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Exegesis and Philosophy in the Writings of Abraham Ibn Ezra

By David Biale

Among medieval Jewish Bible commentators, none anticipated modern Biblical criticism as closely as the twelfth century Spanish philosopher, poet, astrologer, traveler and exegete, Abraham Ibn Ezra. While this fact has been noted in passing by commentators since the seventeenth century, no one has yet attempted to reconstruct Ibn Ezra's radical exegetical method from his often obscure commentaries.[1] Like modern critics, Ibn Ezra detected possible interpolations in the Pentateuch, which raise questions about Moses's authorship. He further evolved a theory of immanent *literalist* criticism and rejected reading the Bible with philosophical pre-suppositions. He appropriated the dictum *the Bible speaks the language of men* in order to explain difficulties that other commentators, while using the same expression, allegorized to suit their philosophies. But, in contrast to the Biblical criticism which began with Spinoza in the seventeenth century, Ibn Ezra did not so much want to sever the Bible entirely from philosophical speculations, as to harmonize it with the neo-Platonic and Aristotelian vocabulary with which he operated.[2] By selective application of science to scripture, Ibn Ezra tried to save the Bible from a scientific critique. As we shall see, the complex rejection and application of philosophy in exegesis was expressed by Ibn Ezra in a theory that the Bible represents a *dual perspective*: human and divine, colloquial and philosophical.

Our reconstruction of Ibn Ezra's exegesis will take the following form: we will first discuss some features of his exegetical theory, primarily his discovery of interpolations and his rejection of philosophical allegories. We will then point out the difficulties and ambiguities in the method, and, finally, attempt to resolve them with recourse to Ibn Ezra's cosmology.

The Exegetical Theory of Immanent Criticism

In his commentary on Deuteronomy 1.1-3, Ibn Ezra lists a number of obscure passages in the Bible that might be interpreted as interpolations. For example, in his commentary on Genesis 12:6, Ibn Ezra notes that the passage "and the Canaanite was *then* in the land" can be construed two ways. It might refer to a relationship between past and distant past: *before* Canaan conquered the land of Canaan, there were other inhabitants. Or, *there is a great mystery and the wise will remain silent.* The mystery is not difficult to guess: the passage might refer to a relation between present and past. The author wrote the verse *after* the Canaanite had been expelled from the land, namely after the death of Moses. Since the textual evidence in Genesis 10 implies that Canaan was the first to inhabit the land, Ibn Ezra seems convinced that the verse was written after the death of Moses. Indeed, there is little doubt that Ibn Ezra believed that each of the passages he lists in Deuteronomy 1:1-3 were interpolations.[3] However, as Richard Simon already pointed out in the seventeenth century and, as orthodox Jewish commentators also argue, Ibn Ezra by no means rejected Moses's authorship on the basis of these few interpolations.[4] His scathing remarks against Rabbi Yitzhak, who thought that the verse "and these are the kings who reigned in the land of Edom" (Genesis 36:31) was written during the reign of Yehoshofat, conclude that Yitzhak's blasphemous book should be burned. The best we can argue on the basis of scanty evidence is that Ibn Ezra was willing to explain certain passages by a theory of interpolations, but rejected those who applied this principle of "modern criticism" too freely when another explanation might work as well. This is not the only context in which Ibn Ezra appears as a cautious radical.[5] In any case, his predilection towards unorthodox interpretations led him to include commentaries even more radical than his own, if only in order to refute them. Thanks to him, we have become aware of the startling range of opinions in the scholarly Jewish world of his time.

But, Ibn Ezra's theory of interpolations is only a part of a wider theory of literal exegesis, or, attempt to understand the text immanently. His rejection of excessive allegorization in favor of literal exegesis rests on an attack against some of the exegetes of his day, notably a Rabbi Isaac,[6] and Sa'adia Gaon.[7] Excessive allegorization results from the desire to harmonize the Bible with the conclusions of medieval science and philosophy. For example, in his desire to show agreement between the Biblical story of creation and Ptolemaic astronomy, a certain Spanish scholar distorts both the literal meaning of the text and astronomical

science. In discussing Genesis 1:14 (and God said "let there be lights in the *sky* of the heavens."), he thinks that the *sky* is divided into eight spheres, seven for the planets and one for the fixed constellations. But, the text plainly says that there are heavens above this sky. Now, if the Spanish commentator understands the text literally, then his cosmology is faulty, since twelfth century cosmology did not recognize anything above the sphere of the fixed constellations. But, if he wants to preserve scientific precision, he must allegorize a text which seems absolutely clear. Ibn Ezra does not merely oppose insertion of any scientific ideas into exegesis; rather, he objects to distorting the text by inserting science, or misinterpreting science in order to fit the text. Thus, on the same passage in Genesis:

> and in this path rose Sa'adia Gaon of the Exile, and in his commentary on "let there be lights" he inserted opinions contradicting the knowledge of astronomy according to the astronomers.[8]

Ibn Ezra's attack on the use of *foreign science* is part and parcel of a general criticism of excessive allegorization.[9] In opposition to those who try to fit the text to their philosophical pre-conceptions "we will not search along the wall like blind men in order to pull out things according to our needs. And why should we turn the obvious into the hidden?"[10] The first task of exegesis is to discover the literal meaning of the text.[11]

Ibn Ezra accepts the medieval aversion to anthropomorphisms, but rejects excessive allegorization of them. For instance, on the verse, "And God said, 'let there be light,' " Sa'adia Gaon wants to elicit proof from the text for his theory that there is no mediation between God and creation. Hence, he interprets *and God said* to mean *and God willed.* Sa'adia presupposes that God's will is not mediated as an efficient cause. Ibn Ezra criticizes Sa'adia on the grounds that grammatically, the text could not have meant *and he willed* or else it would have said *and he said there to be.* (Infinitive as opposed to imperative.) This ostensibly trivial grammatical point conceals a deeper argument: if the literal sense of the text contradicts a proposed allegory, then the allegory is invalid. However, far from suggesting that God actually speaks, Ibn Ezra also allegorizes the text, but not by substituting another expression. He understands the phrase *God said* in everyday terms: if a king orders his servants to do something, his verbal command indicates that he need not physically exert himself. The allegory serves a pedagogical rather than philosophical

purpose: to teach that no matter *how* God creates, he does not exert himself.[12] The allegory is permissible because the very usage of language in the Bible suggests it; Sa'adia's allegory imports a philosophical preconception into the text and thus distorts the literal (and grammatical) meaning of the verse.

Ibn Ezra's method is, then, one of immanent allegorization. In distinction to Sa'adia, he takes his metaphors from the language of the Bible itself, rather than substituting another, externally-derived expression. Sa'adia's error is in searching for philosophical precision in the Bible. Ibn Ezra argues instead for a non-technical exegesis: "the Bible speaks the language of men."[13] The application of human adjectives to God is part of the Bible's non-technical, colloquial language. For instance, the Bible itself admits that "the Eternity of Israel will not lie or change his mind, for he is not a man to change his mind."[14] But, in another place, it clearly states that "God changed his mind."[15] No allegorical substitution can solve the contradiction without a gross distortion of the text; instead, Ibn Ezra explains that in the latter verse, the *Bible speaks the language of men.* We are not permitted to infer anything positive about God (for example, whether he changes his mind) from the use of any given colloquial metaphor. In fact, this dictum is the most common explanation in Ibn Ezra's commentaries for passages suggesting either that God has a body[16] or emotions.[17]

Since the purpose of the Bible's author was pedagogical and not philosophical, he accomodated his work to the language and understanding of common men. The perspective from which the Bible observes the world is also human. For instance, the creation of the world must be understood from an earthly point of view: the heavens in the creation account are merely the heavens we see, the direction upwards, and not the *heavens above the heavens.* (*shmay ha'shamayim* – the supra-lunar world). Here again, the words "heaven" and "earth" are colloquial rather than scientific. At least in its discussion of creation, the Bible is concerned only with the sub-lunar world that is observable by men; a description of the supra-lunar world can be found in the books of the astronomers. Only by understanding creation from a human perspective can we account for the scientifically puzzling implication in Genesis that the moon is larger than the stars.[18] Only by our principle that the Bible speaks not just the language of men, but indeed from the perspective of man, can we resolve the tensions between science and scripture. In answer to Sa'adia's school (and, in fact, much of medieval thought) Ibn Ezra boldly asserts that the Bible does not contain all knowledge; its pedagogical focus is man in his

everyday needs. Hence, its limited scope, its earthly perspective and its ordinary language.

To be sure, the subject matter of the Bible is holy, but its means of communication is worldly. Although excellent knowledge of Hebrew is necessary for exegesis, the status of the Biblical language is no different than any other human language. For Ibn Ezra, language is purely instrumental. No philosophical conclusions can be drawn from minor word variations, as long as the essential meaning is preserved.[19] For instance, the differences in language between the Exodus and Deuteronomic versions of the Decalogue are differences in form, but not in meaning: "Know that the words are like bodies and the meanings are like souls and the relation of the body to the soul is like a *tool.*"[20] Ibn Ezra's doctrine that the Bible speaks the language of men is a commentary on language itself. Man uses metaphors that are taken *neither from the worlds above him or below him.* Hence, such expressions as *the mouth of the earth* and *the hand of the Jordan.*[21] The search for knowledge begins with man himself: "the principle is: how can man search to know what is above him if he doesn't know his own soul and body."[22] The Bible is the beginning of all knowledge, but it is not in itself all knowledge.

We are now in a better position to understand Ibn Ezra's rejection of philosophical allegories in favor of immanent metaphors. Unlike a univocal, philosophical vocabulary, the Biblical language is ambiguous, like any other ordinary language. Only when an ambiguity in language exists is allegorization permissible, and, then, the non-literal meaning must be taken from the Bible's own use of language. For instance, the verse on *circumcision of the flesh* defines circumcision. But the phrase *uncircumcised of the heart* (Deut. 10:16) contradicts man's reason, since literal circumcision of the heart would clearly be fatal. Now, in order to avoid this absurdity, the terms *heart* and *circumcision* must be understood as ambiguous: they can stand for *thoughts* (i.e. as metaphors) as well as for their literal significations. This allegory is suggested by the Biblical language itself, which often uses parts of the body to *refer to two things* (the actual organ and something metaphorically implied). Similarly, the *tree of knowledge* is puzzling, for surely Adam and Eve were created with some faculty of knowledge. But, in Biblical Hebrew, *knowledge* is an ambiguous expression, since it can also stand for carnal knowledge. The only way to understand the passage is by means of the second, metaphorical meaning.[23] In both cases, man's reason acts as a negative litmus test to determine where there is an absurdity and where to suspect an ambiguity.

To conclude our reconstruction of Ibn Ezra's method, we have seen how the doctrine that *the Bible speaks the language of men* provides an alternative to philosophical allegorization of the Bible, while still avoiding unthinking literalism. Given Ibn Ezra's belief in the fundamentally *human* nature of the scriptures, it is no surprise that he suggested (implicitly) an historical approach to the question of the Bible's authorship in his hints of interpolations.

Tensions in the Method

The particular linguistic analysis necessary for the literal understanding of the Bible is based on a faculty of reason that can detect the ambiguities of Biblical language. We have called this a *negative* litmus test for immanent ambiguities: reason does not dictate what the text should say, as Sa'adia would have it, but rather detects where the text is problematic, contradicting man's reason:

> Every matter of a commandment, small or large, is weight on the scales of the heart, since there is in the *heart a faculty of reasoning* implanted from the wisdom of God. And, if reason will not tolerate the matter, or it contradicts the evidence of the senses, then it is permissible to search for an allegory.[24]

What is the nature of this faculty of reasoning (*shikul ha'da'at*) which is necessary for exegesis? Is it the property of a philosophic elite or of all men? If we examine the above statement from Ibn Ezra's Introduction to the Pentateuch, we are puzzled by the use of the word *heart*. Does it refer metaphorically to the highest soul (*neshama eliyona*), as it does in his commentary on Genesis 1:1?[25] Or does it refer literally to the physical organ? An examination of other texts gives us the answer that it is, indeed, the second, literal meaning. Basing himself on Sa'adia's tripartite correspondence of parts of the body to psychological faculties, Ibn Ezra writes in his commentary to Exodus 23.25-26:

> The *neshama* is wisdom, and it is situated in the brain . . . the spirit is in the *heart* and man lives through it, and it is the faculty that seeks strength to overcome all that stand against it and it is the master of anger . . . and the *nefesh* is in the liver and it is the urge to eat.

Furthermore, we learn from the commentary on Ecclesiastes 7:3 that

> Man has three souls. One is the vegetable soul . . . and it is the soul of desire and need to drink and eat. The second soul is the animal soul and it is the seat of the five senses and of locomotion and this soul is also in man. But only man has the third soul which is called *neshama*; it distinguishes between truth and falsehood and is the seat of wisdom. The *second soul* is the intermediary between the two other souls and God gave *reasoning* to man which is called *heart*.

Heart, then, is a precise term for the second soul which governs the senses and the passions. Apparently, the *shikul ha'da'at* is a type of practical reasoning which co-ordinates the evidence of the senses (*common sense* in the medieval use of the term). This faculty is universal: "the reasoning ability that God has implanted in the heart of *every man*."[26] Yet, the wisdom to distinguish between truth and falsehood is situated in the brain, and although perhaps present *in potential* in all men, it is only developed in the philosopher. There is, then, a distinction between two types of reasoning and, by implication, two types of knowledge: philosophical speculation that leads to knowledge of *truths*, and practical reason which provides, among other things, a universal moral sensibility.[27] It is this latter *shikul ha'da'at* that is necessary for exegesis. As we have noted, it is not a positive philosophic reasoning, but a universal sensitivity to what is ambiguous in ordinary language.

Can any man with a good knowledge of Hebrew then be a perceptive Biblical interpreter? The truth is not quite so simple. As we have already seen, limited allegorization is permissible in the case of crude anthropomorphisms ("and God *said*, 'let there be light'"). But, does a conception of God without human characteristics belong to common human knowledge or only to philosophers? If all men possessed an abstract notion of God, then the *language of men* would have no need for recourse to anthropomorphisms at all in describing God. Clearly, Ibn Ezra did not hold that all men innately know God to be without human features; this knowledge is a *secret* possession of philosophers. If this is the case, then it seems that Ibn Ezra did not rigorously maintain his distinction between philosophical and practical reasoning; philosophical pre-conceptions *are* allowed to dictate exegesis in detecting anthropomorphisms.

Our suspicion of a possible ambiguity in Ibn Ezra is reinforced when we find that certain passages of the Bible are only comprehensible, in his view,

with the aid of scientific philosophy. For example, in his commentary on Psalm 19:2-8, he claims that the text is obscure without the aid of astronomy:

> 'the heavens relate the glory of God and the sky tells of the work of his hands' – this psalm is very honored and it is connected with the workings of the heavens, and now I will explain it briefly, but he who has not learned astronomy will not understand it.

Unquestionably, the meaning of the word *heavens* is different in Genesis and in Psalms, since in the one it is limited to the visible sky, and thus precludes the aid of astronomy, while in the other it requires it. While in the first, the literal meaning of the text is obscured by the insertion of a scientific discourse, in the second, it is meaningless without it. In the first, the word has a vernacular meaning, while in the second, it has a technical scientific sense. In this latter case, reason, as Ibn Ezra has defined it, is insufficient for understanding the passage; external, scientific knowledge is required. Moreover, in this passage at least, the Bible speaks from a *heavenly* rather than *human* perspective.[28] Our faith in the consistency of meaning is undermined by this sudden switch in perspective and vocabulary.

Resolution of the Tensions: the Dual Perspective Doctrine

We have discovered a serious tension and potential inconsistency in Ibn Ezra's exegesis between the rejection of philosophy and use of philosophy; at times, it seems, the Bible speaks in the language of men, while at other times, it uses words in a precise technical fashion. I shall try to prove that this *dual perspective* is a result of the very nature of the cosmos as Ibn Ezra understood it, and it only becomes consistent once we understand his cosmology.

In Ibn Ezra's cosmos there are three worlds, arranged hierarchically: upper, middle and lower.[29] The upper world is that of the incorporeal angels, who control the other two worlds.[30] The middle world (supra-lunar) contains the spheres of the stars and the planets. Each sphere is controlled by an intelligence or angel and obeys fixed laws. The combination of the planets and constellations in different configurations directly influences events in the sub-lunar, or lower world:

> The middle world of the stars and planets has many changes, due to which creatures in the lower world change in their essences and also

> in their accidents. But the essences and the light (i.e., accidents) of the bodies of the middle world *do not change*. . .[31]

The sub-lunar world is fundamentally different from the supra-lunar world, since its four elements are continually subject to dissolution and recombination; the sub-lunar world is characterized by change, while the upper worlds are characterized by permanence.[32] In another formulation, "the general is preserved while the particular is lost."[33] The term *general* here refers to both the form of a species and the laws which govern it; *particular* signifies the *accidents* which distinguish one individual in a species from another,(i.e., the tangible modifications of the *essence* such as shape, color). Now, as we have seen above, the source of these accidents is also the constellations: "the stars are the cause of visible images."[34] But, they are transmitted to the sub-lunar world indirectly, by mediation of the moon.[35] Somewhere in the process of mediation, the fixed number of combinations of the constellations proliferates into an infinite variety of accidental possibilities in the sub-lunar world:

> Although I cannot count the individuals (in the sub-lunar world), their genera (in the supra-lunar world) are preserved, known and counted.[36]

This apparent tension between the finitude of forms and the infinitude of individuals in the sub-lunar world, is reflected in the Bible itself.[37] In his interpretation of Ecclesiastes I, Ibn Ezra agrees with the pessimistic passage *there is nothing new under the sun.* But, on Psalm 19:3, he gives a mathematical analogy to the constant flux of the world, an arithmetic series which he claims cannot be predicted by a formula. So it is with the world *because there is something new every day.* Nonetheless, there is no contradiction between the two passages: "and there is no claim that Ecclesiastes contradicts this, since there it speaks of the *general* (*Klal*)."[38] The Bible speaks from two different, but non-contradictory perspectives:

> The movements of the spheres are fixed from one perspective and changing from another; they move on straight paths *in relation to themselves* and not on straight paths from *the viewpoint of the inhabitants of earth.*[39]

From the perspective of the general (the supra-lunar world), the stars are fixed, their combinations finite, their paths constant; from the perspective of earth, their combinations are infinite and their paths variable.

The laws of nature we derive by observing the world around us are relative, because they are prejudiced by our limited perspective. However, the objective laws of nature, derived through philosophical reasoning, may seem to contradict our observed laws. Nonetheless, we are not dealing with two contradictory sets of laws, but instead, two perspectives. Consider the following analogy: Newtonian physics is a precise description of rectilinear motion on earth. But, applied to motion in space approaching the speed of light, it is inadequate. From a *general* perspective, Newtonian physics appears to contradict Einsteinian physics. From an earthly perspective, it is a sufficiently accurate approximation. A similar principle applies to the Bible itself. Certain passages allude to the *general,* while others refer to the *part*, or human perspective. To return to a previous example, the moon is called one of the "greater luminaries" from the viewpoint of man. Similarly, David is called *gadol* (large) by Samuel in relation to his brothers, not because of his physical size, but by virtue of his moral stature.[40] *Size* has two meanings: technical (absolute physical dimensions) and relative-metaphorical. The colloquial usage derives from man's subjective perception, whether of the moon or King David. Hence,

> if one should ask: "haven't the astronomers shown that all the stars with the exception of Venus are larger than the moon and yet it is written 'the large luminaries'," the answer is that the meaning of 'large' is not by virtue of the physical body, but only because of the *light*.[41]

The relation of man to an object is through perception of its *accidents*: "the senses perceive the accidents,"[42] and "the eye does not see the sun but the rays emitted by it."[43] The limit on man's ability to perceive the *Klal* is part of the limit on his practical reason, namely, that his information comes through his senses. His knowledge of the supra-lunar world is indirect. That which appears to be changing in the constellations is really just a change in the perceiver himself:

> The changes in causes are a result of changes in the nature of the perceiver and the thoughts of each man change according to the nature of his body . . . (as effected) by the constellations . . . . and the states . . . and foods.[44]

This geographical and dietary explanation for different mentalities also explains why men have different conceptions of God. Since God is one,

foreign Gods must refer to a distorted, but not necessarily completely false concept of God. Interestingly, Ibn Ezra hints that the physical conditions of the land of Israel may allow a purer perception of God there than in other places.[45]

Everyday language is drawn from this ethnocentric perspective; since human beings only perceive the accidents tangible in the sub-lunar world, their language is drawn from their images of that world. Hence, the names of God which describe His perceivable attributes (*Shaddai, Elohim*) are borrowed from the language of men as opposed to God's essential name (YHVH).[46] The language of the Bible is an accommodation to man's limited perception. But, since perception varies according to geographical factors, it is likely that colloquial language also varies according to location. Much of the Bible – and particularly certain of its commandments – is then accommodated to the specific understanding of the Jews and their language.[47]

But is man forever doomed to his shadowy cave, incapable of understanding the fixed laws which govern the perceived chaos of his world? Certainly not. The philosopher is able to view the universe from a universal perspective and grasp the laws of the supra-lunar world which govern the sub-lunar world. Knowledge of the sciences is necessary for man to rise above his human perspective and *reach God.* Certain passages in the Bible teach us this doctrine that the way to God lies in progressive accumulation of knowledge:

> 'let us pursue knowledge of God because His origin is like the dawn' – pursuit of knowledge of God is the secret of all the sciences and only for this reason was man created. But, he cannot know God until he has learned many sciences, which are like a ladder that rises to the highest level. And the meaning of 'dawn' is that in the beginning, the wise men will know God by His deeds (i.e., events in the sub-lunar world) like the dawn, and, minute after minute, the light grows until he knows the truth.[48]

Man need not remain *land-locked* because he is not merely a creature of the sub-lunar world. As a "microcosm of the universe"[49] man's highest soul corresponds to the *soul of God,* while his vegetative soul corresponds to the sub-lunar, material world. The process of overcoming the lower soul is often dialectical, since the principle of one soul may be the very opposite of its competitor. Hence, Ecclesiastes says that *anger is better than joy,* but also that *anger is the province of fools.* But, the two passages

are not contradictory, says Ibn Ezra in response to rabbinical objections.[50] The first refers to the conflict between the joyful vegetative soul and the angry animal soul. The accumulation of knowledge corresponds to a progressive purging of passions from the soul until one reaches the ideal of contemplation.

But, philosophical contemplation is not in itself knowledge of God; the philosopher cannot by himself attain this knowledge. The best he can hope for is a Stoic resignation to the determined actions of the constellations:

> The philosopher who has no inheritance or money will be happy in his knowledge and will not be angry at his poverty because his destiny was already decreed from the creation of the world . . and he who has a corrupt horoscope in matters of money or other matters has no redress.[51]

At this stage in our inquiry, it seems as if an unbridgeable chasm lies between the human and philosophical perspectives. While the uneducated man makes value judgements about events in the sub-lunar world, the philosopher understands that "the constellations were not created to do good or evil, but they only proceed in their course."[52] While for the uneducated, miracles are possible, the philosopher recognizes that all changes in our world are explainable by laws. The common man thinks he sees God's hand in the world, but the philosopher tells him that he is simply ignorant of astrology.

It is certainly true that Ibn Ezra tries to explain miracles as unusual, but still natural, phenomena. For example, he explains the parting of the Red Sea by a meteorological theory. In his discussion of the *wind of God* in Genesis 1:1, the wind is to be understood literally; God uses the wind as his angel or messenger. With the exception of the creation of man, the creation of the sub-lunar world is a natural separation and re-ordering of the already-existing four elements. His treatment of the word *creation* (*briyah*) hints that it means *molding* or *cutting* from pre-existent matter, rather than *creatio ex nihilo.* The *letters and signs* that are so often taken to be miracles are only apparently so in the lowest world. They therefore do not appear in texts such as Ecclesiastes, which are concerned with the fixed laws of the upper worlds.[53] Those miracles often associated with the prophets are usually just natural *signs,* which do not contradict natural law.[54]

Are miracles then simply an illusion of the human perspective? Ibn Ezra's negative answer to this question lies at the heart of his attempt to

synthesize the human and universal perspectives in a religious vision of exegesis. According to Ibn Ezra, the totality of the universe includes a principle higher even than the constellations and their governing intelligences. This is the "essential name of God acting as an attribute name."[55] God can intervene in the operation of *general providence* and thus improve or damage the fate of an individual:

> God said to Abraham before "I will multiply your seed," "I am El Shaddai," which means the director of the highest constellations. Not that he *alters* the constellations, only when a man knows and adheres to his name, he will do him *good* that is not in his constellation . . . and that is the secret of the whole Torah.[56]

The value-free operation of the constellations is given value standards not only by the judgment of man, but also by the action of God. An alliance between man and God against the indifferent action of the heavens is possible. However, God does not abrogate natural laws when he performs miracles, but rather circumvents or moderates them, often with the aid of natural causes.[57]

Ibn Ezra's attempt to harmonize deterministic astrology with God's special providence leads him to a reinterpretation of the rabbinical doctrine *Israel has no constellation.* In the Talmudic Tractate Shabbat (156A), a long discussion of the worth of astrology is concluded with the admonition to a believer in the stars: "abandon your horoscopes, since Israel has no constellation." By implication, the rabbis rejected astrology as a form of idol worship. But, according to Ibn Ezra, all nations, including Israel, are under the influence of the stars. Only Israel has the ability to escape by direct appeal to God himself. The appeal to special providence is only possible by direct communication with God, a uniting of man's reason with God's, independent of any intermediaries. Among the prophets, only Moses attained this personal contact with God. Nonetheless, Moses provided the Jews with a way of reaching God without the gift of prophecy: the Bible itself. Even the uneducated Jew who follows the commandments can apparently escape his pre-determined fate.[58]

The God who performs miracles is not a transcendent being who suspends the fates with a bolt of lightning. Special providence is a result of the very nature of God himself: "God is one, He creates all and He *is* all."[59] God differs from everything within the universe in that he is the *whole* while everything else is only a *part*. The universe is not separate

from God; it *is* God. The angels discussed in Genesis 1:1 (*elohim*) are not just natural phenomena harnessed as God's messengers. Because they carry God's name (*my name is in him*), they are *emanations* of God.[60] At this juncture, Ibn Ezra falls squarely in the neo-platonic tradition in which the universe emanates from God.

We can now understand the peculiar relationship between those names of God drawn anthropomorphously from the sub-lunar world and the essence of God. "A speaker cannot compare the works of God to anything else except His works, since everything is His works."[61] When we describe God with anthropomorphisms, we do not contradict God's essence, because those *accidental* terms are reflections or emanations of His essence. Hence, anthropomorphisms are not total falsehoods. They express a partial view of God, since, indeed, every element of the universe is part of God. On a pedagogical level, the language of men has a limited (although crucial) status. But, philosophically, the everyday language is as important as a technical, scientific vocabulary, only its object is this sub-lunar world.

While an individual part of the universe consists of necessary essence and contingent accidents, only God is necessarily both essence and accidents together. From an earthly perspective, change is a perception of new accidents. But, in relation to God, change is essential. This is what Ibn Ezra means when he says that "the part cannot change the part, only the whole can change the part."[62] In this sense, the astrologer may predict the future, as Bilaam does, but he cannot change fate; only the man of faith, in his communion with the whole can evoke miracles. When linked by faith to God, our perceptions of infinite multiplicity and change in this world are not illusions, but an integral part of God's dialectical emanations into the parts of the universe. Only by starting with the earthly perspective of Biblical knowledge can man rise to knowledge of the supra-lunar spheres. Only by dialectically combining both types of knowledge can man overcome fate and unite himself with the whole of the universe.

We have now reached the end of our effort to reconstruct Ibn Ezra's exegetical theory on the background of his philosophy. We are finally at a position to understand the doctrine of accommodation as a synthesis between the human and cosmological perspectives. The Bible contains certain passages where cosmological knowledge is necessary for exegesis, while other passages must be understood in everyday language. However, our ability to distinguish between the two perspectives depends on our understanding of philosophical truths. We know that the creation account must be understood as the creation of only the sub-lunar world, because philosophy describes the supra-lunar world and we do not find it in the

literal story before us. Ibn Ezra's exegetical theory is built on a circular argument: to understand the pedagogical parts of the Bible, one does not need philosophy, but to discover which passages require philosophy and which do not, philosophical knowledge is necessary. To follow the Bible's teaching, and thus circumvent astrological fate, one need not be a philosopher. But, the Biblical commentator who teaches the common men how to read the Bible, requires a philosophical education. The Bible does not contain all knowledge, but neither, for that matter, does philosophy. Only a synthesis of the two brings salvation.

Footnotes

Introductory Note: The outlines of Ibn Ezra's exegetical theory were developed in part in a seminar with Professor Amos Funkenstein in the Fall of 1973. I am grateful to Prof. Funkenstein for many valuable suggestions and criticisms.

Note on editions: All references to Ibn Ezra's commentary are given according to the relevant Biblical verse. The *Mehokekei Yehudah* (Bnei Brak pub. Horev, 1961) edition was used for the commentary on the Pentateuch. Unless otherwise noted, the references are to the long recension. The Shiloa edition of the *Mikraot Gedolot* (Israel, 1970) was the source for the commentaries on the remaining books of the Bible.

1. The first modern commentator on Ibn Ezra was Baruch Spinoza, *Theological-Political Treatise,* ch. VIII. See also Richard Simon, *Histoire critique du vieux Testament,* Paris, 1680 (Introduction, p. 35, p. 49). For modern critics, see Isaac Husik, "Maimonides and Spinoza on the Interpretation of the Bible," *Supplement to the Journal of the American Oriental Society,* No. 1, (Sept. 1935); Asher Vizer, "Ibn Ezra k'parshan," *Sinai* 62 (1967) 113-126; D. Rosin, "Die Religionphilosophie Abraham Ibn Ezras," *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judentums,* 42 (1898), 17-33; et passim, 43 (1899), 22-31 et passim.

2. For Spinoza's exegetical method and its basis in his natural science, see the *Theological-Political Treatise,* particularly ch. 3. For the relation of Spinoza to seventeenth century Biblical criticism, see Klaus Scholder, *Ursprunge and Probleme der Bibelkritik in 17 Jahrhundert,* (München: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1966). See also Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken, 1965). Despite Strauss's effort to show the connections between Spinoza's critique of religion and his exegesis, he exaggerates his case. For Spinoza, imagination (the source of revelation) has a legitimate epistemological status; its ideas may be confused, but they are not categorically false. Hence, revelation is a vague reflection of philosophic truth. To fully understand Spinoza's exegesis on the background of his philosophy, one would have to do what Strauss largely ignored: a careful study of Spinoza's *Ethics* together with the *Theological-Political Treatise.*

3. For instance, Og's bed seems to refer to an historical artifact known to a later author, most likely no earlier than King David who conquered Rabbat Ammon where the bed was on display. Ibn Ezra does not comment on Deut. 3:11, where the passage appears and leaves it to us to draw our own conclusions. The *secret of the twelve* so often discussed in the Ibn Ezra literature, is indeed obscure. It does not seem to refer to Deut. 1:1-5, where the problem seems to be the expression *across the Jordan* implying that the introduction to Deuteronomy was written by someone who had already crossed the Jordan. Nor does it refer to the last twelve verses in Deuteronomy as both Friedlander and Leib think, since he explicitly says that Joshua wrote the passage (an accepted interpolation): here there is no need for a secret. Neither could it have been the *twelve stones* referred to in Deut. 27, since Ibn Ezra there explicitly endorses the opinion of Sa'adia Gaon (itself a rare occurrence) that the stones simply contained a number of commandments of warning.

4. Simon, op. cit., p. 49; M. Friedlander, *Essays on the Writings of Ibn Ezra,* (London 1886), p. 60 (Friedlander's book is the only in depth study of Ibn Ezra, but it bears the bias of a hagiography. It is an indispensable source of references for the philosophical allusions in Ibn Ezra's commentaries). See also the commentary *Mehokekei Yehudah* by Yehudah Leib, which directly addresses Spinoza in defence of Ibn Ezra (Deut. 1:1-5). Spinoza's view is found on pp. 120-121: "Aben Ezra, *Theological-Political Treatise,* trans. Elwes (N.Y.: Dover, 1951), a man of enlightened intelligence and no small learning who was the first to treat of this opinion (that Moses was not the author of the Pentateuch), dared not express his meaning openly."

5. He argued that Job was translated from Aramaic into Hebrew. He also claimed that there were two authors of Isaiah, using the historical argument that Cyrus came during the Babylonian exile and the author of Chapter 40 onwards must have lived during the exile, unlike the author of the first 39 chapters who clearly lived before. The argument is couched in veiled language.

6. Perhaps Isaac ben Suleiman or Isaac Israeli whose neo-Platonism resembles Ibn Ezra's and may have been one of his sources. See A. Altmann and S.M. Stern, *Isaac Israeli,* (London Oxford U.P., 1958).

7. Ibn Ezra was familiar both with Sa'adia's commentaries on the Bible as well as his *Book of Beliefs and Opinions,* trans. S. Rosenblatt (New Haven: Yale U.P., 1948) to which he refers explicitly in Ecclesiastes 7:3.

8. Introduction to the Pentateuch, Part I.

9. In Part 3 of the Introduction, Ibn Ezra rejects *the way of darkness and murkiness.* While Friedlander believes this may refer to Christian or Kabbalistic exegesis (op. cit., p. 121) there is no evidence in the commentaries that Ibn Ezra was aware of Kabbalistic exegesis, which began seriously in Spain in the thirteenth century with Nachmanides. There is likewise no legitimate cause to believe that he refers to the Christians in his example of *uncircumcised of the flesh.* I would suggest that he is alluding to all systems of excessive allegorization. His rejection of Midrash

in Part 4 on the grounds that *there is no end to Midrash* in addition to his list of midrashim surrounding creation suggest that it was Ibn Ezra whom Nachmanides later criticized in his commentary to Genesis 1.1 (*men of little faith*).

10. Introduction, Part 3.

11. Introduction, Part 4 and Part 5. He quotes a rabbinical source for support that the literal meaning has priority over Midrash.

12. Hidden beneath Ibn Ezra's criticism of Sa'adia is, of course, his own preconception about God: that He works through natural bodies as mediators.

13. The doctrine that *The Torah speaks the language of men* has a long history in the Jewish literature. In Talmudic sources, it is associated with the name of Rabbi Ishmael (cf. TB Sanhedrin 61b, TB Yebamot 71a). Ishmael's traditional opponent, Rabbi Akiva (2nd century), was known to derive law from every word repetition in the Bible. Biblical Hebrew commonly combines present tense verbs (technically nouns) with future tense (technically imperfect) verbs. Akiva would interpret such doublings as referring, for example, to *this world and the world to come,* thus expanding the scope of the law in question. In response, Ishmael argued that *the Torah speaks the language of men* and one should not derive law from common linguistic devices. In his own way, Ishmael corresponds to the *literalist* attack on allegory, only that he is criticizing the *Midrash halakha* (legal hermeneutics). The dictum underwent a shift from a legal to an exegetical principle in the Middle Ages. Sa'adia Gaon (*Book of Beliefs and Opinions,* II:3) himself implicitly used the doctrine. He argues that anthropomorphic expressions are unavoidable because precise vocabulary would preclude any discussion of God. Linguistic ambiguity is a necessity of every language, but reason can show how to deduce the precise meaning from the ambiguous usage. However, Sa'adia's argument is circular: in order to reconcile a passage with the dictates of reason, the philosopher applies a rational preconception to Biblical language in order to reveal the precise philosophical meaning of the verse. Allegory rests on a prior philosophical position. Sa'adia sees the Bible as a philosophical treatise and thus considerably limits his use of the Ishmaelian dictum. Following Ibn Ezra, Maimonides *Guide to the Perplexed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), I:33, pp. 70-72, 3mployed the dictum to emphasize that the Bible is a book for the masses. For Maimonides, one of the most rigorous exponents of a *theologia negativa,* anthropomorphisms have even less place than they do for Ibn Ezra. But since the ceremonial commandments are historically relativized for Maimonides, the status of the Bible is lowered: it is a pedagogical and not a philosophical book. Where philosophy is unambiguous, offensive Biblical expressions can be explained by *the Bible speaks the language of men.*

14. I Samuel 15:29.

15. Exodus 32:14.

16. Genesis 1:26, Genesis 11:5, Genesis 35:13.

17. Psalm 104:31.

18. Genesis 1:16.

19. The major exception to this is the essential name of God YHVH, whose formulation is unique in and of itself.

20. Exodus 20:1.

21. Listed in Genesis 1:26.

22. *Yesod ha'Morah* (Frankfurt am Main: J. Baer, 1840), p. 3.

23. Introduction to the Pentateuch, pt. 3.

24. Ibid.

25. Ibn Ezra draws an analogy between the heart, which is both corporeal and non-corporeal, and the angels as mediators between God and the world.

26. Psalms 2:2.

27. See his doctrine of natural law in *Yesod ha'Morah,* p. 8: "The commandments which are primary and do not depend on space or time or any other thing . . . were known to the faculty of reason (shikul ha'da'at) before Moses gave the Torah."

28. Exodus 28:6 (the description of the ephod) is another passage which requires knowledge of foreign science.

29. No attempt will be made here to trace Ibn Ezra's sources, although such a study is lacking. His cosmology is a mixture of neo-platonic and Aristotelian elements, assimilated from Arabic sources. I am indebted to Joshua Lipton for the suggestion that Ibn Ezra's knowledge of Aristotle may have come in part from Abu Ma'shar, whom Ibn Ezra quotes in his astrological treatises.

30. The intelligence associated with governance of the constellations is *Shaddai.* Friedlander misinterprets *Shaddai* as the power to subdue nature. Ibn Ezra means that *Shaddai* is the force of regularity in the universe. Genesis 17:1, Exodus 6:3.

31. Exodus 3:16.

32. Psalm 19:3.

33. Exodus 3:15.

34. Genesis 1:14.

35. Exodus 3:16.

36. Ecclesiastes 1:9, *Yesod ha'Morah*, p. 20.

37. The problem of how a finite number of forms can generate an infinite number of individuals was already solved by Aristotle. Each form is appropriate to a range of combinations of the four elements, but within that range, there are an infinite number of combinations or variations. Matter, for Aristotle, was the principle of individuation, since it imposes the individual accidents upon the actualized forms. I am indebted to Prof. Funkenstein for this reference.

38. The *general* (*klal*) refers not to God but to the laws which govern the universe.

39. Psalm 19:2.

40. Genesis 1:14-16 refers to I Samuel 17.

41. Genesis 1:14.

42. *Yesod ha'Morah*, p. 20.

43. Exodus 33:21, Exodus 3:16, Exodus 6:3 are various repetitions of this principle.

44. Introduction to Ecclesiastes.

45. Exodus 20:3, Deuteronomy 31:16. The similarity of these ideas to those of Judah Ha'levi is perhaps no coincidence. By all accounts, Ibn Ezra knew Judah Ha'levi and there is even an improbable story that they were related. cf. Rosin, op. cit., p. 21; Vizer, op. cit., pp. 113-114. Ibn Ezra mentions Ha'levi by name in the commentaries on Exodus 20:1 and Deuteronomy 14:22.

46. Exodus 3:16, Genesis 17:1.

47. *Yesod ha'Morah*, p. 8.

48. Hosea 6:2.

49. Genesis 1:26.

50. Ecclesiastes 7:3.

51. Ecclesiastes 7:13.

52. Ecclesiastes 23:25.

53. Exodus 3:15, *Yesod ha'Morah*, p. 20.

54. Isaish 20:3, Deuteronomy 13:2, Isaiah 8:18. In general, the relation of miracles to prophecy is fuzzy since even false prophets were known to perform miracles. See the commentary on Bilaam.

55. Exodus 3:16. The essential name (YHVH) is also an attribute name. An essential name can only stand for itself; it denotes a unique individual (a proper name is a good example) and it cannot be pluralized, conjugated, indicated with a definite article or placed in a construct with another noun. An attribute name can stand for an individual, but also for other individuals (e.g. the name of an occupation). Only YHVH can paradoxically be an essential and attribute name because it is the essence and motive force of the world.

56. Exodus 6:3.

57. Exodus 33:22. Ibn Ezra argues for a miracle by coincidence: the inhabitants of a wicked city are told by a prophet that they will die if they do not pray to God for mercy. They leave their city to pray, and while outside, a river rises and destroys the city. This argument by coincidence is really not what he means by the intervention of God, although it indicates his discomfort with special providence.

58. In Exodus 23, he claims that if one follows the Bible, then one has no need for doctors. The correct orientation of the body – through proper diet and obedience to the commandments – can influence the relation of the upper soul to God.

59. Genesis 1:26, Exodus 23.

60. Exodus 23, Genesis 1:1. The essential name of God (cf. note 55) indicates that if God's name is in the angel, so is his essence.

61. Introduction to Ecclesiastes.

62. Psalm 2:4. These ideas bear a remarkable resemblance to Spinoza's *Ethica*, especially Part I. See also Numbers 20:8 and 22:28.