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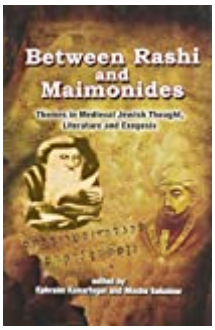

Ephraim Kanarfogel, Moshe Sokolow, eds. *Between Rashi and Maimonides: Themes in Medieval Jewish Thought, Literature and Exegesis.* New York: Michael Scharf Publication Trust of the Yeshiva University Press, 2010. ix + 431 pp. $39.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-60280-138-7.

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Medieval Commentators and Their Agendas

The fifteen essays in this volume stem from an international conference held at Yeshiva University in New York in late 2004. I will discuss personal reactions to the strengths and weaknesses of each article in the order they appear in the volume. The volume is divided into three parts identified only as part 1, part 2, and part 3. In part 1 Daniel Lasker, one of the finest experts in polemical literature, gives us a comparison between Maimonidesâ engagement of Christianity and that of Rashi. Since both scholars were steeped in the Talmudic images of Jesus and Christians and generally Jews (and Christians) perform âotheringâ based on classic texts rather than personal engagement, it is difficult to assess the strength of personal knowledge of the other. Lasker argues that Rashiâs concern with polemics is overemphasized by contemporary scholars while Maimonides had a deeper knowledge of scholastic issues of the trinity. I did not find his arguments compelling because of his selection of what should count for comparative evidence. For example, he provides a chart of Rashiâs polemical comments in sixty-five psalms compared to five other polemical works and interpretations in New Testament literature. I am not even sure Maimonides would get one space on his chart. The difference in genres, audience, and concerns does not allow for easy comparison between Maimonides and Rashi on any social topic and that would be my major critique of the volume as a whole.

Menachem Kellner compares Maimonidesâ view of commandments with Rashiâs and finds the latter gives a greater redemptive/cosmic significance to the performance of commandments than does Maimonides. Hence for Rashi the Patriarchs certainly observed the commandments and for Maimonides they certainly did not. Indeed one wonders if Kellnerâs citing the case that Maimonides sees cult as being a weaning mechanism away from barbaric pagan practices understands the true subversive basis of Maimonidesâ sources which at root see Torah laws as dysfunctional in the post-Easter age. (Guy Stroumsa has demonstrated that Maimonidesâ source is a fourth- century Christian work that was translated into Arabic.)[1] The key is the Pauline claim that the law was a teacher until it reached its end with the Messiah and af-

ter that is a liability. Nevertheless, Kellnerâs piece raises important philosophic issues for contemporary religious practice.

Dov Schwartzâs piece discussing problems with Maimonidesâ teaching on the connection of the spheres and the intellects challenged me the most of all the essays. It is a topic that has long drawn my attention and which I dared to investigate briefly in print. It is only for those who can wrap their heads around Maimonidesâ Aristotelian Arab conception of the cosmos and for such medievalist types the piece is worth plowing through. Aviezer Ravitzky tackles a highly complex issue concerning Maimonidesâ view of linguistic magic (writing divine names or incantations). Certainly he forbade it as an Amorite practice in some cases, idolatry in others, and still sheer foolishness in others. Nevertheless, Isaac ben Shem Tov and his uncle Joseph ben Shem Tov argued that if a particular amulet was empirically effective in curing diseases, since Talmudic tradition supported the use of amulets with holy names, their use was permissible. The general trend in Ashkenaz was to write amulets and even the Gaon of Vilna criticized Maimonidesâ ruling on the matter. The first third of the book closes with a scintillating piece by Moshe Idel which discusses a passage in Maimonidesâ *Commentary to the Mishna* Sanhedrin, *perek Heleq* that ostensibly refers to the âsupernal pleromra.â This term is known to me from gnostic sources and is also found in *Sefer Ha-Bahi*r in reference to a spiritual space of angels in the divine realm, akin to what Maimonides (similar to Muslim philosophers) says of it as the place of Groups of Angels. Nahmanides makes use of Maimonidesâ citation and understands it, as indeed it seems to be, as a reference to the world of souls in the next world who are aware of divine secrets. Next Idel discusses forgeries of documents ascribed to Maimonides in which he appears to write as a Merkavah mystic affirming the doctrines of Nahmanides, or even a practitioner of linguistic magic. Idel ends on the salutary note that Maimonides was indeed a magician in convincing many that he had discovered a pristine Jewish philosophy that was borrowed to large extent by the ancient Greek philosophers from Moses and the prophets .

Part 2 begins with a fascinating study by Nahum Rakover of the history of medieval interpretation of the Talmudic dictum, âWhere penitents stand, even the wholly righteous cannot stand.â The notion irked many Jewish scholastics whose *pilpul* reworked the saying in many ways, most noticeably, âwhere the wholly righteous stand, penitents do not stand.â The offering of Robert Chazan sees the appalling 1096 crusade account of R. Eliezer bar Natan as the one which spoke to medieval Jews; incorporating conservative views and an appropriately developed lament-liturgy. It was the furthest removed from the events of 1096 and replaced two earlier accounts, one of which was very close to the event. In contrast to these earlier sources Eliezer provides a poetic meta-history addressing the here and now. He minimized the new and innovative of the other accounts. The next article spoke to me most because I like reductionist *halakhic* legal theory that finds crucial differences in cases that look identical. J. David Bleich examines the *halakhic* parameters that determine identity of a species. His unique ability to express complex abstractions in concrete terms now turns to the dilemma of âis a robin a robin because it walks like and talks like a robin–or because its mother was a robin?â Would this be the same if we spoke of a horse which was born from a horse but not from a detached egg? The birth process is a direct gestation process from within the mother and hence the horse is spun directly from within the species. An egg hatching depends on dynamics at a remove from the mother and the egg is the immediate agency of the fledgling robin. This and similar questions complicate âidentity issues.â He travels the breadth and width of *halakhic* analysts from Rashi to Rav Chaim Brisker in scrutinizing the problem of the âyotseiâ and the âyotsei min hayotei.â His erudition is surprisingly broad, showing a familiarity with classical non-Jewish sources and possible midrashic references to the historical emblems of the Roman army.

Ephraim Kanarfogel in his typical thorough fashion discusses Nahmanidesâ use of Ashkenazic scholastic *hiddushim* (novellae) of the Tosafists in Spain. He gave authority to *Tosafot Shanz* which preserves original formulations of Rabbi Isaac and Rabbenu Tam, both from the late twelfth century. Kanarfogel next traces the students of the Ramban school to see whom they quote. His concern is Ritva, who has a wider scope of Tosafot collections, both German and French, than Nahamanides used; some have not even been printed. I was fascinated to see the history of discussion of the remarriage of a nursing mother within twenty-four months of a birth who had taken an oath to continue nursing. B. Ket. 60b gives many opinions as to remarriage but none dealing with an oath. The rule is there has to be a gap of three months between cessation of nursing an ex-husbandâs child and remarriage. Does she have to wait three months when an oath prevents her from stopping nursing? We are worried that nursing weakens the nutrition of a fetus from the new husband. That question comes up in a *responsum* of Leon de Modena in the seventeenth century and

I was unaware of the earlier sources. The wealth of information concerning who cites whom in his notes boggles the mind. To my taste, Scott J. Goldberg and Moshe Sokolow penned the most creative of all the pieces: an examination of the educational theories of the major writers, mostly commentators and *poskim*. The proper cultivation of good learning habits, rote learning at some points providing data points for complex cognitive skills promoting arguments from analogy; deductive and inductive reasoning; critical faculties for seeing reasons to distinguish where older paradigms would be dysfunctional. From the commentaries of these medievals it is possible to see what they were reacting against and what the scholars advocated. Since commentary does not allow for probing analysis; we get only broad goals and not detailed methodology. The piece is very suggestive of how commentary can be studied for matters beyond elucidating a biblical text.

Introducing part 3, Alfred Ivry (âThe Weight of Midrash on Rashi and Maimonidesâ) gives us a comparative portrait of Rashiâs approach to biblical interpretation as compared to Maimonidesâ approach. Indeed he compares the exegesis of Maimonidesâ philosophic work to Rashiâs popular commentary. We might have gained more from an examination of midrash as presented in Maimonidesâ *halachic* code as compared to Rashiâs Talmudic *halachic* exegesis where the audience and task at hand are more analogous. Ivry gives us a picture of Rashi that Lasker questioned–one involved with polemics concerning the Trinity and Christian doctrine–and a Rashi devoid of a wildly fantastic midrashic mind-set far from the findings that Eric Lawee exposes in his contribution to this volume. Ivry shows that Rashi chose midrashim carefully with the needs of his community in mind but he never speculated beneath the surface to show any philosophic concerns. He does not do so even in regard to anthropomorphisms which do not appear to have been of concern in Ashkenaz in his day.

Not surprisingly, Ivry, compared to Cohen and others, is somewhat out of date with cutting-edge scholarly work on Rashi but very much aware of cutting-edge work on Maimonides. By the end of Ivryâs piece we appreciate Moshe Idelâs comment in the volume that Maimonides magically created the impression that Greco-Arabic philosophy lies at the base of midrash and Bible–the wellsprings of Jewish learning.

Mordechai Z. Cohen shows how Rashi, in his biblical commentaries, chose his midrashim to teach etiquette and morality and words of encouragement in difficult political times. He had no particular axes to grind regarding theories of creation, miracles, or the like and was not bothered by a corporeal deity. On the other hand, Maimonides used midrash to bolster his philosophic outlook and used a forced methodology to fit them into his system. While Rashi was not interested in finding keys to dilemmas in the Book of Job, like why the righteous suffer, Maimonides developed his social lessons and theories of providence by close readings of the book. In general, the Ashkenaz approach found its challenges in the philological difficulties presented by Job rather than any systemic treatment of its theology. Next, Naomi Grunhaus presents a detailed analysis of Radakâs commentaries examining cases where Radak presents non-*halachic* interpretations following the literary context of scripture. Michelle Levineâs piece on Nahmanidesâ sensitivity to minute changes in biblical dialogues and other fine points provides a window on the artistic appreciation of his literary prowess. Some of Nahmanidesâ positions are amazingly original and find their justification in the Bibleâs nuanced wordings. Her work is a delight to read. Finally, Eric Lawee examines Aaron Aboulrabiâs (fifteenth century) harsh critique of Rashiâs use of midrash in his Torah commentary, including those with *halachic* significance. He then looks at *Alilot Devarim* (*The Book of Capricious Charges*) which blames Rashiâs biblical commentary with its midrash emphasis for the intellectual decline of Ashkenazic Jewry. Such critiques found their place in Abarbanel, Isaac Arama, and others of the Spanish schools and of course in the more recent *Haskala* writers. At the end of the day Rashiâs commentary emerged as the commentary *par excellence* on the Torah and continues to enjoy its pre-eminent status co-joined to scripture as one cloth.

The volume as a whole sheds light on many topics which have been broached before to some extent yet uncovers fascinating perspectives that are fresh and exciting. The writers deserve our thanks for penetrating insights and the organizers of the conference our gratitude for assembling this panel of experts in their fields.

Notes

[1]. Guy Stroumsa, *La Fin du sacrifice. Les Mutations religieuses de l'AntiquitÃ© tardive* [The end of sacrifice] (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2005), 217.

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