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IBN EZRA, ABRAHAM BEN MEIR (1089–1164), one of the most important Jewish Bible exegetes; also a poet, composer of **piyyutim*, grammarian, translator, philosopher, astronomer, and astrologer. Exceptionally erudite, he was among the last creative geniuses of the Spanish "golden age." Nevertheless, despite the customary image of him, Ibn Ezra was neither a talmudic scholar (the suggestion that he studied in the yeshivahin Lucena has been refuted by Goldberg) nor a physician (his opposition in principle to medicine is detailed in his Long and Short commentaries to Exodus 21:19). He also lacked the requisite skills for business or public office, and therefore was unable to make a living in the accustomed professions of his social class – as a rabbi, *dayyan*, physician, businessman, or courtier. For lack of alternative, he became a professional poet, supported by patrons who loved poetry and sought fame. Ibn Ezra's dependence on a succession of benefactors is evident in the exaggerated praise he showered on them in his eulogies. The need to move from patron to patron, and his restless character forced Ibn Ezra to a life of wandering: besides his birthplace Tudela, we know that prior to 1140 he lived in Cordoba, Seville (where he raised his son Isaac), Christian Toledo (to which he apparently refers in his poem "*Mi ʿAlah Shamayim*" by the name "Edom," a rabbinic code-word for Rome and thus for Christianity), Gabes (Tunisia), Algeria, and Morocco. He did not, however, reach Egypt or the Land of Israel. His poetry (e.g., his poem "*Gavhu Sheḥakim*") refers to the adverse effect his prolonged wandering had on his family life.

Ibn Ezra was socially involved with the poets of his day, and was particularly close to *Judah Halevi, whom he frequently mentioned in his Bible commentaries, and who almost certainly was his in-law: his son Isaac married Halevi's daughter. Documents from the Cairo **Genizah* and from Isaac's collected poems attest to Isaac's accompanying Halevi on his sea voyage to Alexandria, where they parted: Halevi continued on alone to the Land of Israel, whereas Isaac went to Babylonia, where he eventually converted to Islam. Two of Ibn Ezra's poems, which are written in the first person, take the form of a father Abraham's elegy for his son Isaac, and refer explicitly to his death, but do not accord with the biographical and geographical facts in our possession regarding both Ibn Ezra and his son Isaac. Ezra Fleischer's conclusion, that Ibn Ezra wrote these poems about other deceased acquaintances and not about his son Isaac, must therefore be accepted. There is, therefore, no evidence that Isaac died during his father's lifetime or that Ibn Ezra knew of Isaac's apostasy in Babylonia.

In Jewish Spain, Hebrew was the language of poetry, and Judeo-Arabic was the language of prose. Ibn Ezra accordingly wrote only his religious and secular poems in Hebrew (many of which survived due to their popularity), but his Arabic works did not survive. We only know of their existence because of references to them in some of his surviving works, such as in his Introduction to his commentary to Lamentations and in one of his poems). These references indicate that his Arabic writings included both science and Bible exegesis. However, when he reached the age of 50, around the year 1140, his circumstances underwent a drastic change: for political reasons not entirely clear, he was forced to leave Muslim Spain and arrived alone in Rome (a fact to which he refers in the poem at the beginning of the Introduction to his commentary to Ecclesiastes, written in 1140). During the remaining quarter century of his life he wandered among the Jewish communities of Italy, Provence, North Africa, and England. Unlike the Jews of the Islamic countries, the Jews of Christian Europe did not know Arabic, and were, therefore, uninfluenced by Arabic science, philosophy, linguistics, and poetry. The appearance in their midst of a Spanish polymath, fluent in the sciences and in Hebrew grammar, and zealous in his rationalism and consistent *peshat* exegesis (i.e., philological and contextual interpretation), led to an ambivalent reaction: both admiration and hostility. Even Ibn Ezra's admirers failed to appreciate secular, courtier poetry. Nevertheless, affluent patrons supported him and enabled him to write his novel *peshat* exegesis, Hebrew translations of important works of grammar and astronomy, and Hebrew text books in his various areas of expertise, which exposed their children to Spanish-Jewish wisdom. The wandering poet thus became a wandering sage, combining personally and in his writings the intellectual and spiritual culture which flourished in the shadow of Islam from Babylonia to Andalusia. Ibn Ezra's wanderings during these years also resulted in our having two sets of commentaries to various biblical books and diverse versions of the same scientific work (as listed in the Bibliography). Different patrons would request the same book. However, because of his poverty, he no longer possessed the original, and therefore rewrote the book, with corrections and innovations. He now also had to write his exegetical and scientific works in Hebrew for his new readers in Christian Europe, and to coin new Hebrew terms in these disciplines, instead of the Arabic terms he had previously used. Unlike his earlier Arabic writings which were lost, most of his later writings survived, because they were written in Hebrew.

Ibn Ezra as an Exegete

Ibn Ezra probably did not write commentaries on every book of the Bible; the earliest (14th century) supercommentaries already attest that they did not have commentaries by Ibn Ezra on the Former Prophets, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Proverbs (the commentary printed as his in Rabbinic Bibles is actually by Moses Kimhi), Ezra and Nehemiah (idem), and Chronicles. On the other hand, two commentaries (complete or fragmentary) survive on seven biblical books – Genesis, Exodus, the Minor Prophets, Psalms, Song of Songs, Esther, and Daniel.

Ibn Ezra summarized his exegetical method, with his characteristic brevity, in the rhymed introduction to his standard commentary on the Pentateuch: "This is *Sefer ha-Yashar*/ by Abraham the poet;/ it is bound by the cords of grammar / and approved by the eye of reason; / happy are those who adhere to it." For Ibn Ezra, the word *yashar* (straight) included in his title was a synonym for *peshat* (comm. on Num. 22:28). He describes this method as satisfying the dual test of meticulous philology ("the cords of grammar") and strict rational plausibility ("eye of reason"); only this exegetical method can yield the spiritual joy that comes from the study of the Torah.

A significant portion of Ibn Ezra's commentary is devoted to precise and multifaceted linguistic clarifications, based on a critical adoption of the major achievements of the Spanish school of Hebrew philology. Particularly conspicuous is his tendency to apply the rules developed by his predecessors with extreme caution and stringency, and to limit to a bare minimum the prevalent recourse to exceptions and radical hypotheses (whenever he can do without them, he employs the expression: "there is no need"). For example, he rejects out of hand Ibn Janah's system of lexical substitution (that is, the legitimate interchange of similar words), and reduces to the minimum his method of consonantal substitution. Ibn Ezra demands that the exegetical enterprise be based on rational judgment, on the one hand, and on the master of all branches of knowledge, on the other: "Reason is the foundation, since the Torah was not given to those who have no knowledge, and the angel [i.e., mediator] between man and God is his intelligence" (Introduction to the standard commentary on the Pentateuch, the "Third Way"). He sought rationality not only in the rational commandments but even in the revelational commandments: "Heaven forbid that a single precept might contradict reason" (long comm. on Ex. 20:1). The narrative parts of the Pentateuch, too, must be interpreted in accordance with natural and psychological verisimilitude (comm. on Gen. 11:3, Ex. 20:1), except for miracles, which are utterly reasonable for one who believes in God's dominion over nature and is confident in the true testimony of Scripture. Miracles do contravene the laws of nature, but they do not contradict either reason (since God is omnipotent) or observation (by witnesses) (*Sefer ha-Ibbur* 10a). Accordingly, Ibn Ezra forcefully rejects the midrashic tendency to multiply miracles beyond those explicitly recounted in the Bible (long comm. on Dan. 1:15), but rejects doubts about the Noah pericope as the results of idle questions (comm. on Gen. 6:20).

The demand for plausibility extends to stylistic plausibility as well, by virtue of the rationalist assumption that Scripture is written in a language similar to "human language"; that is, that it is phrased in language to which the standard rules of syntax and rhetoric apply. The conventional gloss on "I am Esau your firstborn" (which goes back to a Midrash and was adopted by Rashi as a way to clear Jacob of lying) – "I am who I am, and Esau is your firstborn" – is rejected as "empty words" (comm. on Gen. 27:19), since the discrepancy between the text and the interpretive paraphrase is too great to conform to normal rhetoric and syntax.

Ibn Ezra also vigorously opposes ascribing significance to plene versus defective spelling. He grounds this opposition not only on the absence of any consistent usage in the matter in the various layers of the Bible, from the Pentateuch through Proverbs (introduction to the standard commentary on the Pentateuch, the "Fifth Way"), but also on the empirical fact that in day-to-day life plene and defective spelling have no independent significance (long comm. to Ex. 20:1). Because the Bible does not employ supernatural language and its own unique rhetoric ("Heaven forbid that a prophet should express himself in numerology or obscure hints" (short comm. on Ex. 1:7)), and because human beings cannot transcend human concepts, it is only natural that the biblical style incorporate anthropomorphisms: human language necessarily uses metaphors drawn from the human realm to refer to the Divinity that is above man and to nature that is below him (long. comm. on Ex. 19:20).

Ibn Ezra's quest for the philological-contextual interpretation, controlled by reason and science, is accompanied by a strong methodological awareness. Relying on the fundamental principle, "let us pursue the text" (long comm. on Ex. 9:10), Ibn Ezra rejects midrashic expansions that are not anchored in the biblical text (short comm. on Ex. 16:4). He also feels a duty to vary his terminology to denote the degree of certainty he accords to his proposed interpretations: "but the correct [interpretation] is," "with clear proofs," "perhaps," "in my opinion," "a sort of proof," "this is only a conjecture." Similarly, he frequently offers alternative interpretations when he cannot make an unequivocal decision as to which is better; nor is he afraid to acknowledge his inability to understand some verses – an inability that stems, in part, from our limited knowledge of biblical history (Gen. 49:19), and our remoteness from the biblical world (long comm. on Ex. 30:23). Even though he rejects the exegetical validity of most Midrashim (as explained in his two introductions to the Pentateuch, the "Fourth Way"), sometimes he himself finds in the text an additional dimension (literary or conceptual) that he cannot adequately prove from the context; he characterizes this as a "sort of support" (short comm. on Ex. 21:1) or as "a sort of homily" (comm. on Deut. 16:18).

Ibn Ezra's exegetical method is marked by the fertile tension between belief in the sanctity and truth of the Bible, and extreme exegetical freedom. He acknowledges the limited and partial nature of human comprehension and the limits of science (short comm. on Ex. 23:20), but not the relativity of rational judgment. Hence, when the truth of the Bible contradicts the truth of human reason, the solution must be exegetical. His steadfast adherence to the rationalist assumption that a verse cannot be at variance with knowledge gained from sensory perception or from logical reasoning, just as it cannot contradict another verse, entitles (and obliges) the commentator to make difficult verses correspond to the demands of reason (in this he follows Saadiah Gaon; see *Beliefs and Opinions* 7:1–3). This radical exegetical intervention, which detaches a verse from its primary meaning – by means of metaphorization, allegorization, and other methods of extension – is what Koranic exegesis calls *tawil* and Ibn Ezra calls *tikkun* ("correction" or "adaptation"; introduction to the long comm. on Genesis, the "Fourth Way"). In view of the risks of arbitrary interpretations, however, and to ward off the danger – whose chief embodiment he saw in Christian exegesis – that *tikkun* might be applied to undercut the stories of the Patriarchs, the practical commandments, and messianic promises, he sets (again in the wake of Saadiah) a stringent limit for the commentator: plausible verses are not to be "corrected." The

procedure is permissible only when it is absolutely necessary. At most, one may discover in particularly charged verses a second stratum that supplements rather than replaces the first meaning (Introduction to the Pentateuch, the "Third Way").

Another limitation of the exegete's freedom – meant to serve as a shield against the perils of Karaite anachronism – is the belief in the binding validity of talmudic tradition, whose status as revealed Oral Law parallels that of the Written Law. Belief in the truth of the received tradition (*kabbalah*) – by which he means a reliable tradition that is chiefly halakhic and only secondarily historical and exegetical – and in its harmony with the philological-contextual meaning of the verses was deemed utterly logical: the conspicuous absence of full and comprehensive information about most of the commandments and the disproportion between what is stated explicitly in the Torah and what is only alluded to, clearly attest that the Written Law was not meant to stand alone; from the outset it was intended to be rounded out by the Oral Law. Consequently, talmudic *halakhah* may not be ignored unless it is a disputed or lone opinion. But the homiletic expositions of the Sages do not belong to the category of the "received tradition," since they are merely the fruit of their efforts to find prooftexts in Scripture to support the received *halakhah* or to provide an underpinning for their own intellectual and spiritual creativity (short comm. to Ex. 21:8; *Safah Berurah* 5a–7a). Thanks to this sharp distinction (similarly maintained later by *Naḥmanides in his disputation with Pablo Christiani), Ibn Ezra does not have to deal with most Midrashim as binding interpretations: "one who has a heart [i.e., reason] can recognize when they say *derash* and when *peshat*" (*Yesod Mora*, ch. 6). This exegetical freedom entails a countervailing exegetical restriction. The perfect correlation between the received tradition and the philological meaning of the text keeps Ibn Ezra from recognizing the legitimacy of any *peshat* interpretation that contradicts *halakhah* (advanced with no qualms by Rashi, Rashbam, and Naḥmanides). Wherever he senses a tension between accepted *halakhah* and the text, his intellectual honesty compels him to acknowledge the fact; but his faith requires him to demonstrate that the gap can be closed by means of an alternative philological meaning (long and short comm. on Ex. 13:9, Lev. 21:2).

Just as the talmudic tradition elucidates and complements the Written Law but is not derived from it, Scripture should be understood in the light of the sciences and general knowledge, but they need not be based on it ("Here we have evidence that the world is circular rather than square, although there is no need for a verse, since this is known through manifest proofs" (comm. to Isa. 40:22)). This recognition that what is known through tradition and what is known through the intellect have separate origins and are independently valid can already be found in Saadiah Gaon. Ibn Ezra, however, derives from it the far-reaching conclusion that exegetes should reduce to the absolute minimum the projection onto Scripture of both *halakhah* and science (typical of geonic exegesis). The Torah was given to all Israel, "to be understood by the learned and the unlearned" (long comm. on Ex. 20:1); consequently it contains very few allusions to philosophy and the sciences, which must be learned separately, in a systematic manner (both Introductions to Pentateuch, the "First Way").

Like Ibn Janah and Judah Halevi, Ibn Ezra fiercely rejects even cautious attempts at conjectural emendation of the text, and holds that the work of the Masoretes was flawless: "Due to them the Divine Torah and Sacred Books stood in their perfection, without additions or omissions" (*Yesod Mora*, ch. 1). Accordingly, he insists that any interpretation respects the punctuational functions of the cantillation signs and the division into verses; rejects as a "lone view" the tannaitic tradition of the "eighteen emendations of the Scribes"; and deals with differences between *qere* and *ketiv*, alternate versions of parallel texts (such as the two versions of the Decalogue and of several Psalms), and the discrepancies between Pseudo-Jonathan and the Masoretic text as exegetical problems rather than textual phenomena.

Ibn Ezra's rejection of lower criticism seems to have provided a counterweight for his penchant for higher criticism. In other words, his utter confidence in the accuracy of the text and the reliability of the method provides him with a basis for his extreme exegetical independence and critical approach when it comes to the question of the authorship of the biblical books. He is greatly perturbed by anachronisms. Elucidating comments – like "the Canaanite was then in the land" (Gen. 12:6), "as it is said to this day, in the mount of the Lord it shall be seen" (Gen. 22:14), "his bedstead, an iron bedstead, is now in Rabbath of the children of Ammon" (Deut. 3:11) – are later additions, just like the last 12 verses of Deuteronomy, which were written prophetically by Joshua (comm. on Deut. 1:2, 34:1 and 6). Ibn Ezra's criteria for determining the date of composition of a text are exegetical and literary, not rhetorical and historical. The question that bothers him is, whether it is plausible that Moses and Isaiah wrote such things, and not (as scholars ask today) whether such passages had meaning for their own contemporaries. With regard to Daniel's prophecy of the end of days he stresses that the prophet himself did not understand the arcane mysteries spoken to him, but "when the end arrives, the learned will understand them" (long comm. on Dan. 12:8–9). It is not rhetorical considerations – that there was no sense or meaning for passages of redemption, return, and the rebuilding of Jerusalem in the days of Hezekiah, or for the proclamation of Cyrus the Mede as the Lord's anointed at a time when the Assyrian empire still reigned supreme – that lead Ibn Ezra to post-date the prophecies in the second part of the book of Isaiah (carefully veiled hints in his commentary to Isa. 40:1). His reasons are entirely exegetical: the fact that the prophet is described as present in the Babylonian exile when his consolations are realized (comm. in Isa. 49:7); the Babylonian milieu of the present-tense description of the imminent redemption (Isa. 55:6); and the exegetical advantage of reading "the servant of the Lord" prophecies as referring to the prophet himself (Isa. 53:12).

On the question of the authorship of the Psalms, discussed in the introductions to his two commentaries on that book, Ibn Ezra adopts the Sages' view that the Psalms were written by divinely inspired prophet-poets, some of whom are identified in the superscriptions, but does not present this view of "the ancients" as binding but as plausible. As for the book of Job, he disputes two talmudic opinions, that Job is a fictional character, or that Moses wrote the book. In Ibn Ezra's view, Job and his friends were historical figures: gentile prophets (except, perhaps, for Elihu), who lived before the time of Moses (comm. on Job 1:1), and whose language was not Hebrew, since the difficult language of the book indicates that it is a translation (on Job 2:11).

Ibn Ezra repeatedly stresses the paucity of our knowledge about the historical and biographical backgrounds of the prophetic books, and rejects the use of Midrashim to fill in the gaps; as long as they are not reliable traditions they are not to be drawn on as if they were historical evidence. For example, in the introduction to Joel he writes: "We have no way to know when he lived; on the basis of the *peshat* he is not the son of Samuel" (as a Midrash would have it). On the other hand, he is certain that Solomon wrote the [Song of Songs](#) and Ecclesiastes, since this is explicitly stated in the text. As for the nature of the Song of Songs, he takes a clear traditional stance: it is not to be understood, in keeping with the surface meaning, as an erotic poem (since there was no disagreement among the Sages as to its sanctity), and its application as an allegory of the Jewish people is a binding tradition.

In Ibn Ezra's commentaries on the poetic chapters of the Bible, the literary and esthetic dimension is not developed to the extent one might expect from so great a poet. The custom of the liturgical and secular poets of Spain to indicate the melody to accompany a poem by citing, at its beginning, the opening words of another poem sung to that tune provides the basis for his brilliant conjecture that this is the significance of some of the opaque superscriptions, e.g., to Psalm 56:1, 57:1. He does not interpret them as part of the psalms, since their (forgotten) musical significance was their only meaning in these places. Occasionally he comments on poetic ornaments such as *inclusio*, antithesis, paronomasia, palillogy, and parallelism. In prose he notes that chiasmus is in accordance with "the custom of the holy tongue" (long comm. to Ex. 17:7), and that the use of homonyms "adds elegance" (comm. on Gen. 3:1).

To guard against the age-old exegetical tradition that all aspects of the text (from "superfluous" words to dotted letters) require a gloss, Ibn Ezra relies on a view of language that was accepted by many of the Jewish and [Muslim scholars](#) of Spain: "The words are like bodies and the meanings like souls … Hence it is the rule of scholars in every language to preserve the meaning; they do not worry about interchanging words if they have the same meaning" (long comm. on Ex. 20:1). The verbal expression is not considered to be an essential part of the meaning, but only one of its garments: "Essentially words are but hints; knowledge of the language has no independent value, but is a vehicle of communication" (short comm. on Ex. 23:20). Style is even further removed from the sense; it is no more than an external ornament, pinned onto the garment to make it more attractive. Relying on these assumptions, Ibn Ezra can ignore a host of stylistic phenomena that provide the foundations for glosses he regards as remote from the *peshat*; they also enable him to explain to his own satisfaction the significant differences between parallel episodes (e.g., two reports of Pharaoh's dream and two versions of the Decalogue), by representing them as purely external (*Yesod Mora*, ch. 1). The price of this concept of literary expression as almost exclusively devoted to transmitting information is a notable neglect of fine turns of expression and stylistic niceties inherent in a particular formulation.

His audacious critical hints, and perhaps also his caustic language and polemical temperament, have given Ibn Ezra the reputation of a radical innovator who conceals the main points of his heterodox opinions behind a veil of traditional declarations of faith. But this picture is mistaken. His sacred poetry allows us to paint his portrait as a genuinely religious personality, steadfast in his allegiance to the Jewish faith and his love of the Jewish people. What is more, his final judgments in most of the fundamental debates of scriptural exegesis reflect a measured and reasoned middle course, motivated by the aspiration to achieve a synthesis of opposing stances. In the four-way polemic presented in his two introductions to the Pentateuch he does not reject the methods of his predecessors outright. Instead, he expresses his reservations about their one-sidedness so that he can incorporate their positive elements into his own multi-dimensional and balanced method.

[Uriel Simon (2nd ed.)]

Ibn Ezra as a Philosopher

Ibn Ezra's philosophy is Neoplatonic in orientation, and also manifests a Neo-Pythagorean fascination with numerology. Since most of his works are unsystematic in exposition, present ideas in various places, and are elliptical in style, his thought is frequently difficult to characterize systematically. His commentaries in particular sometimes note that "this is a mystery" (*sod*) or "the intelligent (*maskil*) will understand," which may merely indicate the profundity of the issue, or may at times serve to mute radical conclusions.

Philosophical exegesis of the Bible, for Ibn Ezra as for [*Philo](#), became an integral literary genre for philosophizing, not only because (in the words of H.A. Wolfson) "Scripture has to be interpreted in the light of what is most evidently true in reason, and reason has to be corrected in light of what is evidently the true teachings of Scripture" (*Philo: Foundations of Religious Philosophy in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, 1947, 2, 447), but also because it simultaneously provides the occasion for the religious philosopher, committed to both revelation and reason, to comprehend and make explicit the rationality underlying revelation, thus demonstrating the rational validity of religion within the philosophic community, and to expound philosophical ideas in the religious community studying Scripture. Philosophical Bible exegesis thus becomes both a philosophic and religious imperative. Although such philosophic works as Saadiah's *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* and Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* are replete with references to and exegesis of Biblical passages (indeed, Maimonides defines the first purpose of his book as an explanation of [perplexing] Biblical terms), Ibn Ezra was an outstanding example of medieval systematic exegesis of the Bible as a philosophical literary genre.

At its core, for Ibn Ezra revelation is a rational process, and not just a historical event. As mentioned above, "the judgment of reason is the foundation" (*shikul ha-da'at hu hayesod*) and the angel (mediator) between a person and God; the angels are of

the "species" (*min*) of the human intellect. It is the underlying rationality of revelation, as well as rational plausibility, which leads Ibn Ezra to questions of higher criticism (discussed in the previous section), and also underlies his understanding of the meaning of revelation as recorded in Scripture. He uses the identical phrase, "reason cannot tolerate" (*ein ha-da'at sovelet*) these things, to reject what he regarded as unreasonable interpretations of Scripture, both by the Karaites and by the talmudic rabbis – in the case of the Karaites, their literalist understanding of "an eye for an eye" as physical punishment (long comm. on Ex. 21:24), and in the case of the rabbis, their midrashic view that both versions of the Decalogue were given simultaneously (*zakhor ve-shamor be-dibbur ehad ne'emru*); since people cannot comprehend two different ideas spoken at the same time, a simultaneous revelation of both would have been incomprehensible and thus meaningless (long comm. on Ex. 20:1).

In Ibn Ezra's understanding, the structure of the Decalogue reflects this inherent rationality of revelation. Like Maimonides after him, Ibn Ezra interprets the opening phrase "I am the Lord your God" as a positive commandment, but for different reasons (in light of his Neoplatonic and Neo-Pythagorean conceptions of the One). There are commandments relating to speech ("the mouth" or "the tongue") and actions, butthere are also "commandments of the heart," relating to human understanding. The existence of God "includes all the commandments of the heart and tongue and action, for whoever does not believe in God in his heart has no commandments," just as substance, the first of the ten Aristotelian categories, is the substratum for the other nine categories, which are accidents, and just as One is the source of all other numbers (long comm. to Ex. 20:1). The One, for Ibn Ezra, by which he frequently refers to God, is thus not a number or quantity at all, but the self-sufficient source of all number and quantity, upon which everything else depends.

The dependence of everything on God derives from their having been created by him. Creation, however, is not *ex nihilo* (as Saadiah and many other early Jewish philosophers believed), and the term *bara* (Gen. 1:1) means cutting (*gazar*), i.e., establishing limits or boundaries (*gevul nigzar*) among existing entities (comm. to Gen. 1:1, Isa. 40:28, 42:5). This creation, described in Genesis, applies only to the lowest (*shafel*) of three worlds. Ibn Ezra's three-fold cosmology is found in several different passages – e.g., in his long commentary to Exodus 3:15 (repeated in less detail in his commentary on Ex. 20:2–3), and his commentary to Daniel 10:21 – but with major differences between the two cosmologies, in terms of both direction and content.

Ascending Order (in Exodus)	Descending Order (in Daniel)
The lowest world (*olam shafel*)	The first world (*olam rishon*) *The One (= God)*
1. minerals 2. plants 3. animals 4. humans	The second world (*olam sheni*) Bodiless angels Stars (imperishable matter)
The middle world (*olam tikhon*)	
1. planets 2. stars and constellations	The third world (*olam shelishi*) Terrestrial, material world (including humans)
The upper world (*olam elyon*) angels	

When describing the ontological descending order of cosmology (the Neoplatonic downward way), Ibn Ezra begins with the One (i.e., God), the source of all being, from whom the second world emanates, consisting of the angels and the heavenly bodies. These are related, because the angels are the separate intelligences of the imperishable, but material, moving spheres of the stars. The second world, in other words, is the heavenly realm (both spiritual and material) transcending the third, terrestrial world in which we live. Conversely, when describing the spiritual ascending order of cosmology (the Neoplatonic upward way), reflecting the soul's progressive purification from corporeality and ascent to its sources, Ibn Ezra begins with material existence. The highest level attainable is wisdom, the rank of the angels (who, as stated above, are of the same species as the human intellect). That is the highest degree of perfection which the human soul can hope to attain, and therefore, the ascending order of cosmology does not include mention of God, the One, transcending all other reality.

In the Bible, the term *elohim*, the general term for God, is in the plural form, and often refers to the angels (as Neoplatonic intermediaries between the One and lower levels of reality), because "all of the actions of the Lord are by means of the angels who do his will" (regular comm. to Gen. 1:1). *Elohim* can thus refer to different realities, in contrast with the Tetragrammaton yhwh which is a proper, substantive noun referring only to the One (long comm. to Exod. 6:2–3, 32:1). In various passages in his commentaries, and in his monographs *Sefer ha-Shem* ("the Book of the Name") and *Yesod Mora ve-Sod ha-Torah* Ibn Ezra analyzes this unique name of God, including the numerical values of the letters when added to or multiplied by each other in various combinations.

Since the One is the source of all numbers, it is in all numbers (all numbers are composed of units) and all numbers are in it (as their source). This insight leads Ibn Ezra to a pantheistic equation of the One with "All": "he is the One which is everything (*hu ha-eḥad she-hu ha-kol*; long comm. to Exod. 33:21), and "he is all and all is from him" (*hu ha-kol u-me-itto ha-kol*; long comm. to Ex. 23:21), and "God is the One, he creates all, and he is all, and I cannot explain" (*Hashem hu ha-eḥad, ve-hu yoẓer*

ha-kol, ve-hu ha-kol, ve-lo ukhal le-faresh; comm. to Gen. 1:26). As in other cases, Ibn Ezra's elliptical, pantheistic language makes it difficult to determine with certainty whether "*kol*" in these cases refers to God (as maintained by H. Kreisel), to the active intellect (as suggested by E. Wolfson), to a Neoplatonic notion of emanation, or to a Neo-Pythagorean description of One which itself is not number, but transcends number, containing all number and contained in all number.

Similar ambiguity surrounds Ibn Ezra's notion that the "All" knows all in a general way (*al derekh kol*) but not in a particular way (*ve-lo al derekh helek*; comm. to Gen. 18:21; Ex. 33:14–21). These statements do not indicate an Aristotelian denial of divine knowledge of terrestrial particulars. Rather, they seem to mean that whereas our empirical knowledge always implies a clear distinction between the particular knower and the particular known object, in the "All" there can be no distinction between subject, act, and object of knowledge, and that the "All," by knowing itself, knows everything contained in itself as their source, and thereby knows all in a general and not particular way.

Just as the "All" knows all by knowing itself, so, in a sense, does the human being, because "the human body is like a microcosm (*ʿolam qatan*). May God be blessed who began with the macrocosm and finished with the microcosm" (comm. to Gen. 1:26); "one who knows the secret of the human [rational] soul (*neshamah*) and the composition (*matkonet*)" of his body, can know the things of the upper world, because the human is the image of the microcosm (*demut olam katan*)" (long comm. to Ex. 26:1). Knowledge of oneself is thus prior and essential to knowledge of God: a person "cannot know God if he does not know his soul (*nefesh*), his rational soul (*neshamah*), and his body; for whoever does not know the essence (*mahut*) of his soul, what wisdom does he have?" (long comm. to Ex. 31:18).

Such self-knowledge takes on additional significance in light of Ibn Ezra's astrological theories. His interest in astrology was not limited to the purely theoretical level, and extended to practical astrology as well. Ibn Ezra's astrology is a consistent element in the three-fold cosmological structure described above; it entails understanding the influences of the higher realms on the lower, particularly on human affairs. However, to worship the stars, which are "servants" (*meshartim*) possessing no independent will or conscious purpose, and whose activity is purely automatic and necessary, is out of the question (long comm. to Ex. 33:21). Ibn Ezra also argues against a magical or theurgic interpretation of the fiery serpent (*saraf*) in Numbers 21:8, although elsewhere he understands the cherubim and other sacred objects in the portable tabernacle as having astrological, and possibly also astral magic, significance, and "after you understand these you will understand the secret of the brass serpent" (short comm. to Ex. 25:7). For Ibn Ezra, astrology (perhaps including astral magic) is thus a way of understanding how the various components of natural reality influence each other.

Astral influence is not merely a function of the arrangement or constellation (*maʿarekhet*) of the higher power (*koaḥ*). The influence of the higher power is determined no less by the constituent make-up or physical constitution of the receiver (*toledet ha-mekabbel*) below. As Ibn Ezra explains in his Introduction to Ecclesiastes, in the scheme of emanation, one agent can produce one effect, but these effects can differ according to differences among the receivers, just as the differences among the receivers reflect differences in the constellation of the astral agent affecting them (comm. to Deut. 5:26).

Astral effects cannot be changed, but it is precisely their pre-determined predictability that provides for an element of human free will, since the person who knows of a certain inevitable effect can take steps to avoid it, such as people who know through astrological prediction that there will be a flood, can opt to flee to high ground. Within this general scheme, however, there is an important exceptional feature. Picking up on the talmudic phrase that "Israel has no constellar sign" (*ein mazal le-yisrael*) (Shab. 156a, Ned. 32a et al.), Ibn Ezra states: "It is well established that every nation has a known star and constellation, and that there is a constellar sign for every city. But God gave Israel a great superiority by his, rather than a star's, being their guide, for Israel is God's portion" (comm. to Deut. 4:19).

Israel is thus ruled directly by God, and not by any astral intermediaries, and the Torah provides for the Jew a way to escape general astral influence. The stars, after all, belong to the intermediate realm, and exert influence on the lowest, terrestrial realm. The Torah, however, transcends the intermediate realm of the stars and their influences, and belongs to the upper realm of the angels and the rational soul. So in terms of Ibn Ezra's cosmology, the Torah is ontologically superior to the stars, and its power is superior to astral forces. The Torah thus provides the Jewish people, according to Ibn Ezra's astrological theory, a particular freedom from astral influence. This needs to be understood, however, naturalistically, rather than theurgically, in terms of the knowledge the Torah imparts to its adherents, a knowledge which enables them to understand the predictable influences of the stars, and thereby to escape them. "The servants [i.e., the stars] cannot change their path, and the subservience of each of them is the rule given it by God … Worshipping the works of the heavens cannot be beneficial for [a person], for whatever was decreed for him according to the constellation of the stars at his birth will happen to him, unless a power superior to the power of the stars protects him, and he cleaves to it, so that he will then be saved from the decrees" (long comm. to Ex. 33:21).

Israel's uniqueness is not, however, a function of any special physical power, as suggested by Judah Halevi's theory of a Jewish biological faculty for divine communication, the *amr ilahi* (Hebrew: *inyan elohi*). Such a physical faculty would be, for Ibn Ezra, a necessary component of one's physical constitution (*toledet*), which would then necessarily be subject to astral influence. It is only by living according to the Torah's teaching that Israel is exempted or saved from astral influence: "This is what the sages [meant when they] said, 'Israel has no constellar sign,' so long as they [i.e., the Jewish people] observe the Torah" (long comm. on Ex. 33:21). Without the Torah, there is thus no difference between Jew and non-Jew. Ibn Ezra and Halevi thus present us with opposite interpretations of Jewish distinctiveness. For Halevi, it is the biological or genetic distinctiveness of the Jewish people which makes possible the revelation of the Torah to them. For Ibn Ezra, it is the divinely

revealed Torah which makes possible the existence of the people of Israel as a special group, governed directly by God's law rather than indirectly through a system of astral influences.

[Raphael Jospe (2ⁿᵈ ed.)]

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