of knowledge, in other words, to remember the things that should be remembered.\textsuperscript{704}

The Jews’ possibilities to construct similar public deposits of memorable things were limited. Synagogues were often destroyed or confiscated in the Middle Ages. Whole Jewish communities were expelled from their settlements or simply massacred from time to time. Hebrew books were publicly burnt by Christian authorities as it happened to Maimonides’ GP in the 1230s and to the Talmud in the 1240s. Moreover, iconophobic traditions played very important role in Judaism from its birth. All these factors hindered the adaptation of Christian culture of memory. Therefore, it is far from being evident that Carruthers’ results can be applied to medieval Judaism as well.

Nonetheless, I think in the case of post-Maimonidean allegoric exegesis Carruthers’ ideas have a considerable explanatory force. As we have seen, Samuel Ibn Tibbon criticized Maimonides’ for superimposing an unjustified philosophical interpretation on the “first three verses of the Torah.” At the same time the same Samuel Ibn Tibbon interpreted the tower of Babel as a philosophic allegory. I think this would never come to Maimonides’ mind. Moreover, Samuel swore that he never interpreted any sentence of the Bible in a philosophical sense unless he was absolutely convinced that his interpretation was in accordance with the authors’ original intention.\textsuperscript{705} Was he consistent in words and deeds?

In my opinion Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s exegetical ideas and practices can be interpreted as having been consistent if we suppose that his “I” was a medieval one in Carruthers’ sense. When Samuel wrote about philosophy he imagined himself to have drawn from a common corpus of knowledge accessible to everybody who is capable of understanding it. He supposed that his competent readers had access to the same common knowledge. And what is more important, he took it for granted that Moses and the other biblical prophets had been able to access the same publicly displayed knowledge.

In the light of the last assumption it must have appeared just natural to Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s mind that Moses alluded to philosophical doctrines in the Torah. Scholars sharing the common knowledge can easily communicate with each other about this knowledge by using allusions, metaphors or allegories signifying or evoking certain parts or elements of the shared doctrines. The common knowledge was sufficient in medieval people’s eyes to guarantee the success of communication: allegories were not difficult to decipher if the common knowledge was remembered properly. Virgil rebukes Dante for not understanding the significance of the three lesser circles of hell in a scene of the Divine Comedy quoted by Mary Carruthers:

Why do thy thoughts wander so from their wont, or where else is thy mind looking? Rememberest thou not the words with which thy Ethics expounds the three dispositions which are against the will of Heaven? […] If thou consider well this

\textsuperscript{703} Carruthers, The Book of Memory, 156-188.

\textsuperscript{704} Cf. the famous story of Paolo and Francesca in Canto V of Dante’s Inferno analyzed in Carruthers, The Book of Memory, 185-188.

\textsuperscript{705} Cf. the discussion in the introduction to the second part of the present paper.
teaching and call to mind who are those that bear their penalty above outside thou shalt see clearly why they are separated from these wicked spirits.706

According to Carruthers’ analysis Virgil refers to Aristotle’s Nicomachean Ethics as remembered by Dante (and by anybody who belongs to the educated people) by the phrase “thy Ethics” [la tua Etica]. This “Ethics” is a piece of commonly shared knowledge which can be expected to be mobilized when somebody is contemplating the structure of a building: Virgil is a bit surprised that Dante is unable to recognize the allusion in the infernal structures to the ethical teaching.

In my opinion Samuel Ibn Tibbon would have been similarly surprised if a well-educated man had not recognized the allusions of certain biblical passages to philosophical or scientific doctrines. The presence of such allusions in the biblical text is as evident for Samuel as it is evident to Dante’s Virgil that the three lesser circles of the hell allude to the three dispositions in Aristotle’s Ethics.

Samuel probably thought that Moses had exactly the same sort of philosophical knowledge that he himself possessed with basically the same concepts and distinctions and the same number of conceptual distinctions. Moreover, he probably thought that Moses had expected his educated readers to remember this knowledge while reading the Torah. Therefore, he could assert that Moses had the intention of alluding to philosophic doctrines in those passages that are capable of being interpreted as philosophic allusions. The common knowledge alone was sufficient to decide which verses have allegoric sense and what the allegoric sense is.

This hypothesis sheds light on Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s research program (described in the introduction to the second part of the present paper) as well. Samuel’s assumption is that the biblical and rabbinic writers shared and presupposed the same common knowledge that was shared and presupposed in his days as well. Therefore, the key for understanding the words of the prophets and the rabbis was the aforementioned common knowledge. The process of interpretation consisted of identifying the piece of common knowledge alluded to in a particular text.

Moreover, Samuel Ibn Tibbon could expect his readers to be aware of the common knowledge and to be able to draw from it while interpreting biblical or rabbinical texts. Therefore, in his Sefer ner ha-hofes he was often content with short remarks, such as “this passage has an inner sense” without explaining what the inner sense was. He must have believed that the competent reader would be able to identify the inner sense without doubts.

To sum up, Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s assumption was that the point of Moses’ teaching philosophy was not to present a new and original system nor to establish with argumentative methods the already known truth but to make his readers remember a common body of knowledge while reading the Torah. Consequently, philosophical interpretation meant correct remembering of the relevant doctrines.

However, this memory game was not for its own sake in. The reader should recall at this point Maimonides’ theory of spiritual knowledge outlined at the beginning of this chapter. It is not enough to know in theory that God exists; one has to realize and to experience God’s existence. Such realization will lead to spiritual perfection according to Maimonides. And he also emphasized the importance of Bible reading as spiritual exercise.

I think Maimonides’ notion of spiritual perfection was Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s background-theory for biblical exegesis. The purpose of reading the Bible is not only to learn new information but to realize what we know. Remembering the philosophical doctrines our

706 Inferno, 11, 76-81 and 85-89; English translation by Mary Carruthers and quoted from her “The Poet as Master Builder: Composition and Locational Memory in the Middle Ages,” New Literary History 24 (1993): 881-904; quotation is on pp. 882-883.
minds will be actualized; that is to say, it will be connected to the Active Intellect. In Maimonidean religion attachment to the Active Intellect was the ultimate purpose of religious observance since it was believed to be the guarantor of the soul’s eternal life and generally of salvation in whatever terms the later was conceived. According to this theory philosophical exegesis of biblical or talmudic texts resulted in actualizing one’s philosophical knowledge which in turn led to the soul’s attachment to the Active Intellect and by this the soul could secure its place in the next world. Philosophical exegesis was a means of salvation.

Can the same conclusions be extended to earlier authorities, first and foremost to Abraham Ibn Ezra and Moses Maimonides as well? This is a complicated question that I will leave for latter studies. Now I shall concentrate on the Ibn Ezra supercommentators.

**Allegorical Exegesis: The Evidence of the Supercommentaries**

However, I will not quote and not analyze the allegoric interpretations evidenced by these texts. To carry out this task it would be necessary to outline first Ibn Ezra’s and Maimonides’ interpretations of the verses in question and to compare it to the supercommentators’ solutions. In the framework of the present paper this is not possible. I will rather recollect briefly the most important cases for allegoric exegesis in the supercommentaries.

**Moses Ibn Tibbon**

Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s son, Moses Ibn Tibbon wrote a long book (*Sefer ha-pea*, still unedited) on the philosophical interpretation of certain talmudic passages. Maybe his intention was to complete or continue his father’s project of deciphering the esoteric sense of rabbinic dicta announced in chapter three of the *Maamar yiqqawwu ha-mayim*.

Moses Ibn Tibbon’s interest in Ibn Ezra’s commentary might have been motivated by his concern for the exegesis of aggadot. Commenting on the Bible Ibn Ezra often remarks that this or that aggadah “has a secret” [*yesh lo sod*]; therefore it should not be quoted against his interpretation. These remarks of Ibn Ezra are in fact very similar to what Samuel Ibn Tibbon announced about his planned book *Sefer ner ha-hofes*. Samuel also wanted to remark in most cases only that the passage in question has an esoteric sense. Ibn Ezra’s existing commentary on the Pentateuch could substitute for Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s unfinished or lost *Sefer ner ha-hofes* to some degree. Moses Ibn Tibbon could perceive Ibn Ezra’s short remarks as defining a corpus of talmudic texts that are capable of allegoric interpretation. It would be very interesting to compare the list of talmudic passages interpreted by Moses Ibn Tibbon to the list of those talmudic passages that are pointed out to have “secret” by Ibn Ezra. This task cannot be carried out here.

In his lost supercommentary Moses Ibn Tibbon interpreted Ibn Ezra’s enigmatic words concerning the allegoric sense of the Garden of Eden. In Shlomo Ibn Yaish’s supercommentary there are various allegoric interpretations concerning the aggada about the pre-existence of Torah. It is probable that one of them came from Moses Ibn Tibbon’s pen.

**Eleazar ben Mattityah**

We have quoted already Eleazar’s allegoric interpretation about the three men that appeared to Abraham. Jacob’s vision of the ladder is also interpreted allegorically following the footsteps of Maimonides. The vestments of the high priest also receive allegoric treatment.

Eleazar’s interest in attributing philosophic or scientific opinions to talmudic masters has been noted in the chapter about creation. This activity fits well to the framework of
“Maimonidean research program” as announced in chapter three of Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s *Maamar yiqqawu ha-mayim*. Consequently, Eleazar’s activity of interpreting rabbinic statements can also be characterized as a “medieval I” recalling the publicly displayed knowledge while reading sacred texts.

In the commentary on Ibn Ezra’s introduction Eleazar inserted a long allegoric explanation about the story of Eden. He returned to the same topic when commenting on Genesis 3. He notes:

I have already treated this subject [in the introduction] meditating on it as far as I could. And I could not wait with it, for I was scared that my time would be over and I would not get [to this point] as happened to many other people before me. And now that I have reached this point [i.e. Genesis 3] – may God be magnified – I will add further explanation concerning the cherubim based on the sage’s [Ibn Ezra’s] allusions in the section *haazinu*.

This passage shows how important the allegoric interpretation of the Eden narrative was in Eleazar’s opinion. At the end of his discussion of this story in the supercommentary on Ibn Ezra’s introduction Eleazar presents a short justification for allegoric exegesis:

And if there is a man whose thoughts cannot bear the idea that the same thing can [have both] open and hidden [senses – *galuy ve-nistar*], he should consider the noses that were created for the sake smelling and breathing; moreover, tongue [was created] for the sake of speaking and eating, and the sexual organs […] for the sake of procreation and peeing as is explained in Ibn Rushd’s treatise on the qualities of the organs.

The example of the noses is probably taken from Ibn Ezra’s second introduction to the Torah-commentary (to the Long Commentary). The rest of the examples are probably Eleazar’s inventions. Ibn Ezra’s original remark is to be found in a polemical context when he criticizes the Christian biblical exegesis for attributing spiritual sense to the commandments; it was probably meant to be an ironical remark directed against the doctrine of the four senses. Nevertheless, Eleazar’s words testify an important aspect of the medieval idea of allegoric interpretation: the examples are taken from nature because nature itself is endowed with many functions both ‘open’ and ‘hidden’ ones. Allegorizing was natural for Eleazar in an emphatic sense of the word: it was an application of the same worldview, that an educated man could acquire through studying natural sciences, to biblical exegesis.

**Joseph Caspi**

Caspi’s supercommentary deliberately avoids treating Ibn Ezra’s secrets. The significance of this supercommentary lies in the fact that it shows another facet of medieval readings of Ibn Ezra’s commentary: its role in elementary education. This topic will be treated later. In the present context we can dismiss Caspi’s supercommentary for having no relevance.

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707 MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 169 v.
708 MS Vat. ebr. 54, fol. 165 v.
709 Hebrew text with German translation in David Rosin, *Reime und Gedichte…*, (Jahresbericht des jüdisch-thologisch Seminars Fraenckel’scher Stiftung,, 1887), 60.
However, Caspi’s other works show clearly his commitment to the “Maimonidean research program.” In his *Sefer ha-sod* he repeatedly emphasizes that every sentence of the Torah brings about intellectual perfection. He argues that whoever understands the Torah will see without doubt that it was written by a perfect philosopher and it contains allusions to philosophic doctrines. He apparently did not feel the necessity of establishing stricter criteria for allegoric interpretation. In the exegesis of particular passages he extends the circle of allegoric stories far beyond the Maimonidean definition.

Therefore, Caspi’s *Sefer ha-sod* is a further witness for an exegetical program conceived in Maimonidean-Tibbonide terms. Consequently, this exegetical program might easily evidence that Caspi’s “I” was a medieval one according to Carruthers’ definition.

**Sen Bonet de Lunel**

Besides expounding Ibn Ezra’s notes about the allegoric sense of the Garden of Eden and the tabernacle, Bonet analyzed Abraham’s sacrifice to God in Genesis 15 as having taken place in a prophetic vision capable of allegoric decoding. His long discussion of the meaning of the visual elements has the characteristics of a sermon – it is possible that Bonet delivered such sermons at certain occasions such as wedding ceremonies as was the custom of other post-Maimonidean philosophers as well.

The animals that were cut into two pieces by Abraham in Genesis 15 symbolize in Bonet’s opinion those faculties of the soul that can have both positive and negative effects (“fragmented intentions” *kavvanot haluqot*) on spiritual perfection. The fight between body and soul is described in a rather dramatic way. Abraham did not cut the bird into two pieces because the bird signifies the intellect and the intellect is completely good; its “intention” is not “fragmented into a good and evil impulse. Bonet continues with the analysis of the ‘bird of prey’ that descended to eat from the animals cut into two pieces by Abraham:

See and understand how this [new element] follows from our interpretation and how it is consistent with it! For the “bird of prey” – by which the material forces are meant – descended only on the corpses that stand for those capacities [of the soul] that have fragmented intentions [*ha-kavvanot he-haluqot*] when they work as we have already explained, but on the bird, that stands for the intellectual faculty, and which is not fragmented into two intentions the “bird of prey” did not descend.

Bonet argues for the correctness of his interpretation by pointing to the fact that all the elements of the vision can be decoded in a consistent way following his guidelines. The completeness of the decoding is the proof for the correctness of the exegesis.

Abraham’s and Isaac’s argument with Abimelek’s servants about the wells in the desert is taken by Bonet to mean controversies about philosophical issues. Water is a symbol of knowledge; digging the well means establishing a doctrine; burying the well means refuting a doctrine. Using this semantic key Bonet reveals that Abraham’s and Isaac’s opponents at Abimelek’s court held basically the same doctrines as the Islamic atomists. Abraham and Isaac are depicted as good Maimonidean philosophers in Bonet’s text: the various wells dug by them in a certain order correspond to various parts of

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710 MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 58 r-v
711 MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 107 v – 109 v.
712 MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 80 v.
the Maimonidean curriculum. Their servants who dug the wells were their students. From the way Isaac is talking with his servant in the biblical narrative Bonet concludes to Isaac’s pedagogic virtues.\footnote{MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 87 r – 92 v.}

I think this text by Bonet reveals that he also shared Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s fundamental assumption about the existence of a commonly accessible knowledge that was the same in biblical and in modern (medieval) times. For Bonet it was a self evident presupposition that Abraham and Isaac and the servants of the Philistine king had the same range of intellectual options the same concepts and the same solutions as the philosophers of his own age. His interpretation of the biblical story hardly makes any sense unless this premise is accepted.

Sen Bonet de Lunel’s possible master, Jedaiah ha-Penini was the author of one of the most popular philosophical works among medieval Jews – the fact that this work is hardly more than a short footnote in our histories of medieval Jewish philosophy demonstrates well our lack of understanding of the medieval spirit. This book was an allegoric poem in which the basic topics of his Maimonidean-Tibbonide philosophy were alluded to in poetic images. Composing this poem (\textit{Behinat ha-olam}) Jedaiah must have taken for granted that his competent readers will be able to recognize easily the intended sense. In fact, many of his readers attempted to expound Jedaiah’s intentions in writing: \textit{Behinat olam} became one of the most frequently commented texts in medieval Hebrew literature according to the judgement of Moritz Steinschneider.\footnote{Steinschneider, HÜ, 311. Jedaiah’s poem is mentioned in the company of Bible, Talmud, Maimonides’ GP, Ibn Ezra’s Torah-commentary, Averroes’ works and Ghazzali’s \textit{Intentions of the Philosophers}.}

\textbf{Moses Nagari}

Moses Nagari also explains Ibn Ezra’s allegoric notes on the Garden of Eden and he emphasizes the originality of his interpretation.\footnote{MS Vienna, ÖNB, Cod. hebr. 106, fol. 16 v – 18 v.} However, in general, allegoric interpretation seems to play a less important role in his supercommentary than in the aforementioned authors.

This might be due to his Italian provenance: Moses Ibn Tibbon, Joseph Caspi, and Sen Bonet de Lunel were all born in Provence. The same is less evident in the case of Eleazar ben Mattityah although he is reported to have traveled from “France” to Crete and he was familiar with the works of Samuel Ibn Tibbon and the \textit{Ruah hen}. It is possible that indulgence in allegoric exegesis was a Provençal intellectual tradition in medieval Jewish philosophy. However, a much wider range of sources should be examined before drawing such a conclusion. This cannot be carried out here.

Moses Nagari’s supercommentary starts with a long allegoric poem on which the author himself wrote a commentary. This phenomenon, writing a poetic work and an auto-commentary on it, is well-understandable within the framework of medieval Latin memory culture. Mary Carruthers points to an autograph manuscript of Boccaccio, a younger contemporary and compatriot of Moses Nagari, containing a poem of his with glosses on it from his own hand.\footnote{Carruthers, \textit{The Book of Memory}, 218-220.} Carruthers argues that the practice of auto-commentary was based on the notion of the text as a “common place” where different ideas and pieces of knowledge can meet. The author comments in his own poem in order to realize this possibility inherent in the text.\footnote{Carruthers, \textit{The Book of Memory}, 194-220.} It is quite probable that Moses Nagari’s introductory poem was meant to be such a “common place” as well.

The following remark of Moses Nagari is quite illuminating:
Know that in this sentence he [Ibn Ezra] follows Plato’s statement concerning the intellect’s being in the brain and the nutritive [soul] in the heart and the desiring [soul] in the liver. But I do not think that Ibn Ezra, the wonderful and excellent scholar fell into such a refuted error [hazzama] the opposite of which is proved by true demonstrations, for it is one of the essential properties that makes the intellect different from the rest of the faculties of the soul that [the intellect] is not attached to any of the organs that are peculiar to the imagination.\textsuperscript{718}

In the continuation Moses Nagari explains that Ibn Ezra meant only that human intellect normally proceeds the information taken from the imaginative faculty, and the latter is paralyzed if the brain is harmed. In this sense it is possible to say that the intellect is dependent on the brain, therefore “it is in the brain.”

Moses Nagari’s argument is based quite explicitly on the premise that Ibn Ezra had access to the same corpus of knowledge as Moses Nagari himself. This is why it was impossible for him to imagine that such a great scholar as Ibn Ezra presumably was would have committed such an elementary mistake. The consideration that in Ibn Ezra’s times Aristotle’s authority over Plato’s one in matters of psychology was by no means an accomplished fact just simply does not come to Moses Nagari’s mind.

Therefore, Moses Nagari’s supercommentary evidences the presence of the mental operations described by Mary Carruthers.

\textbf{Conclusion}

Allegoric exegesis was introduced into Judaism by Philo of Alexandria in the cultural context of the early imperial period. Allegoric exegesis was conceived as a spiritual exercise in which the soul of the reader gets connected to the higher realms of reality. This definition was left unchallenged in the Middle Ages as well.

Maimonides treated allegoric exegesis in the wider context of esoteric interpretation. It was used to establish Judaism’s superiority over Christianity and Islam. Maimonides analyzed the spiritual transformation in Aristotelian terms: realizing the inner meanings of the biblical texts the human intellect becomes actualized which implied for Maimonides a sort of attachment to the Active Intellect. Maimonides attributed protective power to this mental state: as long as someone is attached to the Active Intellect he or she is under the special providence of God.

In late thirteenth- early fourteenth-century Provence allegoric exegesis of biblical narratives was extended far beyond Maimonides’ original proposals. The reason for this might have been an adaptation of the memory-culture of the Christian environment. The connection between thoughts and images was felt natural – this is implicit already in Maimonides’ theory of prophecy – and the idea that the same corpus of knowledge was available to the biblical authors and the modern (medieval) commentators themselves gave license to attribute allegoric sense to virtually any biblical passage. This usually did not imply the denial of the literal truth of the biblical stories.

Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s research program announced in chapter three of the \textit{Maamar yiqqawu ha-mayim} can be interpreted in this framework. The early Ibn Ezra supercommentators generally shared the interest in this research program and its presuppositions.

\textsuperscript{718} MS Vienna, ÖNB, Cod. hebr. 106, fol. 58 r.
In the *Theological-Political Treatise* Spinoza sharply criticizes the medieval Jewish philosophers for believing that Moses and the prophets were great philosophers. Allegoric exegesis was completely unfounded and even ridiculous in Spinoza’s eyes. Was he right? Isn’t it true that allegoric exegesis is fare-fetched and arbitrary more often than not?

A medieval Jewish philosopher from fourteenth-century Provence, such as Caspi or Bonet would reply to Spinoza that it is simply self-evident that Moses alluded to philosophic doctrines while narrating events that took place in the external world or in prophetic vision. You have to learn philosophy, that is to say, you have to be able to remember the common philosophical doctrine through visual memory-images and then you cannot but see with your own eyes that Moses definitely talks about philosophy in the Torah. There can be disagreements about which doctrine is alluded to in which passage. But to deny the very existence of the allusions is to deny the evident facts.

The reason for Spinoza’s unfriendly criticism of medieval philosophers might be that the “software” of thinking was changed between the Middle Ages and the seventeenth century. Knowledge was no longer perceived as a self-evident corpus of information and thought displayed publicly to everybody’s access, who was worthy of it. The connection between images and thoughts was not felt to be natural any longer. Due to these changes the key ideas of medieval Jewish biblical exegesis must have seemed meaningless to Spinoza.
Chapter 4: Literal sense and Philosophy

I shall argue in this chapter that the main function of the literal sense in Ibn Ezra and in the early Ibn Ezra supercommentators was to regulate the process of esoteric interpretation.

It is very tempting for modern scholars to suppose that literal exegesis on the one hand and allegoric or other types of deeper exegesis on the other hand are mutually exclusive approaches to the biblical text. The fact that they appeared hand in hand in early medieval Jewish exegesis and they continued to live in a symbiosis up to the end of the Middle Ages seems to us a rather awkward state of affairs requiring a specific explanation. We are tempted to look for some external factors that forced the fusion of literal and philosophic interpretation of Scripture in medieval Jewish Bible-exegesis.

In the following pages I will argue that this image is fundamentally wrong. Literal and allegoric and other types of philosophic exegesis were the elements of a single organic approach to the text in medieval Judaism. There was no need for any external cause to bring them together; for they were connected to and supplementing each others by their nature.719

Ibn Ezra and his followers wanted to realize certain rigor in biblical exegesis. Insistence on the importance of correct grammatical understanding of the biblical texts, profound interest in biblical realia pertaining to history, ethnography, natural history, human psychology were all guarantees to avoid the mistake of arbitrary exegesis. Literal sense served as a foundation for philosophic interpretations. Finding the deeper sense of Scripture that could pertain to philosophy, natural sciences, theology and mysticism was the ultimate motive for both literal and non-literal exegesis. Literal exegesis was used to refute illegitimate exegesis. Any deeper interpretation had to pass the test of literal sense.

In the second version of his introduction to the Pentateuch-commentary Ibn Ezra criticized the Christian idea of the four senses of Scripture in a rather sarcastic way. The point of the criticism was that the Christians infuse spiritual senses into Scripture arbitrarily. A similar line of thought lies at the heart of Ibn Ezra’s criticism of an inner Jewish group, the Babylonian geonim, whose orthodoxy is by no means questioned by Ibn Ezra. The mistake of the geonim was also that they attributed scientific senses to scriptural passages without due caution. Thus Samuel ben Hofni gaon wrote a long treatise about dreams in his comment about Jacob’s dream; another geonic author called Isaac treated all sorts of questions concerning natural history while commenting on the creation narrative.720 Ibn Ezra points out the arbitrary nature of geonic exegesis as well. The argument is basically the same as the one brought against the Christians.

These texts show that for Ibn Ezra biblical exegesis was by no means a free play with texts and words. Certain biblical passages might have philosophic, scientific or mystic senses. But attributing esoteric senses to biblical texts should not be an arbitrary operation.

Ibn Ezra’s position is well-rooted in the tradition of medieval Jewish biblical exegesis and was upheld and continued in the subsequent centuries as well. As has been pointed out in the Prolegomena the basic formulation of the exegetical program is attested the first time in

719 However, this statement is not valid for Abraham Abulafia’s school of Cabbala. Abulafia decomposed the literal sense of Scripture in a radical way in order to grasp the esoteric sense; cf. Idel, Kabbalah: New Perspectives, 235-237.
720 The identity of Isaac is uncertain. It is not very probable that he is any of the Isaac gaons who lived before Saadyah because it was Saadyah’s invention to write long commentaries on the Bible as is generally assumed and Ibn Ezra’s short remark about Isaac is not sufficient to challenge this well-established opinion. Ibn Ezra’s Isaac could have been Yitzhak ben Sakri a Spaniard scholar who was active in Baghdad after Hay gaon’s death (cf. Brody, The Geonim of Babylonia, 13; on p. 345 another Isaac is mentioned who died after 1037). Weizer mentions Isaac ben Yashosh and Isaac Israeli as a possible candidate (Ibn Ezra, Perushey ha-Tora, ed. Weizer, vol. 1, 1, note 13).
Saadyah gaon’s works. In the seventh treatise of his *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* Saadyah criticizes those Jews who explain away the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead as a mere figure of speech. In this context he declares that the Bible is to be interpreted literally always unless the literal sense of the passage in question is contradicted by (1) sensual perception, (2) intellectual truth, (3) trustworthy tradition [= talmudic tradition], (4) another scriptural passage that is “clearer” than the passage in question.

Saadya’s formula intends to mark the safe passage between the two dangerous extremes, the Scylla and the Charybdis of biblical exegesis. The first one is the denial of the existence of deeper sense. This position was taken by Haywayi [Hiwi] al-Bakhli, a Jewish heretic in ninth-century Persia vehemently criticized by Saadya. Haywayi rejected the Bible as a work of vulgar and ignorant people full of self-contradictions and primitive and false notions about God. Haywayi’s criticism was probably based partly on a Pehlevi anti-Jewish document from the time of the Sassanian persecutions and fitted well into the Late Antique pagan tradition of biblical criticism represented by Celsus, Porphyrius, Julian the Apostle and others.721 No doubt, Saadyah would have subsumed Spinoza’s *Theological-Political Treatise* under this category as well.

These authors all denied that the Bible had a more refined and sophisticated message under the veil of popular beliefs and doctrines. This fact served as a justification for rejecting the authority of the Bible in their thought. Saadya’s permission of the non-literal exegesis in the four cases enumerated above is meant to prevent this mistake. In certain cases one has to look for a deeper sense.

The insistence on the literal sense in Saadyah was obviously meant to avoid the Charybdis, the other extreme of biblical exegesis. Some heretics, Saadyah reports, are rejecting the literal sense by the pretext of esoteric interpretation even in cases where nothing makes it necessary to go beyond the literal sense. The excess in non-literal exegesis results in the blurring of the border between Truth and Falsehood, between correct and incorrect interpretation. Saadyah would vehemently disagree with Feyerabend’s famous slogan (“anything goes”) concerning biblical exegesis. Indulgence in non-literal interpretation threatens the actual observance of the commandments and the doctrinal integrity of Judaism in Saadya’s opinion. He emphasizes the primacy of literal sense in order to counterbalance the excess in non-literal interpretation.

Saadyah adopts a “realist” position in exegesis to back his rules of interpretation. Any usage of human language, Saadyah argues, is targeted at understanding. That is to say, we want to understand each other when we say something to each other. Biblical texts should be taken as attempts at successful communication as well (how otherwise?); therefore the same mental attitude should be applied while reading the Bible as when we read any other text. The Bible can be understood literally; therefore it should be understood literally.

The same consideration applies to the four cases when Saadyah recommends non-literal exegesis. Human speech is full of figures, hyperbolas, metaphoric expression that nobody takes literally because it is obvious that they are not meant literally. If you conclude from the phrase “God is a consuming fire” appearing in Deuteronomy 4: 24 that Moses believed in the corporeality of God, then you commit a rather elementary mistake. For Saadyah it is obvious that such phrases were not meant to be taken literally; you have to be a rather malicious reader if you attribute vulgar doctrines to the biblical authors on the basis of such statements. The cases when rabbinic interpretation contradicts the literal sense are not very different from the rest of the cases either. The rabbis of the talmudic period could have a superior knowledge about the phraseology, rhetoric and literary conventions of biblical literature than ourselves. If the talmudic rabbis declared that the number 40 given as the

number of lashes to be performed as a punishment to certain transgressions meant in fact 39, then we cannot but rely on their superior knowledge and accept their ruling as the true sense of the text intended by God Himself.722

Although Ibn Ezra criticizes sarcastically geonic exegesis including Saadya’s contribution his own attempts stand firmly in the tradition started by Saadya. The Scylla and Charybdis were basically the same excesses in vulgar and esoteric interpretation for Ibn Ezra as well. Byzantine and Ashkenazi commentators are scorned by Ibn Ezra for a naïve understanding of talmudic aggadot. They disregard the esoteric senses obviously present in these rabbinic texts and as a consequence they attribute a vulgar sense to both the Bible and the aggadot. On the other hand, the geonim, including Saadyah gaon, introduce superfluous scientific discussions into their commentaries and by this they conceal the real esoteric aspects of the biblical text.

Ibn Ezra’s criticism is not directed against rabbinic tradition itself or against the usage of sciences in biblical exegesis in general. Ibn Ezra carefully distinguishes the talmudic rabbis from their ill-hearted modern followers (such as Rashi or Tobiah ben Eliezer): the rabbis used esoteric language to express their most proper comments whereas their Byzantine and Ashkenazi followers lack the education necessary for understanding the allusions. Saadyah and other geonim were more familiar with sciences – although Ibn Ezra remarks that many of them did not understand properly the argumentative character of sciences – but they failed to find the correct way of integrating scientific knowledge into biblical exegesis.

Thus Saadyah becomes a target of criticism for Ibn Ezra. But the logic of this criticism is obviously indebted to Saadyah to a great extent. Ibn Ezra applies the same argument against the geonim that Saadyah brought forth against the non-literalist interpreters.

Moreover, Ibn Ezra’s notion of literal sense is also based on “realistic” considerations akin to Saadya’s ones. The following passage from the Long Commentary on Exodus is revealing. Ibn Ezra discusses the reasons for the differences between the two versions of the Decalogue (Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5):

Know that the words are like bodies and the senses are like souls and the body is an instrument for the soul. Therefore, it is the custom [mishpat] of all the sages in every language that they preserve the meanings but they do not hesitate to change the words if the meaning is the same […] But our contemporaries often attribute significance to defective and plene forms [i.e. peculiarities of biblical Hebrew orthography]. And if they attributed a single sense [consistently] to one of them or if it were the [general] custom [in the Bible] to write all [the words] in a uniform way I would not object. But now I will give you an example. Someone tells me “Write to my friend the following: I, XY do love you for ever [ani peloni ohevka le-olam]!” And I write peloni without waw [i.e. in a defective way without marking the ‘o’ with a ‘w’], and similarly ohevka without waw, and le-olam also in a defective way. And now someone else comes and asks me why I write it defectively. But as for myself, I do not have to write anything except what I was told and I do not care for defective or plene forms.

In this passage Ibn Ezra clearly and explicitly refers to what he assumes to be the general and “normal” attitude to writing in his own times. When we write letters to each other, so Ibn Ezra, we do not make such a big deal out of certain orthographic conventions. What matters is the sense and nothing else. This idea gives him the key for understanding the differences between the two versions of the Decalogue, namely, the two versions say the same things and the differences pertain only to the wording not to the sense. The underlying

assumption is that the same sort of reality that is experienced today is evidenced in the biblical texts as well. The Byzantine and Ashkenazi interpreters (and as a matter of fact, the rabbis of the talmudic period as well) probably did not share this assumption with Ibn Ezra. However, Saadyah gaon before and Maimonides after Ibn Ezra could hardly object to his argument.

If we turn to Maimonides the picture does not change in the essentials. In the first part of GP Maimonides’s main intention is to liberate his reader from the error of literalist misinterpretation concerning corporeal attributes and activities ascribed to God in the Bible, such as “eye,” “hand,” “image,” “seeing,” “hearing,” “ascending” etc. Maimonides sees in the “external” senses of such expressions a serious threat to the faith of the philosophically educated Jews. Therefore, he considers it an important mission of GP to explain that these phrases are not to be taken in their external sense. The Scylla of biblical exegesis that we have already encountered in Saadyah and Ibn Ezra is clearly recognizable.

However, Maimonides takes no less pain to avoid the Charybdis as well. In a very famous passage (GP II, 25) he writes:

Know that are shunning the affirmation of the eternity of the world is not due to a text figuring in the Torah according to which the world has been produced in time. For the texts indicating that the world has been produced in time are not more numerous than those indicating that the deity is a body. Nor are the gates of figurative interpretation shut in our faces or impossible to access to us regarding the subject of the creation of the world in time. For we could interpret them as figurative, as we have done when denying His corporeality. Perhaps this would even be much easier to do: we should be very well able to give a figurative interpretation of those texts and to affirm as true the eternity of the world, just as we have given a figurative interpretation of those other texts and have denied that He, may He be exalted, is a body.

Two causes are responsible for our not doing this or believing it. One of them is as follows. That the deity is not a body has been demonstrated; from this it follows necessarily that everything that in its external meaning disagrees with this demonstration must be interpreted figuratively, for it is known that such texts are of necessity fit for figurative interpretation.723

Note the anonymous reference to Saadyah’s tradition in the last quoted sentence. It is “well-known” for Maimonides’ that those passages that contradict some demonstrated scientific truth should not be interpreted literally. The quotation continues:

However, the eternity of the world has not been demonstrated. Consequently in this case the texts ought not to be rejected and figuratively interpreted in order to make prevail an opinion whose contrary can be made to prevail by means of various sorts of arguments. This is one cause.724

The presence of Saadyah’s tradition is obvious. Since Rule 2 of Saadyah does not apply, nor any of the other rules, creation of the world in time is to be taken literally. The continuation of the text is also remarkable:

The second cause is as follows. Our belief that the deity is not a body destroys for us none of the foundations of the Law and does not give the lie to the claims of any prophet. The only objection to it is constituted by the fact that the ignorant think that

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723 Tr. Pines, 327-328.
724 Tr. Pines, 328.
this belief is contrary to the text; yet it is not contrary to it, as we have explained, but is intended by the text. On the other hand, the belief in eternity the way Aristotle sees it—that is, the belief according to which the world exists in virtue of necessity, that no nature changes at all, and that the customary course of events cannot be modified with regard to anything—destroys the Law in its principle, necessarily gives the lie to every miracle, and reduces to inanity all the hopes and threats that the Law has held out, unless—by God!—one interprets the miracles figuratively also, as was done by the Islamic internalists [ahl al-bājin]; this, however, would result in some sort of crazy imaginings.  

Maimonides’ motivation for rejecting the excess in figurative interpretation is not to preserve the doctrinal integrity as was the case with Saadyah gaon. He rather relies on his own intellectual taste which is taken for granted in the text and required no specific justification or further comment in Maimonides’ eyes. It would lead to “crazy imaginings” if every passage of the Bible could be interpreted allegorically as the certain Islamic sects did with the Koran. (What would Maimonides think of Philo of Alexandria?) Maimonides seems to experience a sort of intellectual disgust when the possible extension of non-literal interpretations comes up. Saadyah’s rules were successfully internalized by Maimonides.

A “realist” approach in Maimonides’ exegesis is evidenced by his assert that GP deals with the interpretation of the Torah “according to truth.” In the introductory chapter we read:

It is not the purpose of this Treatise to make its totality understandable to the vulgar or to beginners in speculation, nor to teach those who have not engaged in any study other than the science of the Law—I mean the legalistic study of the Law. For the purpose of this Treatise and of all those like it is the science of Law in its true sense.

Similarly, in his letter to Joseph ben Judah Maimonides admonishes his student to study the Talmud “according to the truth.” The “true” science of Law is contrasted to vulgar people’s, the beginners’ and the traditionalists’ approach. These are the people who cannot access truth. On the other hand, the “true” science of the Law is reserved to those people who can access truth in general. In other words, we encounter here the topic of “veridical self” again. Maimonides distinguishes the veridical self from those selves that cannot attain and pronounce truth. The real sense of the sacred texts will be revealed only to the veridical self.

The underlying assumption is again the continuity between the “truth” of the biblical times and the “truth” accessible today. A self that proves to be veridical according to the norms available in Maimonides’ times will be able to comprehend the real message of the Bible. Maimonides’ reader has to pass a sort of exam before he is allowed to approach the “science of the Law in its true sense.”

Samuel Ibn Tibbon basically continued the tradition of the prestigious forerunners with minor modifications. He used the test of literal sense for the re-evaluation of Maimonides’ exegetical solutions—and we have seen in the introduction to the chapters on creation that concerning the “first three verses” of the Torah Maimonides’ interpretation failed the exam according to Samuel. At the same time Samuel extended the circle of the allegoric exegesis as we have seen in the previous chapter. He justified both his rejection of Maimonides’ solution in the name of the literal sense and his extension of the allegoric exegesis by a reference to the notion of “intention.” It was the “intention” of Moses and other biblical writers what Samuel Ibn Tibbon wanted to grasp. He asserted that both his literal and allegoric interpretations reflected correctly the original intention of the biblical authors.

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725 Tr. Pines, 328.
726 Tr. Pines, 5.
We have seen in the previous chapter that the early Ibn Ezra supercommentators continued Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s project in extending allegoric interpretation far beyond the limits Saadyah gaon, Ibn Ezra and Maimonides originally imagined. They apparently did not have any sense of disgust while doing so nor did they suspect that it would lead to “crazy imaginations.” I have argued that the reason for this developments was the adoption of the memory culture practiced in the Christian scholastic environment.

However, the increase of allegoric exegesis implied by no means a decline in literal interpretation. The very fact that the Ibn Ezra supercommentaries were written in great number does not signify necessarily an interest in literal interpretation – Ibn Ezra could have been read as a key for the esoteric sense of the Scripture and the aggadot alike. Pseudo-Caspi’s supercommentary indeed focuses on the esoteric interpretation of the Torah. However, as far as we can judge from the surviving material, Pseudo-Caspi was the exception, not the rule. A safely identifiable fragment of Moses Ibn Tibbon’s lost supercommentary deals with a grammatical comment, and probably many more such notes found in Shlomo Ibn Yaish of Guadalajara’s supercommentary come from Moses Ibn Tibbon’s work. Grammar, chronology, realia, and other non-philosophical topics are by no means ignored in the rest of the supercommentaries either besides Pseudo-Caspi. Most of the supercommentators were ready to learn such matters as well from Ibn Ezra.

Sen Bonet de Lunel’s supercommentary provides us with a couple of interesting examples where literal sense is used as a counter-check against Maimonides’ esoteric interpretation. Against Maimonides’ denial that the heavens were created for the sake of humanity Bonet objects that Genesis 1: 14-15 in the literal sense does claim that the heavenly bodies were put on the sky in order to shed light on the earth. Maimonides’ own exegetical solution is rejected by Bonet because it contradicts the literal sense (the kavvana or ‘intention’ of the text to use Bonet’s terminology). 727

Bonet solved the problem by proposing a more refined interpretation of both the biblical passage and the philosophical doctrine about superiority of the heavenly bodies in the hierarchy of being. Bonet admits that Maimonides was right in affirming that the heavenly bodies do not exist for the sake of humanity. However, Bonet argues, from this fact it does not follow that the actual position they are having on the sky cannot serve the interest of mankind. Genesis 1: 14-15 relates that God posited the heavenly bodies in a certain order on the sky with the intention to facilitate the human measurement of time and perhaps for other purposes as well. 728

Maimonides’ interpretation of Isaac’s binding (the aqeda) is also rejected for its being incompatible with the plain sense of Scripture. Maimonides argues in GP III, 24 that the point of Abraham’s trial was that human beings (“the sons of Adam” or “Adamites” in Pines’ translation) should know how much Abraham loves God. Maimonides’ interpretation of Genesis 22: 12 follows this line of argument:

Accordingly the angel said to him [to Abraham]; “For now I know that thou fearest God” [Genesis 22: 12]: meaning that through the act because of which the term “fearing God” is applied to you, all the Adamites will know what the limits of “the fear of the Lord” are. 729

Bonet rejects this explanation – and consequently, Maimonides’ interpretation of the aqedah entirely – because it contradicts the literal sense of Genesis 22: 12:

727 Cf. MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 54 r-v.
728 Cf. MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 54 v – 56 r.
729 Tr. Pines, 501.
Most of the commentators are perplexed about this issue; even Rabbenu Moses [Maimonides] of blessed memory – although all of his words are correct and wise and his water we are drinking – offered an explanation that is hardly in comfort with the text of the [biblical] verses and with the content of the passages in which this cornerstone [of the Torah; i.e. the trial] is discussed. For he explained that in all the cases when the topic of the trial is mentioned [in the Bible] the purpose [of the trial] was not that God might know what he had not known before but the purpose was that those particular stories would be examples [mashal] from which people [beney adam, “Adamites”] could learn proper behavior and beliefs. Accordingly, he interprets “[God tempts you] to know whether ye do love [Him]” (Deuteronomy 13: 4) as ‘to make known;’ and similarly concerning the issue of the aqedah [Maimonides interprets] “For now I know [that thou fearest God]” (Genesis 22: 12) that the meaning is like “[For now] I have made known…” Ibn Ezra quotes a similar opinion in the name of the gaon [i.e. Saadyah], namely, that the story of the aqedah explains to all the people [“Adamites”] the limits of fearing God and that the people should follow [the example] and learn how far worshiping Him should be extended. But this matter is far from the text of the [biblical] verse and from its content [leshon ha-pasuq ve-inyano] o we shall tell our opinion concerning this subject.730

Bonet refers to Ibn Ezra’s comment on Genesis 22: 1 where Ibn Ezra refutes the opinion of “the gaon” (similar to Maimonides’ opinion) arguing that nobody saw Abraham at the dramatic moment of the sacrifice; therefore, the primary purpose of the trial could not be to make Abraham’s fear of God publicly known. Ibn Ezra insists that the verb ‘to know’ cannot be interpreted as ‘to make known;’ therefore, the verse refers to God’s knowledge of Abraham’s deed and not to other peoples knowledge. Bonet inserts his essay on trials at that point in the supercommentary: he obviously accepts Ibn Ezra’s refutation of “the gaon’s” opinion which implied the rejection of Maimonides’ interpretation as well for Bonet.

After rejecting Maimonides’ opinion Bonet explains that the point of the “trials” mentioned in the Torah is to bring the good character existing potentially in a righteous person into actuality. The process of actualization sometimes requires pain and suffering; God does not hesitate to inflict the righteous with such sufferings even if no sin was committed before. The trial is not a punishment; it is bringing a potentiality into actuality. Ibn Ezra alluded to this theory by saying “God tried him [i.e. Abraham] in order that he may receive reward” at the end of his comment on Genesis 22: 1.

As for the meaning of “For now I know that thou fearest God” Bonet adopts Ibn Ezra’s strategy of explaining away anthropomorphic passages: God knows everything in advance; but His foreknowledge does not make the contingent events necessary. The biblical phrase “now I know…” signifies the fact that Abraham’s decision was not pre-determined by God; it was out of Abraham’s free will. Bonet refers to the well-known talmudic adage: “the Torah speaks human language.” Since human beings does not know a contingent fact until it is realized God is also depicted in the biblical imagery as if He did not know in advance the outcome of Abraham’s decision in order to signify that the decision was out of free will. In other words Bonet identifies the biblical sentence as an anthropomorphic metaphor and adopts Ibn Ezra’s usual approach of interpreting biblical metaphors.731 This is how Bonet preserves a strictly literal interpretation of Genesis 22: 12 and avoids any undesirable theological consequences.

730 MS Vat. ebr. 104, fol. 83 r.
These examples show that the literal sense worked as a constructive principle for deeper or esoteric or philosophic exegesis. Bonet’s own interpretations do use philosophical terms and concepts. These interpretation pertain to the “secrets of the Torah,” to the “inner sense” although they are not allegoric in nature. However, such an exegesis cannot be carried out without determining first the literal sense of the passages in question. For Bonet and probably to the other supercommentators as well there was no way to the “secrets of the Torah” except through literal sense.

Jospeh Caspi in his Sefer ha-sod (“Book of the secret”) enumerated seven rules of biblical interpretation. The first and the last ones deserve special attention in this context:

The first rule is to know that the sentences written in the books have to be tasted and sensed slowly and carefully. Just like the great physicians command us to chew the food properly in the mouth in order that the stomach may digest it well, each of the intelligent ones [maskil] has to keep and turn over and shake the sentences in his mouth in order that the understanding of all the things related may be completed in the mind [lit. ‘heart’]. For in this way one can feel what [Scripture] speaks about and can divide it according to grammatical and logical distinctions after having studied these two arts that are necessary for anyone who wants to understand a text as has been explained in the previous tractate.732

This texts recalls the phraseology of Latin monastic authors who spoke about “chewing” and “ruminating” the sacred texts. Mary Carruthers writes:

[… the medieval scholar’s relationship to his text is quite different from modern “objectivity.” Reading is to be digested, to be ruminated, like a cow chewing her cud, or like a bee making honey from the nectar of flowers. Reading is memorized with the aid of murmur, mouthing the words subvocally as one turns the text over in one’s memory; both Quibtilian and Martianus Capella stress how murmur accompanies meditation. It is this movement of the mouth that establishes rumination as a basic metaphor for memorial activities.733

The grammatical and logical distinctions [haluqot ha-diqduq ve-haluqot ha-higayon] mentioned by Caspi also have parallels in Latin Christian sources. It is sufficient here to recall Hugh of Saint Victor’s definition: “The method of reading consists in dividing [modus legendi in dividendo constat]”734 Dividing the texts into small logical and grammatical units was a basic method of memorizing and “familiarizing” the text: the purpose was not simple the ability of mechanic recalling but understanding the texts with all its implications and integrating it into one’s personal spiritual life. Caspi’s starting point in reading the Bible was not very different from Hugh of Saint Victor’s one from this point of view notwithstanding the significant differences between Christianity and Judaism in dogmatic and hermeneutic assumptions.

The last of Caspi’s rules reads as follows:

The seventh rule is to know that the narratives of our Torah are true according to the literal sense [ke-pshutehem] [I mean the literal sense that is] understood by the competent readers [lit. “by those who understand their literal sense” etsel meviney pshutehem]. For Moses the prophet was given the truth from God – may He be exalted – whose stamp is truth. Nonetheless, though they are real literally there are mysteries / secrets hidden in them that are concealed from everybody except for a few and special individuals.735

It is remarkable that Caspi makes implicitly a difference between “literal sense” as understood by the vulgar readers that he rejects and the “literal sense” as understood by the competent readers that he accepts. If we asked him for an example he would probably reply that the vulgar reader believes that God has a body on the basis of such biblical phrases as “God’s hand / eye / etc.” whereas the competent reader (following the footsteps of Ibn Ezra and Maimonides) will understand that these phrases do not imply corporeality even on the level of literal exegesis.

For Caspi vulgar versus elite exegesis did not coincide with literal versus allegorical senses. The demarcation line was drawn rather between the vulgarly misunderstood literal sense and the genuine literal sense. Discovering the genuine literal sense of Scripture and recognizing the “hidden” sense lying behind it was part of the same exegetical program in Caspi’s thought.

What was the reason for that? I think there is no need for supposing other reasons than the ones pointed out above. The early Ibn Ezra supercommentators wanted to avoid the same Scylla and Charybdis as Saadyah gaon some three hundred years before. The only major difference was that – if our hypothesis proposed in the previous chapter is correct – the “Scylla” of vulgar interpretation was not so much the heresy of Haywayi or the Karaites but the traditionalists, such as Rashi and his disciples, and in a way Nahmanides as well, who denied philosophy’s role in exegesis and often embraced ideas that were nonsense for the followers of Maimonides. Philosophy’s role in exegesis was to block the way of such interpretations leading to absurd consequences. But that did not mean that whatever philosophical interpretation was acceptable for post-Maimonidean philosophers. Any proposal had to pass the test of the literal sense.

Literal sense was defined by the same sort of “realist” approach as was done by Saadyah gaon and Ibn Ezra. The early Ibn Ezra supercommentators probably used writing extensively in the everyday-life. The way they understood their private correspondence, economic notes and contracts was applied in biblical studies as well. This lead to “philological rationalism” in their exegesis what we usually identify as literal interpretation, and they sometimes called it peshat.

But this was not the only aspect of the usage of literacy in everyday-life and as a consequence in biblical exegesis either. Private letters contained sometimes eulogies in rather poetic language that were obviously not meant to be understood literally. Poems often contained allusions to well-known texts and ideas. These allusions sometimes were organized into elaborate allegories. Prayers, psalms and other religious texts evoked biblical imagery in general and many individual loci in particular. The Ibn Ezra supercommentators when they were praying in the synagogues had to recognize these places and had to meditate over these texts.

Moreover, the early Ibn Ezra supercommentators were familiar with a number of argumentative-scientific works, such as Maimonides’ GP, works by Aristotle, Galen, Ptolemeus, Averroes and Avicenna and other commentaries and epitomes written on them.

735 Caspi, Mishneh kesef, 49.
Studying these works they had to realize the implicit premises and the logical implications of the texts. The same intellectual procedures – pointing out implicit premises and implications – played very important role in halakhic literature as well.

To understand the Bible according to the “truth” meant for the supercommentators applying all the possible textual approaches to the Bible that lead to the recognition of truth in everyday-life situations and to exclude all other ways of interpretations be it midrashic, Kabbalistic or “naïve.” Literal exegesis was partly inspired by a pragmatic approach to the text inspired by the everyday-life usage of such texts as private letters, contracts, account-books etc. and partly by grammar and logic learnt from scientific books. Deeper interpretations were inspired by philosophy and natural sciences whence the content was often taken, by poetry and perhaps buildings and memory-images that presented the inspired the supercommentators to decode the “allusions” of the biblical texts, and by prayer, liturgy and other forms of devotion that showed the way text could be used for the sake of spiritual transformation.

The veridical self was formed first and foremost in the great laboratory of everyday life. This veridical self was responsible for both the literal and the philosophic / esoteric interpretations of the Scripture and for their intimate relationship.
Chapter 5: Conclusion: The Bible as “Thinking Machine”

When Spinoza rejected the idea that Moses and other biblical writers were great philosophers alluding to deep philosophical and theological mysteries in their books he took for granted two important premises: (1) the biblical books are documents; (2) philosophy is bound to arguments. The sketch of Spinoza’s argument is the following: Moses and other biblical authors never attempt to prove their opinions by rational reasoning; demonstration is a sine qua non for philosophy: therefore the biblical texts contain no philosophy. We do not have any other document concerning the education, intellectual level and aims of the biblical writers besides the Bible; therefore we cannot but conclude that philosophy played no role in Moses and the other prophets’ aims and thoughts.

In the previous chapters we have encountered a couple of texts written by early Ibn Ezra supercommentators that resemble Spinoza’s ideas in the *Theological-Political Treatise* to a surprising degree. However, the supercommentators did not accept by any means Spinoza’s key argument. For them it was evident that the Bible did contain philosophical doctrines and Moses and the other prophets were great philosophers.

The reason for this is that the early Ibn Ezra supercommentators did not subscribe to Spinoza’s two premises. The biblical books were more than historical documents in their eyes and philosophy was more than rational demonstration.736

The basic definition came from Maimonides in this case as well. It is not enough if you can prove the existence of God, Maimonides argues, you also have to realize the existence of God.737 The process of such realization was conceived as a spiritual transformation. You have to recall the philosophical doctrines in your life in order to mould yourself according to the correct teaching. Recollection was as essential part of philosophy as demonstration for post-Maimonidean Jewish philosophers. The Bible might be poor in demonstration but it is rich in symbols, allegories, visions and histories recollecting the essential doctrines of philosophy.

Actualization of the intellect was the most dramatic step of one’s spiritual development in post-Maimonidean philosophy, because immortality was believed to be dependent on the successful accomplishment of the process. Actualization of the intellect had two steps: The first was the understanding of philosophical doctrines including the demonstration of those propositions that are capable of being demonstrated. The second was the recollection of the doctrines as often as possible in one’s life. It is not enough to understand the doctrines once in your life, post-Maimonidean thinkers believed. You have to do your best to keep your intellect in an actualized state as long as possible. This is the way to immortality. Consequently, Jewish religion in all its aspects was reinterpreted as a great machine to keep one’s intellect in the actualized state.738

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736 Gyöngyi Hegedüs in her masterful dissertation on Saadyah gaon’s philosophy, proposes a distinction between “externalist” and “internalist” forms of knowledge within the oeuvre of the gaon. Some of the apparent self-contradictions of Saadyah’s two philosophical works written practically at the same time – namely, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, and the *Commentary on the Sefer Yetsira* – are due to the fact that Saadyah chose different approaches to reality in each of them. *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions* shows “externalism” and “foundationalism” whereas the *Commentary on the Sefer Yetsira* can be characterized by “internalism” and “coherentism.” These terms are taken from contemporary discussions about the nature of knowledge in the Anglo-Saxon philosophical tradition. Hegedüs emphasizes that Saadyah worked with both types of knowledge at the same time. Rational arguments and demonstrations are vital in Saadyah’s philosophy, Hegedüs argues, when he takes the first approach. However, when Saadyah takes the second approach he rather tries to work out a coherent decoding of a set of symbols. Cf. Gyöngyi Hegedüs: *Saadya Gaon: Philosopher or Apologist?* (Unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Leuven: Katholieke Universiteit Leuven, Institute of Philosophy, 2000), 67-76.

737 Cf. the section on spirituality in the Prolegomena.

738 A typical text evidencing these features is Joseph Caspi’s admonitions to his children (“ethical will” [*Sefer ha-musar*]); cf. Abrahams, *Hebrew Ethical Wills*, vol. 1, 127-161.
A thing that makes difficult the understanding of medieval Jewish philosophical texts for modern readers is the rhetorical character of these writings. The post-Maimonidean philosopher is often engaged in a sacred rhetoric that is akin to preaching and devotional literature. The point is often not to present new arguments and theories but to renew the readers’ spiritual life (first and foremost the author’s own spiritual life) by breathing new life into old texts, formulas, religious ideas and showing how the traditional texts are to be used to achieve immortality.

For example, Jedaiah ha-Penini’s commentary on the midrashim is a great collection of such meditations. Jedaiah points out again and again the wisdom that can be learnt from the old legends of the Talmudic times often deciphering them as allegories of the struggle between the body and the soul. The interpretation of Abraham’s vision in Genesis 15 attested in the supercommentary אַבְדַע נֶפֶשׁ also belongs to this genre. If you read it as a philosopher looking for arguments and clear-cut positions on metaphysical problems, you will be disappointed; hence the occasional complaints in secondary literature about the unoriginality of the “typical” post-Maimonidean philosopher. However, if you read these texts as a religious person trembling for salvation, they will be infinitely interesting.

Reading the Bible was an occasion for the post-Maimonidean philosophers to bring their intellect into actuality. Decoding the visual images enigmatic sentences or grammatical phenomena encountered in the biblical books they understood the intellectual content of the text and often recollected various philosophical ideas through this process. This was believed to be beneficial in itself for one’s achieving immortality. However, there was a further respect connecting philosophy and exegesis: the biblical text not only recalled philosophical theories but often stimulated the readers’ thinking and constrained the reader to modify and to improve the philosophical doctrines learnt from Aristotle or other sources.

The Bible was not a document but a “thinking machine” (Mary Carruthers) for the post-Maimonidean philosophers. Reading the Bible was a process of decoding and a process of spiritual ascension. The basic definition came from Ibn Ezra this time. The words had to be replaced by “senses” or “things” when you interpret the text. In Ibn Ezra’s celebrated metaphor (quoted in the previous chapter) the word is compared to the body and the sense to the soul implying that the later has a higher ontological status than the former. Understanding the sense of a text means ascension from the body to the soul. Both midrashic and geonic exegesis is rejected in Ibn Ezra’s introduction to the Pentateuch-commentary because of their verbalism: the midrashim only play with the words of the text without entering its sense; whereas the geonim introduce a vast amount of irrelevant scientific material into their commentaries and thus also fail to grasp the sense of the text. Ibn Ezra’s own project of literal exegesis is targeted at the “sense” of the text: the soul beyond the body.

Literal sense was decoded sense for Ibn Ezra. Literal exegesis meant to look beyond the superficial aspects of the text and see the deep structures such as the rules of Hebrew grammar, the chronology of biblical events, the astrological laws and divine providence working behind biblical history and the ultimate theological vision condensed in the creation narrative and in the divine names.

Since literal sense was already a decoded sense it was open towards further decoding. In fact, the exact border between literal and esoteric sense is often not clear in Ibn Ezra. What he calls sod, ‘secret’ or ‘mystery’ means only rarely a superimposed interpretation (for example in the case of the Garden of Eden it does). Irene Lancaster has nicely demonstrated that as a rule, the sod of a biblical verse in Ibn Ezra evolves out of grammatical and

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740 Cf. Mary Carruthers, Machina memorialis, esp. 35-52.
elementary exegesis through a process of further decoding. Understanding the *sod* is more often than not necessary for the full appreciation of the literal sense. The same intellectual process – decoding – is responsible for both the literal and the deeper senses. And decoding was believed to be paralleled by the spiritual elevation of the reader.

Decoding is the key for understanding the specific *productivity* of post-Maimonidean philosophy. The followers of Ibn Ezra and Maimonides discovered a great number of exegetical facts. The simplest process was identification. We have seen in the Prolegomena how enthusiastic Samuel Ibn Tibbon was when he managed to identify the position of King Solomon in Ecclesiastes 3 with that of Avicenna. Eleazar ben Mattityah identified the opinions of certain talmudic rabbis attested in rabbinic literature with philosophic and astronomical doctrines well-known in his own days. Identifying the “secrets of Ibn Ezra” meaning the “secrets of the Torah according to Ibn Ezra” was a basic occupation to virtually every supercommentator – the young Caspi being the only exception. Besides that the Ibn Ezra supercommentators sometimes tried to decipher the “secrets” of the Torah independently of Ibn Ezra: thus Eleazar ben Mattityah interprets the three angels appearing to Abraham as referring to the Active Intellect, the imaginative faculty, and good morals and Sen Bonet de Lunel interprets Abraham’s vision in Genesis 15 and the wells dug by Abraham and Isaac in an allegoric way. These were all significant facts in the eyes of the supercommentators. It was the virtue of Ibn Ezra’s commentary that reading and meditating over it led to the discovery of new facts.

But identification was not the only form and only a aspect of decoding. To identify correctly the position of Moses, a talmudic rabbi, Ibn Ezra or Maimonides in a certain question a supercommentator often had to recall and reconstruct philosophical and scientific arguments. Enigmatic sentences in the Bible, in Ibn Ezra and in Maimonides were sometimes decoded as condensed arguments. Moreover, explicit arguments in Ibn Ezra and Maimonides were reconstructed, refined and improved by the supercommentators. Solving apparent inner contradictions, raising and answering objections was part of the same exegetical process of decoding: the point was to get the sense out of the words, to apprehend the soul through the body. It is typical that criticizing Nahmanides for rejecting Ibn Ezra’s and Maimonides’ interpretation of Genesis 18 Eleazar ben Mattityah claims that Nahmanides “did not go deep enough to the matter.” Nahmanides’ failure was not due to factual or logical error according to Eleazar but due to his superficial reading and consequently misunderstanding of Ibn Ezra’s and Maimonides’ words. Had Nahmanides meditated more “deeply” over the two great sages’ texts he would have seen that all his objections could be answered from Ibn Ezra’s and Maimonides’ point of view.

Spinoza insisted that Scripture must be interpreted according to the original intention of its authors. All the Ibn Ezra supercommentators would agree with him. However, the “original intention of the author” did not mean the same thing for Spinoza and for the medieval Jewish philosophers. For Spinoza the original intention of the text was closed: this is what the text says, nothing less, nothing more. What is not *documented* by the text itself cannot be ascribed to the author. For the early Ibn Ezra supercommentators the original intention of the biblical authors – and also that of Maimonides and Ibn Ezra – was open toward further decoding and “deepening” of the sense. The fact that something is implied in the text meant that it was intended by the author. Further documentation concerning the original intention of the author was not required.

In the Middle Ages Scripture was often compared to a sea that can be sailed and discovered: its fish, pearls and other hidden treasures lying beneath the surface are to be

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uncovered. We have seen in the first part that Moses Nagari spoke about the “ocean of Ibn Ezra,” the deepness of which hides “pearls” that can be brought to the air. Joseph Caspi and Sen Bonet de Lunel also emphasized the “deepness” of Ibn Ezra’s “intentions.” Caspi said that perhaps nobody was able to grasp fully Ibn Ezra’s intentions. Bonet compared Ibn Ezra’s words to the words of the prophets. The pearls brought up from Ibn Ezra’s ocean – that is to say, the new facts discovered through a meditation over Ibn Ezra’s commentary – were believed to be parts of Ibn Ezra’s original intention. The same rule applied even more emphatically to Scripture.

However, this did not mean that the early Ibn Ezra supercommentators permitted whatsoever in the interpretation of Scripture, Ibn Ezra or Maimonides. The texts were “thinking machines” – but these machines had to be used properly. Caspi criticized heavily the incompetent readers of Ibn Ezra who attribute him ideas he never held – this criticism is in fact the leitmotif of his introduction to the supercommentary. Eleazar remarks that he has seen only “empty words” concerning Ibn Ezra’s comment on Genesis 12:6 in other supercommentaries. Complaint about the contemporaries’ misunderstanding of the “sage” Ibn Ezra’s words becomes a topos in later supercommentaries. On the other hand, Bonet declares in his introduction to Avvat Nefesh that truth is more beloved to him than Ibn Ezra. If he finds contradiction between Ibn Ezra and the truth, Bonet says, he will do his best to save Ibn Ezra’s fame. If this is impossible, Bonet promises to reject frankly and openly Ibn Ezra’s opinion, and he indeed does so in a couple of instances. The supercommentators did not think that whatever is true and useful is contained in Ibn Ezra. Joseph Caspi held the same opinion concerning biblical books as well: he argued that even the prophets wrote sometimes down erroneous views.

Perhaps the most important aspect of Ibn Ezra’s legacy for the post-Maimonidean philosophers was the insistence on the literal exegesis as a guarantee of the correct usage of the Bible as “thinking machine.” Literal exegesis stimulated philosophical and theological thought: theories were tested against the biblical reality accessible through literal exegesis. On the other hand philosophy and theology provided further considerations and perspectives on the literal sense. And the “literal sense” of the medieval Jewish philosophers, as has been pointed out already, was open towards deeper senses. As the supercommentators “deepened” their understanding of the literal sense they gradually went beyond it. It is often difficult to mark exactly where the literal exegesis ends and where the non-literal starts. The interpretation of Genesis 1:1 in the supercommentaries treated in part two illustrates the process of gradual deepening and leaving the literal sense well.

But this process was by no means arbitrary. It was regulated by the rules of Hebrew grammar, by logical rigor in philosophical argument, by attempts at consistency not only in logical terms but also in symbolism and imagery. Interpreting Genesis 15 as a prophetic vision Bonet argues for the correctness of his interpretation by pointing out that he is able to decode every element of the vision and that certain visual elements have exactly the same meanings in other biblical passages as well.

“Deepening” the senses of Maimonides’ and Ibn Ezra’s texts post-Maimonidean philosophers sometimes decide at a certain point that what follows from now on is no longer Maimonides’ or Ibn Ezra’s opinion but a new interpretation. Bonet’s refusal of Maimonides and Ibn Ezra’s opinion in certain questions is probably a result of such “deeper” interpretations. In other words, Bonet formulated objections against Maimonides and Ibn

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743 Moshe Idel described similar and even more radical processes of sublimation in Kabbalah; cf. his *Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretations* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002) esp. 45-110.
744 See on this Hayoun, *L’exégèse philosophique…*, 258-259.
Ezra’s positions and tried to solve them. This resulted in a series of improved, more and more refined versions of Maimonides’ or Ibn Ezra’s positions. However, at a certain point the “improved” theories became so different from the original ones that Bonet was no longer ready to attribute them to the masters. Therefore, he formulated them as his own theories and tried to show in what way they are better than the two great sages’ ones.

It was not always easy to decide whether an “improved” idea was still in accordance with the original intention of Ibn Ezra or it was rather an original idea of the supercommentator. In a remarkable passage Moses Nagari is unable to decide whether an interpretation is a “pearl” brought up from the “ocean” of Ibn Ezra or his own innovation. Discussing the connection between the movement of the Moon and the forty days of the flood (Genesis 7: 12; cf. Ibn Ezra on Genesis 7: 4) the supercommentator writes: “Whether Ibn Ezra intended this or not I will tell [my opinion].” What follows is an explanation of the flood in terms of astral influences on the earth though leaving room for the will of the Creator as well. A contemporary and compatriot of Moses Nagari interpreted a description of a storm in Virgil (Aenid 1, 52-57) as referring to the mind when it is vexed by anger “whether Virgil himself meant this while he wrote, or whether entirely remote from any such consideration, he wished only to describe a maritime storm in these verses and nothing else.”

To sum up, both the Bible and Ibn Ezra’s commentary were “thinking machines” for the early Ibn Ezra supercommentators. By meditating over the texts they were involved in a process of decoding the sense of the words, understanding the structures of arguments, discovering new problems and solutions. This process led to the discovery of many new exegetical facts. These discoveries were often ascribed to the original intentions of the authors – they were “pearls” hidden in Ibn Ezra’s “ocean.” In other cases the supercommentators attributed the discoveries to themselves. At the same time these discoveries proved the heuristic value of Ibn Ezra’s text as well.

“[A]llegory was not a hermeneutic mode; it was a state of mind” writes Frank Talmage in a classic study on medieval Jewish biblical exegesis. The reason for this, I think, was not so much the belief in “the numinous quality of language” as Talmage held but the concept of spiritual knowledge and ultimately the belief in the creation of the world. Once knowledge is conceived as a spiritual ascension a parallelism between the higher states of mind and higher ontological states of reality contemplated by the mind is easily posited. As you proceed in understanding the text you encounter higher and higher strata of reality.

This rule applies not only to the Bible but to virtually any type of texts. Spinoza contrasts the Bible with Euclid’s Elements. The basic difference between the two books according to Spinoza’s opinion is that Euclid can be understood solely by reason without needing any historical knowledge whereas the Bible can be interpreted only against its historical background. No medieval Jewish philosopher would put the difference in such terms. When you read Euclid you have to proceed from the words to the things. You must substitute, for example, the corporeal images in geometrical figures seen by your corporeal eyes with incorporeal Euclidean objects. The analogy between such deciphering of geometrical figures and “correct” understanding of prophetic visions was pointed out explicitly by the Ruah hen (see part I, section I, chapter 4). Similarly, in understanding the geometrical proofs one has to proceed from the grammatical or rhetorical connection between

745 MS Vienna, ÖNB, Cod. hebr. 106, fol. 20 r.
748 Ibid., 328.
the sentences to the logical ones. The basic process is decoding and ascension: the things of lower type have to be replaced by things of higher type. And as a matter of fact, the “literal sense” of Euclid is also “open” toward further decoding: Euclidean points and lines can be read as symbols for monads and dyads; their relationships can mirror deep theological mysteries, etc. For the medieval Jewish philosophers Euclid is no less mysterious than the Bible.

The ultimate hermeneutic assumption of post-Maimonidean biblical exegesis is the creation of the world. The things must be decoded because they were created by God. Creation means that God molded the things without expressing His essence in them. The created world “alludes” to God but does not offer a complete account of God. Science is a search into the structure and hierarchy of creation. When you understand something you cannot but perceive the operation of a higher existent in the background. This higher existent is responsible for the order experienced in the lower things and without grasping the higher existent you will not be able to see the order on the lower level either; you will see only confusion and contradictions. (Solving the apparent contradictions in authoritative texts was an important way of getting the “sense” out of the “words” for medieval readers.)

But the higher existents are in need of similar interpretation as well. This ascension stops only at the Will of the Creator: not because we can understand the divine will but because it is the ultimate mystery of existence. There are signs available to the human mind informing about the mystery of creation; interpreting these signs human mind can get closer to the mystery but in this life the mystery cannot be grasped. “Divine science” or metaphysics meant not only demonstrating propositions but also contemplating mysteries and interpreting signs for post-Maimonidean philosophers. Therefore metaphysics, the noblest part of philosophy and biblical exegesis were akin to each other in the eyes of medieval Jewish philosophers.

Moreover, the idea of creation also implied that the world is dependent on divine free will and providence. It was a question of outmost importance to understand how divine free will and providence works in our world to the degree possible for human beings. The Bible furnished the post-Maimonidean philosopher with a great number of historical examples to meditate on. Discovering a “fact” about the past of Israel was of great significance from the point of view of the “divine science:” for such facts were the basis for grasping the ways of providence and helped to formulate expectations for the future. Various biblical stories about the redemption of Israel in the past were (and are) read as implicit promises for future redemption by generations of Jewish readers. Post-Maimonidean philosophers were no exception to the rule.

In present day scholarship the relationship between philosophy and biblical exegesis in the works of post-Maimonidean thinkers is depicted sometimes as popularization. Philosophy was the truth for Maimonides’ followers whereas Scripture’s role was only to popularize this truth among the vulgar and according to the intellectual capacity of the vulgar. In other words, these modern scholars attribute Spinoza’s opinion to the medieval Jewish philosophers.

On the basis of what has been written above I strongly disagree with this approach. True, it was one function ascribed to the Bible by post-Maimonidean philosophers that it should help the vulgar to attain as much perfection as they can. However, from this it did not follow that the philosophers could dispense with studying the Bible.

According to a thesis associated with the name of Harry A. Wolfson medieval philosophy, founded in the most essential aspects already by Philo of Alexandria, was a philosophy “which placed itself at the service of Scriptures.” This fact was marked by the appearance of a new genre. “From now on, a new form of exposition appears in philosophic literature, the homily on some scriptural text or the running commentary upon some scriptural
The conclusions of this study corroborate Wolfson’s old thesis on the basis of a completely different methodological approach.

At this point we can reconsider the problematics of “rationalism” as well. Medieval Jewish philosophers were “rationalists,” we read often in articles and books or hear from lecturers today. The whole conflict over philosophy or Maimonideanism was a conflict in which “rationalists” declaring the “supremacy of reason” clashed with conservative religious ideas, sentiments, or mentalities. An excellent Israeli scholar categorized Ibn Ezra supercommentaries according to the “rationalist” and “astral-magical” interest of their authors (was astral magic not rational according to medieval norms?). However, it is difficult to find an assessment of the very concept “rationalism” in this context. It is certainly easier to assume it than to tell what it actually means.

In my opinion the following considerations are in place:

1. Medieval Jewish philosophers were no more rational beings than rabbis, Kabbalists, mystics, artisans, merchants, housewives, peasants, knights, bishops, kings, or queens.

2. Medieval Jewish philosophy as a set of discursive practices can be called generally “rational” meaning “scientific” in the Foucauldian sense of the word. Many of the discursive practices that made up medieval Jewish philosophy went through processes of epistemologization that resulted in different levels of scientificity. For example, textual criticism never became a science in the same sense as Hebrew grammar did. “Greek sciences” were eminently scientific; but when they were applied to biblical exegesis (the “mysteries” of maase bereshit or maase merkava) their scientificity was compromised by discursive practices that can be broadly subsumed under the category of “esotericism.”

However, Talmud-exegesis was no less scientific within the Tosafist-movement than in Maimonideanism – it can be characterized as an epistemologization following different patterns than that of Maimonideanism. The case of Kabbalah and German pietism (hassidey Ashkenaz) is less obvious, but it is not impossible at all that their development can also be analyzed in terms of epistemologization. In any case, biblical exegesis was a remarkably complex and technical art in both discursive formations.

In other words, if “rationalist” means “scientific,” post-Maimonidean philosophers were no more rational than some of their opponents. The fact that their sciences were based on different models than the Tosafists’ talmudic and halakhic discourses does not imply that one was more “scientific” than the other. In this sense of the word, the Tosafists were no less “rationalists” than Maimonidean philosophers.

3. There is a sense in which post-Maimonidean philosophers were “rationalist,” while Tosafists, Kabbalists, German pietists were not. This is “rationalism” as an ideology supporting processes of epistemologization (“we know it better than you, because we rely on reason”). Although the idea of “trustworthy tradition” and even the idea of “mystical illumination” played some role in the overall self-justification of post-Maimonidean philosophers, the greatest emphasis lied on “reason.” In other words, when a medieval Jewish philosopher argued for the legitimacy of his approach, he was more likely to refer to “reason” as something given to men by the decree of God to achieve perfection than to “tradition” or “illumination.”

Cf. Schwarz, Qemihot, segulot, ve-sikhletanut, 67-70.
A statement that can be called representative was pronounced by Abraham Maimonides in the course of the Maimonidean controversies: “Know ye God’s people and His heritance, that God differentiated men from animals and beasts through the reason, wisdom, and understanding which He granted them. He also differentiated Israel from the gentiles through the Torah He gave them and the percepts He commanded them. Hence reason preceded Torah, both in creation of the world, and in each and every one living in it. Reason has been given to man since the six days of creation; Torah was given to man 4,448 years after creation [...] Reason
“Rationalism” as an ideology was built on the much more widespread premises of “conservatism.” Medieval societies looked to the past for instructions and not to the future as modern societies tend to do. The key words were not “progress” or “evolution” but perennial patterns, models, ideals given by God to humanity. Medieval rationalism was no exception. To stand on the basis of reason meant to look for those rational models that were already established in a glorious if not mythical past (perhaps in the Garden of Eden) once for all. It was but logical to search for true philosophy in ancient books such as the works of Aristotle or the Bible itself, once the story of the prophets being the true masters of the ancient Greek philosophers was accepted. If Nature or Reason contradicted the old authorities it was convenient to suppose that the old texts were, in fact, not wrong, but they had to be interpreted differently, in accordance with “truth.” This consideration gave impetus to the ever-lasting work of reinterpretation, writing commentaries, supercommentaries, extracts, summas, etc.

For example, belief in God as Creator meant identifying and absorbing those pristine models that God established for humanity to mold their faith according to them. A “spontaneous” feeling of devotion was not satisfactory in itself: the correct pattern had to be absorbed to lead one’s worship of God. And this pattern could be found partly in ancient texts, first and foremost, in the biblical creation narrative, and partly in intellectual models that had to be extracted from the available texts. This is why the correct interpretation of be-reshit in Genesis 1: 1, and similar problems, became so important objects of knowledge in the Middle Ages. Knowing what Genesis 1: 1 meant was not just solving an isolated problem of Hebrew philology. It was one of the highest peaks of human knowledge. It amounted to understanding the pristine model God gave humanity to think about creation and to mold their faith accordingly. This is how faith was epistemologized.

As has been mentioned in the conclusion of Part Two, “canonizing” a corpus of authoritative literature was a key step in medieval ways of crossing the threshold of scientificity. The corpus defined the science itself and had normalizing effects on the discursive practices of the scholarly community attached to it.

The ultimate reason for the emergence of this specific form of scientificity was the conservative ideology of the Middle Ages. One had to look for pristine patterns, so they looked for pristine books. “Rationalism” did not exclude at all respect for “authorities.” On the contrary, it established the legitimacy of treating a range of non-Jewish texts as authorities, since “reason,” according to a most important slogan of the ideology, was not a “Jewish” property but shared by many non-Jewish sages as well. The specific form of scientificity that distinguished post-Maimonidean philosophers from Tosafists or Kabbalists included the acceptance of a corpus of non-Jewish texts as authorities. Thus the ideology of rationalism determined in a way the very basic form of scientificity. Foucault was right: the hold of ideology over sciences concerned the level of their existence.

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Footnotes:
52. It is possible to argue that medieval Jewish philosophers inherited “rationalism” as an ideology from Arabic-Aristotelian philosophers and ultimately, from ancient Greek philosophy. In this sense they were “Greeks.”
53. In this respect the rationalist ideology of post-Maimonidean philosophers differed profoundly from Kabbalists or tosafist ideologies: the latter were not ready to rely on non-Jewish texts except in very limited contexts (which is not to deny that they were actually influenced by non-Jewish intellectual currents). This difference in ideology had certainly important implications about many aspects of social life, e.g. relationship to non-Jewish scholars, which we cannot treat in the present context.
The Bible had an eminent role in post-Maimonidean philosophy: it was a “thinking machine” or heuristic research tool in discovering facts concerning the most important aspects of reality: the relationship between God and the created world, the manifestation of God’s providence, justice and wisdom in ancient history, guidelines about spiritual life and hope for salvation.
Conclusion: On the Sublime in Exegesis

The sea of Scripture, its inexhaustable, infinite sense, the deepness of its mysteries inpenetrable to the mind... These metaphors describe an experience of the sublime. Immanuel Kant defined “sublime” as a feeling evoked in the human mind by experiencing things that are “great” in an unqualified sense.755 One set of examples are taken from mathematics and connected to the mathematical idea of infinity (“the sublime in mathematics”). Another set of examples are taken from nature, the vision of the inexhaustible extension and power of sea being one of them (“the sublime in nature”). No doubt, medieval writers meant precisely this sort of vision of the sea when they compared Scripture to it. In other words, they described an experience of the sublime.

This experience concerned the sense of authoritative texts – which were authoritative for the very reason of their being places of the “sublime.” The “sublimation” of Maimonides and Ibn Ezra as human persons that we have encountered in the texts (Maimonides as “angel of God,” Ibn Ezra as “flower of sages” etc.) was a surface effect of the sublimation of the texts written by them. Just like Kant talked about “the sublime in mathematics” and “the sublime in nature” and Richir about “the sublime in politics” we can talk about “the sublime in exegesis.”

The sublime destabilized the canonized interpretations collected in the Talmud and other pieces of rabbinic literature. It opened up new dimensions called for new questions, new methods, new answers. The sense of Scripture became suddenly open and indeterminate. The symbols did not signify any more what they used to signify. A new world pregnant with possibilities emerged. Scripture became a sea: powerful, inexhaustable, mysterious, infinite. And a similar fate awaited for Ibn Ezra’s commentaries on the Torah as well, at least in some Jewish circles.

The experience of the sublime is dependent on culture. You will not see the sublime order in the movement of the heavenly bodies, the functioning of human body or the general structure of nature unless you spend many hours with studying astronomy, medicine, and natural philosophy. If Ptolemy, Galen, and Aristotle taught medieval people to experience the sublime in nature, Ibn Ezra and Maimonides taught the Jews to experience the sublime in biblical exegesis. They defined a set of competencies one had to acquire in order to be able to interpret Scripture. And the reward of a diligent student at the end of the day was the experience of the sublime: the sublime in exegesis.

This experience justified that set of discursive practices which made up post-Maimonidean biblical exegesis, even though this justification was retrospective. Just like in the case of astronomy, where a long and difficult learning process was “rewarded” and retrospectively justified by a direct experience of order in heaven, the confidence of post-Maimonidean philosophers in Maimonides and Ibn Ezra’s authority relied on a similar experience of “order” in exegesis. An order that was elusive and enigmatic, an order that was “above” human understanding, in one word, an order that was sublime.

“The sublime in exegesis” addressed a problem, or better to say, a trap in which any symbolic institution is caught medieval Jewish philosophy being no exception. This is the trap of “symbolic tautology.”756 You can prove Aristotle’s great theories if you accept Aristotle’s initial descriptions of elementary reality. But these descriptions already constitute a “symbolic institution.” Why should you accept exactly Aristotle’s initial descriptions? What prohibits

you to start from somewhere else? Apparently, a symbolic institution cannot ground itself on anything else than a set of already “instituted” symbols. That means that a symbolic institution is always arbitrary. It can be based on human conventions but not on the “nature of the things themselves.”

Spinoza’s criticism of Maimonidean exegesis in the seventh chapter of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* points out a similar “symbolic tautology” in Maimonides. In GP II, 25 Maimonides declares that he is ready to “twist” the sense of a biblical verse if it contradicts a demonstrated scientific or philosophical truth and so he does concerning the passages suggesting the corporeality of God. In this way Maimonides “proves” that Scripture is in harmony with philosophy. The method is hopelessly arbitrary, Spinoza concludes.

Experiencing the sublime in exegesis was a solution to this problem justifying the apparent arbitrariness of the exegetical methods at least retrospectively. The magnificent and inexhaustible “sea” of Scripture established a relationship between post-Maimonidean philosophy as a symbolic institution and a sublime reality which is beyond the reach of any human institution, and consequently, has the appearance of “objective reality.”

On the one hand, the experience of the sublime destabilized the established symbolic systems. There is something chaotic in the sublime that resists the human activity of ordering and systematization. But this is only one side of the coin. “Chaotic” is a relative term in this context: something can be chaotic only in relation to an order encoded into symbols. The feeling of the sublime is the feeling of the presence of something completely detached from human concerns, something which is infinitely “above” us. It is the feeling of a superior order. An order which is enigmatic because it escapes us, because we cannot control it, because it is detached from us, because we are excluded from it.

Nonetheless, according to Richir’s analysis, this aspect of the sublime contains an indefinite appeal to human beings “to be and to think,” to search for the enigmatic order and to get closer to its secrets. And also to be worthy of the experience, to elevate oneself to a higher level, to be “faithful” to it. 757 This appeal justifies the perpetual work of proposing ever new interpretations of the Holy Scriptures, to use courageously the symbolic systems (Maimonides and Ibn Ezra) that make such interpretations possible, and to continuously renew and recreate these symbolic systems by relating them again and again to the “abyss” of Scripture, that is to say, to reinterpret again and again the words of Maimonides and Ibn Ezra, to write commentaries and supercommentaries on them. Richir introduces the term *l’instituant symbolique* to signify this aspect of the sublime, namely, that, in an enigmatic way, by appealing “to be and to think,” it can “ground” symbolic institutions.

The emergence of this experience was conditioned by a number of discursive practices that were described on the previous pages. The fusion of Aristotelian discursive practices with biblical exegesis destabilized the sense of the biblical text. When Maimonides declared that *maase bereshit* (creation story) was the “same” as natural philosophy and *maase merkava* (Ezekiel’s vision) was the “same” as metaphysics, the point was not simply to impose Aristotelian theories on the biblical texts. The point was rather to open up new perspectives, new possibilities in exegesis. Maimonides’ statement destabilized the sense of Scripture. The meaning of words, phrases, sentences that used to be interpreted according to well established patterns were brought into a different orbit now, where they did not have fixed, “instituted” meanings yet, where the meanings were still “flowing” and requiring fresh hermeneutical approaches.

Herbert A. Davidson pointed out that Maimonides’ actual exegetical proposals concerning *maase bereshit* and *maase merkava* – that he presented as great “secrets” or

757 Cf. Richir, *Du sublime en politique*, 29. The theme of “imitating God” in the last chapter of GP can be analyzed according to Richir’s guidelines.
“mysteries” in an allusive way – were in all probability not new and not “secret” at all.758 Davidson is right; nonetheless, Maimonides’ enigmatic allusions had a liberating force insofar they opened up new horizons in biblical exegesis.759 This liberating effect – which was intimately connected to the “esoteric style” of using allusions instead of clear statements – was more important for Maimonides’ medieval readers than the actual content of the “secrets.” The same is true mutatis mutandis of Ibn Ezra. For the medieval followers such enigmatic remarks, “secrets,” and “allusions” did not simply impose a doctrine on Scripture but grounded a new culture of exegesis. They were the “foundational acts” of a new symbolic institution.

The fusion of Aristotelian discursive practices with biblical exegesis was made possible by the existence of “spirituality” as a general archeological figure in which “the knowable” was constructed as something that could be disposed in public spaces through various ways of encodement. Thus nature itself contained encoded allusions to the supernatural, and similarly, buildings, religious rites and texts were capable of being interpreted as encoded versions of the same common knowledge. There was no reason to think that Scripture was an exception. There was every reason to believe that Scripture was a great arcane of that knowledge that human beings needed to recall through the course of their life in order to achieve “perfection,” meaning spiritual perfection.

The emergence and stabilization of post-Maimonidean discursive practices was certainly encouraged by both discursive and social developments. We have pointed to the medieval experience of the sublime in nature that emerged as a consequence of the rediscovery of the “Greek sciences,” such as astronomy and medicine – not necessarily of “Aristotelianism” in a narrow sense. The new experience of nature destabilized the established symbolic institutions, political and religious alike. One possible way of dealing with the problem was to integrate the experience of nature into biblical exegesis, and through exegesis into “religion” as a redefined symbolic institution. This alternative could be rejected or embraced; the actual decisions were certainly connected to ongoing battles between various elites within and outside of the Jewish world. Unfortunately, it was not possible to treat this topic properly in the framework of the present study.

But is this the whole story? Do all the considerations summarized above explain the experience of the sublime in exegesis without which post-Maimonidean philosophy could hardly have any real credibility?

“The sublime in exegesis” was the ultimate condition of existence of post-Maimonidean biblical exegesis. To look for further conditions of existence is a task as difficult as to research the instituting principle of “the sublime,” of which Marc Richir happened to write the following remarkable sentence: “Et ce n’est que pour des raisons sociales et historiques, sûrement pas pour des raisons métaphysiques, que nous regretterons à lui donner le nom qui lui revient dans notre tradition: Dieu.”760

758 “It is hard to avoid a sense of bafflement... And the content of his [Maimonides’] discoveries, as far as one can see, is banal and anticlimatic. One profound secret turns out to be the commonplace division of the visible universe into two parts, and a second set of secrets is the familiar Aristotelian physical theory of four sublunar elements.” Davidson, Moses Maimonides, 344.
759 Cf. Davidson, Moses Maimonides, 340-351. It is indeed remarkable that Davidson, whose work is admirable in all other respects, shows so little sensitivity to this aspect of Maimonidean thought. This fact alone demonstrates the great distance between the spirit of our age and that of Maimonides.
760 Richir, Du sublime en politique, 28.
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