

Maimonides, Samuel Ibn Tibbon, and the Construction of a Jewish Tradition of Philosophy

James T. Robinson

Maimonideanism in Southern France

During the thirteenth century, the Jews in southern France (called “Provence” in Hebrew sources) experienced a cultural revolution. Following the arrival of Maimonides’ writings and the translation of his *Guide of the Perplexed* into Hebrew, a very distinctive tradition of philosophy and exegesis was developed. Basic works of Graeco-Arabic and Arabic philosophy were translated into Hebrew, in relation to the *Guide* and in order to help understand the *Guide*. Reference tools—such as glossaries, encyclopedias, summaries, and anthologies—were created to help disseminate and popularize philosophy and philosophical ideas. Most importantly, following the directions of Maimonides, philosophy was used to interpret, and reinterpret, classical Jewish sources and doctrines. This took the form of philosophical commentaries on the Bible and rabbinic literature, philosophical sermons, philosophical commentaries on prayer, and philosophical explications of the reasons for the commandments. Even commentaries on the Talmud and legal codes were introduced by theoretical discussions of philosophy, and the relation between philosophy and religion.¹

The founder of this distinctive Maimonidean tradition of Jewish philosophy was Samuel Ibn Tibbon (c. 1165–1232)—translator, philosopher, and biblical exegete. Ibn Tibbon’s translation of the *Guide of the Perplexed* into Hebrew established the basic textbook of Jewish philosophy, and helped develop the technical terminology that would serve Jewish savants throughout the Middle Ages. His translations of Aristotle and Averroes initiated the rendering of non-Jewish works into Hebrew, and helped determine the orientation of thirteenth-century Jewish philosophy. But perhaps even more important for the construction of a Maimonidean tradition in Provence was Ibn Tibbon’s exegetical pro-

¹ For background, see the pioneering work of Isadore Twersky, “Aspects of the Social and Cultural History of Provençal Jewry,” *Journal of World History* 11 (1968): 185–207; reprinted in *Jewish Society through the Ages*, eds. H. H. Ben-Sasson and S. Ettinger (New York: Schocken Books, 1971), pp. 185–207. For updated bibliography, see James T. Robinson, “The Ibn Tibbon Family: A Dynasty of Translators in Medieval Provence,” *Be’erot Yitzhak: Studies in Memory of Isadore Twersky*, ed. J. Harris (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2005).

gram. Following the guidance of Maimonides, and applying Maimonidean ideas and principles in new areas, Ibn Tibbon produced the first Maimonidean commentaries on the Bible. His *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* presents a verse-by-verse explanation of Ecclesiastes according to what “Maimonides would have explained,” and for the benefit of those who have “knowledge of the *Guide* and have caught a whiff of the sweet smell of the speculative sciences.” His *Ma’amar Yiqqawu ha-Mayim*, which takes the form of a discursive treatise rather than straightforward commentary, nevertheless presents the first full Maimonidean explication of the “work of the beginning” and “work of the chariot.”²

The purpose of this paper is to characterize this tradition that Ibn Tibbon helped create. It will focus on the forms and methods of the tradition—commentary on the Bible, commentary on rabbinic literature, and explanations of the reasons for the commandments—in order to illustrate how a philosophical-literary culture developed from remarks made by Maimonides himself in the *Guide*. The focus will be on Ibn Tibbon, but there will be some consideration of Ibn Tibbon’s descendents and disciples as well: Jacob Anatoli (c. 1194–1256), Moses Ibn Tibbon (fl. 1244–1274), Levi b. Abraham (c. 1215–1306), and Menahem b. Solomon ha-Me’iri (1249–1315). Each of these figures, in his own way, contributed to the growth and development of Provençal Maimonideanism.

Commentary on the Bible

The Guide of the Perplexed is a notoriously difficult work to classify. Is it a work of philosophy, of theology, of exegesis; a work defending religion against philosophy, or introducing philosophy into the very heart of classical Judaism?

In the preface to the *Guide*, Maimonides himself suggests that his work is primarily exegetical: his purpose is to explain equivocal terms that appear in the

² For Ibn Tibbon’s life and work, and his role as founder of a “Maimonidean-Tibbonian” tradition, see especially Aviezer Ravitzky, “The Thought of Rabbi Zerahyah b. Isaac b. She’altiel Hen and Maimonidean-Tibbonian Philosophy in the Thirteenth Century” [Hebrew] (Ph.D. Dissertation, Hebrew University, 1977); idem, “The Possibility of Existence and Its Accidentality in Thirteenth-Century Maimonidean Interpretation,” *Da’at* 2–3 (1978–79): 67–97 (in Hebrew); idem, “Samuel Ibn Tibbon and the Esoteric Character of *The Guide of the Perplexed*,” *Association of Jewish Studies Review* 6 (1981): 87–123; idem, “The Hypostasis of Divine Wisdom,” *Italia* 3 (1981): 7–38 (in Hebrew); idem, “Aristotle’s *Meteorology* and Maimonidean Exegesis of the Account of Creation,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 9 (1990): 225–50 (in Hebrew); idem, “The Secrets of *The Guide of the Perplexed*: Between the Thirteenth and the Twentieth Centuries,” *Studies in Maimonides*, ed. I. Twersky (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 159–207. See also the recent work of Carlos Fraenkel, “From Maimonides to Samuel Ibn Tibbon: From the *Dalālat al-Hā’irīn* to the *Moreh ha-Nevoḥim*” [Hebrew] (Ph.D. Dissertation, Freie University, Berlin, 2000) and James T. Robinson, “Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* and the Philosopher’s Proemium,” *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, vol. 3, eds. I. Twersky and J. M. Harris (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2000), pp. 83–146; idem, “Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*” (Ph.D. Dissertation, Harvard University, 2002).

Bible and allegories not identified as such.³ But his explication of biblical words and passages does not follow any traditional form. The *Guide* is not a straightforward commentary on the Bible, explaining verse after verse, book after book. It is not a (conventional) midrashic compilation or (conventional) grammatical-rhetorical explication of words and literary structures. What Maimonides does instead in the *Guide* is identify and single out key biblical texts, and allude to their meanings in an indirect way, by using hints and allusions, the juxtaposing of words and texts, the citing of suggestive rabbinic sources, and the explanation of the various meanings of a word used in a biblical text. The most important biblical verses, stories, and books that Maimonides singles out and explicates in the *Guide*, in this indirect and allusive way, are the following: Jacob's Ladder in Genesis 28; Moses' request to see God's face at Exodus 33; the "account of the beginning" in Genesis 1, and the story of the garden of Eden in Genesis 2–3; the "account of the chariot" in Isaiah 6 and Ezekiel 1 and 10; the Book of Proverbs and the Book of Job, which Maimonides discusses in relation to providence and the problem of evil; the "binding of Isaac" in Genesis 22; Song of Songs, which Maimonides associates with the soul's quest for union with the active intellect; and Jer 9:22–23, which is explained by Maimonides in relation to the problem of man's final purpose, whether active or contemplative.⁴

Maimonides did not write a straightforward commentary on these texts. In the *Guide* itself, he explains why he decided not to write a commentary: it would be either too obscure or too explicit.⁵ But by singling out these biblical verses, stories, and books, and directing the reader allusively to their philosophical

³ See Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, Preface to Part 1, trans. Shlomo Pines (University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. 5–6.

⁴ Maimonides' exegesis has received considerable attention. Only the most recent or most comprehensive studies will be noted here: Sara Klein-Braslavy, "Maimonides' Interpretations of Jacob's Dream about the Ladder," *Bar-Ilan Year Book* 22–23 (1988): 329–49 (in Hebrew); Hannah Kasher, "Maimonides' Interpretations of the Story about the 'Cleft of the Rock' (Exod 32:12–34:8)," *Da'at* 35 (1995): 29–66 (in Hebrew); Sara Klein-Braslavy, *Maimonides' Interpretation of the Stories about Adam/Man in Genesis* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Reuben Mass, 1987); eadem, *Maimonides' Interpretation of the Story about the Creation of the World* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Reuben Mass, 2nd ed., 1988); Shalom Rosenberg, "On Biblical Exegesis in the *Guide of the Perplexed*," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 1 (1981): 85–175 (in Hebrew); Robert Eisen, *The Book of Job in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 43–77; Josef Stern, "The Unbinding of Isaac: Maimonides on the Aqedah" (forthcoming); Shalom Rosenberg, "Philosophical Exegesis of Song of Songs: Introductory Remarks," *Tarbiz* 59 (1990): 133–51 (in Hebrew); Eliot Wolfson, "Asceticism and Eroticism in Medieval Jewish Philosophical and Mystical Exegesis of the Song of Songs," *With Reverence for the Word: Medieval Scriptural Exegesis in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, eds. Jane Dammen McAuliffe, Barry D. Walfish, and Joseph W. Goering (Oxford University Press, 2003), pp. 92–118; Abraham Melamed, "Philosophical Commentaries on Jeremiah 9:22–23 in Medieval and Renaissance Jewish Thought," *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 4 (1985): 31–82 (in Hebrew).

⁵ See *Guide*, Preface to Part 1, trans. Pines, pp. 9–10.

meaning, he established the foundations for what would become a commentary tradition. Beginning with Samuel Ibn Tibbon, and continuing with his son-in-law Jacob Anatoli, his son Moses, Levi b. Abraham b. Hayyim, and, in some respects, Menahem b. Solomon ha-Me'iri, the disciples and followers of Maimonides devoted themselves to completing what Maimonides had begun. They explained in detail the texts that Maimonides had singled out, making explicit what he had only alluded to. They also used Maimonides' method to explain texts that Maimonides had not alluded to.

This process of creating a Maimonidean commentary on the Bible began with Ibn Tibbon's *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*.⁶ Ibn Tibbon chose this book, he explains, because Maimonides had only explained some of its verses, but had not fully articulated its purpose as a whole.⁷ It was up to him, therefore, the humble disciple, to complete what the master had begun, following only his method and building upon his hints and allusions. The commentary itself consists of a long introduction, in which Ibn Tibbon explains his purpose and method, and a verse-by-verse explication of Ecclesiastes, word after word, signification after signification. Ibn Tibbon builds upon Maimonides' interpretations of individual verses, explains terms in Ecclesiastes in light of the equivocal terms Maimonides had defined in the *Guide*, and applies general Maimonidean rules and principles to Solomon's book of wisdom. Even the structure and method of Ecclesiastes as a whole is understood by Ibn Tibbon in relation to the structure and method of the *Guide*. Like Maimonides in the *Guide*, Ibn Tibbon explains, Solomon in Ecclesiastes attempts to deny the ancient skeptics' arguments against immortality by exposing their weaknesses. Just as Maimonides had explained the arguments for eternity of the world in detail in order to refute them, so Solomon explains the arguments for mortality in detail, in order to refute them: to show that their arguments apply only to what is "under the sun," not to what is "above the sun."⁸

In addition to explaining each verse of Ecclesiastes in exhaustive detail, drawing out all the philosophical and theological implications, Ibn Tibbon also digresses in the commentary to explain many of the other biblical texts that Maimonides had singled out in the *Guide*. He explains Genesis 1 in detail, in relation to Solomon's discussion of the "times" in Eccl 3:1–9, and in relation to the recycling of water in Eccl 1:7. He explains the stories of Adam, Eve, and the Sons of

⁶ For Ibn Tibbon's *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, see the edition and partial translation in my dissertation, "Samuel Ibn Tibbon's Commentary on Ecclesiastes" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Harvard University, 2002). The complete edition and complete English translation are forthcoming. The references below are to paragraph numbers in the forthcoming edition and translation, which differ from the dissertation.

⁷ See, for example, the *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, par. 35.

⁸ See the *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, especially par. 27.

Adam in Genesis, in relation to the “man” (*adam*), the “sons of man” (*bene adam*), and the “woman more bitter than death” in Ecclesiastes. Verses in Job, Song of Songs, and Proverbs are explained in detail as well, building upon the explanations given in the *Guide* and relating them to verses and meanings in Ecclesiastes and Genesis. Even Jer 9:22–23, the final verses discussed in the *Guide*, are explained in some detail by Ibn Tibbon in his commentary, although Ibn Tibbon prefers to give these verses a different emphasis than Maimonides had done. While Maimonides had focused attention on the end of Jer 9:23, “I am the Lord, who exercises loving-kindness, judgment, and righteousness, in the earth,” Ibn Tibbon focuses only on the beginning. In his opinion, the only thing one ought to “glory in” is “knowledge and intellection of God,” full stop. Here, as elsewhere in Ibn Tibbon’s writings, when Ibn Tibbon differs with Maimonides, it is to emphasize the superiority of the contemplative life over the active.⁹

This interest in both explaining new texts that had not been discussed by Maimonides and giving full explications to texts already singled out by the master is found also in Ibn Tibbon’s second work, *Ma’amar Yiqqawu ha-Mayim*. Although this book is not a commentary proper—it is framed by a cosmological question, why the earth is not completely surrounded by water if the elements have natural places—it consists primarily of verse-by-verse explications of biblical texts. The cosmological problem itself is discussed not discursively but through a detailed explanation of Psalm 104 (which Ibn Tibbon considers the authoritative explanation of Genesis 1); and in order to explain Ps 104, Ibn Tibbon digresses to explain, in succession: Isaiah 6, Ezekiel 1 and 10, and Genesis 28; the Book of Job; and every single chapter in the Book of Psalms, not only Psalm 104.¹⁰

⁹ The exegetical digressions in the *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* are discussed in the introduction to my forthcoming edition and translation. For Jeremiah 9, see also Ibn Tibbon’s preface to his translation of Eight Chapters, ed. Menachem Kellner, “Maimonides and Samuel Ibn Tibbon on Jeremiah 9:22–23 and Human Perfection,” *Studies in Halakhah and Jewish Thought Presented to Rabbi Professor Menahem Emanuel Rackman on His Eightieth Birthday*, ed. M. Beer (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1994), pp. 49–57.

¹⁰ For background regarding the cosmological problems introduced in *Ma’amar Yiqqawu ha-Mayim*, see Georges Vajda, “An Analysis of the *Ma’amar Yiqqawu Ha-Mayim* by Samuel b. Judah Ibn Tibbon,” *Journal of Jewish Studies* 10 (1959): 137–49; Aviezer Ravitzky, “Aristotle’s *Meteorology* and Maimonidean Exegesis of the Account of Creation,” *Jerusalem Studies in Jewish Thought* 9 (1990): 225–50 (in Hebrew); and Gad Freudenthal, “(A)Chemical Foundations for Cosmological Ideas: Ibn Sinâ on the Geology of an Eternal World,” in *Physics, Cosmology and Astronomy, 1300–1700: Tension and Accommodation* (= Boston Studies in the Philosophy of Science, vol. 126), ed. Sabetai Unguru (Dordrecht / Boston / London: Kluwer, 1991), pp. 47–73. For the interpretation of Genesis 28, see Altmann, “The Ladder of Ascension,” *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to Gershon G. Scholem on his Seventieth Birthday by Pupils, Colleagues and Friends* (Jerusalem, 1967), pp. 1–32. For the interpretation of Job, see Robert Eisen, *The Book of Job in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 79–110.

Following Ibn Tibbon, the project of writing a Maimonidean commentary on the Bible continued with Ibn Tibbon's son-in-law, Jacob Anatoli, his son, Moses Ibn Tibbon, and later admirers and defenders of both Maimonides and Ibn Tibbon. Although Anatoli did not write a commentary proper, his book of sermons, *Malmad ha-Talmidim*, contains extended commentaries on key Maimonidean verses, especially from Proverbs and Psalms.¹¹ Ibn Tibbon's son Moses, on the other hand, did write a straightforward commentary on Song of Songs, which was self-consciously styled to continue the Maimonidean tradition.¹² As he explains in the preface to this commentary, his goal was to explicate Solomon's book of poetry following the hints and allusions provided by the "true sage and my father, may he rest in peace."¹³ Even the legal scholar Menahem b. Solomon ha-Me'iri, who was a defender of the Maimonidean tradition during the controversy of 1303–1306, contributed to this emerging exegetical tradition. Although his commentaries on Proverbs and Psalms are far less philosophical than those of his predecessors, they are replete with citations and borrowings from Maimonides, Ibn Tibbon, and Anatoli.¹⁴

That these commentaries and exegetical writings were considered part of a coherent and self-conscious philosophical-exegetical tradition is perhaps best exhibited by Immanuel of Rome (c. 1261–before 1336), whose work really marks the end of the first creative phase of Maimonidean exegesis. Immanuel, writing in Italy rather than Provence, was nevertheless a devotee of the Provençal school, and his commentaries are really Maimonidean compilations, selections

¹¹ For Anatoli's exegesis, which deserves a full study in its own right, see in general M. L. Gordon, "The Rationalism of Jacob Anatoli" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Yeshiva University, 1974). On Anatoli and various aspects of his sermons, see also Abraham Melamed, "Political Thought in Jacob Anatoli's *Malmad ha-Talmidim*," *Da'at* 20 (1988): 91–115 (in Hebrew); and Marc Saperstein, "Christians and Christianity in the Sermons of Jacob Anatoli," *Jewish History* 6 (1992): 225–42; republished in *Your Voice Like a Ram's Horn: Themes and Texts in Traditional Jewish Preaching* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1996), pp. 55–74.

¹² See Moses Ibn Tibbon, *Commentary on Song of Songs* (Lyck: Mekize Nirdamim, 1874), and the new edition and translation by Otfried Fraisse, "Moses Ibn Tibbons Hoheillied-Kommentar (Edition, Übersetzung, und Analyse): Ein Beitrag zur philosophisch orientierten Schriftauslegung im Süd-Frankreich des 13. Jahrhunderts" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Freie University, Berlin, 2002).

¹³ See Moses Ibn Tibbon, *Commentary on Song of Songs* (Lyck: Mekize Nirdamim, 1874), p. 6.

¹⁴ For Me'iri's relation to Samuel Ibn Tibbon and to the Maimonidean tradition in general, see Moshe Halbertal, *Between Torah and Wisdom: Menahem ha-Me'iri and the Maimonidean Halakhists in Provence* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000); Gregg Stern, "The Crisis of Philosophic Allegory in Languedocian-Jewish Culture (1304–6)," *Interpretation and Allegory: Antiquity to the Modern Period*, ed. Jon Whitman (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2000), pp. 187–207; idem, "Philosophy in Southern France: Controversy over Philosophical Study and the Influence of Averroes upon Jewish Thought," *Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, eds. D. Frank and O. Leaman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), pp. 281–303.

of the best Maimonidean interpretations, cut up and reorganized according to the verses of the Bible. His *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, for example, is an abridgement and rearrangement of Ibn Tibbon's *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*: Immanuel eliminated the philosophical and exegetical digressions, and provided occasional supplements from Ibn Ezra and Anatoli. The exegetical digressions removed from Ibn Tibbon's *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* then served as the basic building blocks in Immanuel's commentaries on Genesis, Psalms, Proverbs, Job, and Song of Songs; he moved them to the appropriate biblical verse, and supplemented them with explanations by Maimonides, Jacob Anatoli, Moses Ibn Tibbon, and earlier and contemporary Italian exegetes, especially Zerahyah Hen and Judah Romano. In almost every case, Immanuel, good compiler that he was, made sure to eliminate any indication of the original authorship of his collected exegetical remarks. It seems that for him these interpretations represent a collective exegetical authority, that transcends any need to assign individual responsibility.¹⁵

Commentary on Rabbinic Literature

For Maimonides, rabbinic literature, no less than the Bible itself, is a source of philosophical reflection. The philosophical content of rabbinic literature, however, is in many ways more difficult to identify, as a result of the exigencies of Jewish history. Because the rabbinic discussion of philosophical ideas was primarily in oral form, Maimonides maintains, much of the tradition was lost during periods of exile and persecution. What remains are a few allusions here and there, which most people do not recognize and fail to understand. They focus on the rind, and ignore the fruit or grain contained within; they see the external and obvious, but are blind to the internal and concealed.¹⁶

This idea about rabbinic literature is found already in the *Commentary on the Mishnah*, and is alluded to in several places in the *Guide*. It is expressed in *Guide*

¹⁵ For background on Immanuel and his use of sources, see especially Aviezer Ravitzky, "On the Sources of Immanuel of Rome's Proverbs Commentary," *Qiryat Sefer* 56 (1981): 726–39 (in Hebrew); Deborah Schechtermann, "The Philosophy of Immanuel of Rome" [Hebrew] (Ph.D. Dissertation, Hebrew University, 1984); Caterina Rigo, "Judah Romano's Commentaries on the Bible: His Philosophical System as Contained in Them and His Sources in Jewish Thought and Christian Scholasticism" [Hebrew] (Ph.D. Dissertation, Hebrew University, 1996). My full study of his *Commentary on Ecclesiastes* and its relation to Ibn Tibbon will appear in a separate paper.

¹⁶ For Maimonides' conception of rabbinic literature as a source of philosophy, see Isadore Twersky, "R. Yedayah ha-Penini and His Commentary on the Aggadah," *Studies in Jewish Religious and Intellectual History, presented to Alexander Altmann on the Occasion of his 70th birthday*, eds. S. Stein and R. Loewe (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1979), pp. 63–82 (in Hebrew); Marc Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis: A Thirteenth-Century Commentary on the Aggadah* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980); Eric Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance toward Tradition: Defense, Dissent, and Dialogue* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001).

1:71, the second preface in *The Guide of the Perplexed*, in which Maimonides presents a history of philosophy, and Jewish philosophy, which includes the rabbinic sages. The relevant text of *Guide* 1:71 reads as follows:

Know that the many sciences devoted to establishing the truth regarding these matters that have existed in our religious community have perished because of the length of the time that has passed, because of our being dominated by the pagan nations, and because, as we have made clear, it is not permitted to divulge these matters to all people. For the only thing it is permitted to divulge to all people are the texts of the books.... This was the cause that necessitated the disappearance of these great roots of knowledge from the nation. For you will not find with regard to them anything except slight indications and pointers occurring in the Talmud and the *midrashim*. These are, as it were, a few grains belonging to the core, which are overlaid by many layers of rind, so that people were occupied with these layers of rind and thought that beneath them there was no core whatever.¹⁷

What did Maimonides do to redress this deplorable situation? Did he attempt to recover the lost rabbinic tradition of philosophy, and if so, how? As in his explication of the Bible, Maimonides decided not to write a straightforward commentary on rabbinic *midrashim* or talmudic *aggadot*.¹⁸ Instead, he singled out and presented dozens of rabbinic texts in the *Guide* in order to help explain a biblical text, point to some speculative notion, or help develop his theory of biblical writing in general. He singles out the texts but, once again, he leaves it to his followers and disciples to turn occasional pointers and indications into a philosophical-exegetical tradition.

As with exegesis of the Bible, a Maimonidean tradition of *perush aggadot* and *perush midrash* in southern France begins with Samuel Ibn Tibbon, who cites and explains the same rabbinic texts singled out by Maimonides in the *Guide*, and applies them to new verses and in new contexts. Ibn Tibbon also began the process of singling out and explaining rabbinic texts that Maimonides had not addressed, a process that eventually led to the production of straightforward commentaries on midrash and aggadah by Samuel's son Moses, Isaac b. Yedayah, and Yedayah ha-Penini.¹⁹ Note should also be made of Levi b. Abraham's *Liwyat Hen*, which includes not only frequent philosophical explanations of rab-

¹⁷ See *Guide* 1:71, trans. Pines, pp. 175–76.

¹⁸ See *Guide*, Preface to Part 1, trans. Pines, pp. 9–10.

¹⁹ For Moses Ibn Tibbon's *Sefer ha-Pe'ah*, which is being edited by Colette Sirat, see Sirat, *A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), pp. 228–31. For Isaac b. Yedayah, see Saperstein, *Decoding the Rabbis: A Thirteenth-Century Commentary on the Aggadah* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1980).

binic sources, but designated chapters and sections devoted to the explanation of *midrashim* and *aggadot*.²⁰

To illustrate the development of a Maimonidean tradition of commentary on rabbinic texts, two examples will be given from the work of Ibn Tibbon: a rabbinic text that he borrows from Maimonides and applies in a new way and a midrash that he discovers through his own independent reading of *Genesis Rabbah*.²¹

A. "I saw the people who have attained a high rank, and they were few"

The first example is Ibn Tibbon's use of a dictum from *Sanhedrin* 97b:

Rabbi Jeremiah said in the name of Rabbi Shimon b. Yohai: I saw the people who have attained a high rank [*bene 'aliyah*], and they were few; if there were a thousand, my son and I were among them; if there were one hundred, my son and I were among them; if there were only two, they are none other than my son and I.²²

Maimonides cited this dictum in *Guide of the Perplexed* 1:34 in order to support the second of five reasons why most human beings cannot attain knowledge of divine science: the difficulty of the subject itself; the need to actualize a potentiality; the need for preliminary preparation; the need for a good native disposition; and the need to avoid the distractions of the world. I cite the text from *Guide* 1:34, followed by discussion of Ibn Tibbon's use of it:

The second cause is the insufficiency of the minds of all men at their beginnings. For man is not granted his ultimate perfection at the outset; for perfection exists in him only potentially, and in his beginnings he lacks this act. Accordingly it is said: "And man is born a wild ass" [Job 11:12]. Nor is it necessarily obligatory in the case of every individual who is endowed with some thing in potency, that this thing should become actual. Sometimes it remains in its defective state either because of certain obstacles or because of paucity of training in what transforms that potentiality into actuality. Accordingly it is clearly stated: "Not many are wise" [Job 32:9]. The sages too, may their memory be blessed, have said: "I saw the people who have attained a high rank [*bene 'aliyah*], and they were few" [*Sanh.* 97b]. For the obstacles to perfection are very many, and the objects that distract from it abound.²³

²⁰ See Levi b. Abraham b. Hayyim, *Liwyat Hen* 6:3, ed. Haim Kreisel (Jerusalem, 2004). Note should also be made of the talmudic commentaries discussed by Moshe Halbertal, *Between Torah and Wisdom: Menahem ha-Me'iri and the Maimonidean Halakhists in Provence* [Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2000), pp. 109–51.

²¹ For Ibn Tibbon's independent reading of *Genesis Rabbah*, see especially *Ma'amar Yiqqawu ha-Mayim*, ed. M. Bischeles (Pressburg, 1837), ch. 3, p. 9, where he describes his three-month study of the midrash.

²² See also *Sukkah* 45b.

²³ See *Guide* 1:34, trans. Pines, p. 73.

While Maimonides cites the dictum to support a philosophical-educational notion—that human capacity is limited, that attaining intellectual perfection is possible but rare—Ibn Tibbon uses it as an exegetical key. He explains both Eccl 3:21, “Who knows the spirit of the sons of man, whether it rises above [*ha’olah hi le-ma’alah*]?” and Ps 82:6–7, “I have said, ye are *elohim*, and all of you sons of the most high [*bene’elyon*]; But ye shall die like man,” in relation to this rabbinic dictum. According to Ibn Tibbon, what Solomon means is the same as what David means, and what Solomon and David mean corresponds with the rabbinic text: while it is possible for the human soul or spirit to rise above, to become like *Elohim* and a son of the Most High, to attain conjunction with the active intellect and live forever, only few can attain this highest state of existence. The rabbinic text, as used by Maimonides in *Guide* 1:34, helps Ibn Tibbon to identify a central teaching of both Ecclesiastes and Psalms: although immortality is possible, it is extremely rare.²⁴

B. “When were the angels created?”

The second example illustrates Ibn Tibbon’s explanation of a midrash not found in the *Guide*, which he cites in *Ma’amar Yiqqawu ha-Mayim* and explains in detail. The midrash, from *Genesis Rabbah* 1:3, reads as follows.

When were the angels created? Rabbi Yohanan said: They were created on the second day, as it is written: “Who layest the beams of Thine upper chambers in the waters” [Ps 104:3], followed by: “Who makest the spirits Thine angels” [Ps 104:4]. Rabbi Hanina said: They were created on the fifth day, for it is written: “And let fowl fly [*ye’ofef*] above the earth” [Gen 1:20], and it is written: “and with twain did fly [*ye’ofef*]” [Isa 6:2]. Rabbi Luliani b. Tabri said in Rabbi Isaac’s name: Whether we accept the view of Rabbi Hanina or the view of Rabbi Yohanan, all agree that none was created on the first day, lest you should say: Michael stretched [the world] in the south and Gabriel in the north, while the Holy One, blessed be He, measured it in the middle. But I am the Lord that maketh all things; that stretched forth the heavens alone; that spread abroad the earth by Myself [Isa 44:24].²⁵

The text itself seems to represent a rabbinic polemic against dualism; it asserts that God himself is the only true cause of existence; everything else, including the angels, is subordinate to God and His holy will. Ibn Tibbon, on the other hand, is far more interested in the intermediaries than the final cause, and most interested in relating this rabbinic discussion to an ancient philosophical dispute. What he understands from this midrash is that Rabbi Yohanan and

²⁴ See *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, par. 139, 373, 435, 455, 476, 746.

²⁵ See *Genesis Rabbah* 1:3, trans. H. Freedman (Soncino Press, 1983), p. 5. See also *Genesis Rabbah* 3:8, 11:8.

Rabbi Hanina are expressing divergent views not on the creation of angels *per se*—which Ibn Tibbon never tires of reminding us are separate intelligences²⁶—but on their function within the cosmos. Thus Rabbi Yohanan, Ibn Tibbon explains, who argues that the angels were created on day two, was similar to all philosophers before Aristotle, who believed that the active intellect is the giver of forms for all sublunar beings, including plants and animals, whereas Rabbi Hanina, who argued that the angels were created on day five, the day before man was created, sided with Aristotle, who believed that the active intellect was responsible for giving form to man only. Both rabbis agreed that the angels were not needed to give form to the elements or minerals, which do not possess any soul or higher functions.²⁷

Reasons for the Commandments

One of the most distinctive characteristics of *The Guide of the Perplexed* is its discussion of the reasons for the commandments. Consisting of some twenty-five chapters—the longest single unit in *The Guide of the Perplexed*—the section on the commandments separates Maimonides' discussion of providence and evil, on the one hand, and his discussion of the final purpose of human existence, on the other.

As is now well known, Maimonides' treatment of the reasons for the commandments is peculiar not only for the way it introduces law into a philosophical-theological discussion. What distinguishes Maimonides from previous discussions of the same subject is his strong sense of teleology in law, and his use of history, really historicism, to help explain biblical commandments—especially those related to the sacrificial cult—which seem to have no rational explanation. These commandments he explains as divine concessions to the ancient pagan Sabian customs that the Israelites had assimilated. By instituting sacrificial practices that resemble those of the Sabians, God could gradually wean the Israelites from pagan ways and direct them toward the proper service of Him, the one true God.²⁸

²⁶ See throughout *Ma'amar Yiqqawu ha-Mayim*, ch. 4; and see *Guide* 2:6, for background.

²⁷ Ibn Tibbon's discussion is in *Ma'amar Yiqqawu ha-Mayim*, chapter 4. For background and influence, see also Ibn Tibbon, *Perush ha-Millot ha-Zarot*, s.v. *sekhel ha-po'el*; the *Commentary on Ecclesiastes*, par. 401; and Levi b. Abraham, *Liwyat Hen* 6:3, ed. Kreisel (2004), p. 233.

²⁸ For background on Maimonides' "theory of accommodation" and his reasons for the commandments in general, see Stephen Benin, *The Footprints of God: Divine Accommodation in Jewish and Christian Thought* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); Josef Stern, *Problems and Parables of Law: Maimonides and Nahmanides on Reasons for the Commandments* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998).

In possession of these powerful hermeneutical tools, Maimonides approaches his task of explaining the reasons for the commandments with great confidence. All commandments, he explains, have reasons, and all, or most, can be identified; only very few indeed, he remarks, have not become clear to him in the course of his investigations.

This confidence is expressed forcefully already in *Guide* 3:26, the introductory chapter in his discussion of law:

This being so, I have seen fit to divide the six hundred and thirteen commandments into a number of classes, every one of which comprises a number of commandments belonging to one kind or akin in meaning. I shall inform you of the cause of every one of these classes, and I shall show their utility about which there can be no doubt and to which there can be no objection. Then I shall return to each of the commandments comprised in the class in question and I shall explain to you the cause of it, so that only very few commandments will remain whose cause has not become clear to me up to now.²⁹

Maimonides' chapters on the reasons for the commandments, like his exegesis of Bible and use of rabbinic texts, established the foundations for a philosophical tradition of *ta'ame ha-mitzvot*. He defined the problem, established the framework for discussion, and created the tools of investigation. But perhaps more significant in stimulating the emergence of a philosophical tradition of *ta'ame ha-mitzvot* than the commandments he explained were the commandments he did not. His admission that he could not explain the table and showbread, the wine offering, and the red heifer, for example, served a very powerful rhetorical function: they worked as a challenge of sorts to his followers and disciples to follow his lead, to complete what the master had begun.

The meaning of the table, of the showbread, and of the red heifer received considerable attention already in the early Maimonidean tradition: Ibn Tibbon wrote a short treatise about "The Reason for the Table, Showbread, Menorah, and Sweet Savor,"³⁰ and Anatoli devoted one complete sermon in *Malmad ha-*

²⁹ See *Guide* 3:26, trans. Pines, pp. 509–10.

³⁰ For this treatise, see Aviezer Ravitzky, "The Thought of Rabbi Zerachyah b. Isaac b. She'altiel Hen and Maimonidean-Tibbonian Philosophy in the Thirteenth Century" [Hebrew] (Ph.D. Dissertation, Hebrew University, 1977), p. 20, n. 1; Yitzhak Tzvi Langermann "A New Collection of Texts in Medieval Jewish Philosophy," *Qiryat Sefer* 64 (1992/1993): 1427–1432 (in Hebrew); Daniel Abrams, ed., *R. Asher ben David: His Complete Works and Studies in His Kabbalistic Thought* [Hebrew] (Los Angeles: Cherub Press, 1996), p. 21, n. 64. The following discussion is based on two manuscripts: Hamburg 251 (IMHM 912), 218a–221a; Russian State Library, Moscow, Yevreiski 209 (IMHM 53178), 27b–31a. For Ibn Tibbon's authorship, see the remark by Qalonymus b. Qalonymus in his letter to Joseph Ibn Kaspi, ed. Joseph Perles, in *Kalonymos ben Kalonymos' Sendschreiben an Joseph Kaspi* (Munich, 1879), p. 6: גם בענין השולחן ולחם הפנים והמנורה נתן בו החכם ר' שמואל הנזכר ששם נאה ומתקבל, וכתב בו הרבה, הנה הוא אצלינו ואין לנו דברים אלו בלתי הסברא וי"י אלהים אמת יודע האמת ודרי

Talmidim to the red heifer.³¹ These two examples will be sufficient to illustrate the emergence of a Maimonidean tradition of *ta'ame ha-mitzvot*.

A. *The Table, Menorah, Showbread, and Pleasing Smell*

Maimonides' admission of his failure to understand the meaning of the table and showbread appears in *Guide* 3:45, the chapter on the temple and tabernacle. It reads as follows:

Thereupon a candlestick was placed in front of it in order to glorify and honor the Temple. For the Temple, which was always illumined by lamps and separated by means of a veil [from the Holy of Holies], made a great impression upon the soul. You know to what extent the Law fortifies the belief in the greatness of the Sanctuary and the awe felt for it, so that on seeing it, man should be affected by a sentiment of submission and servitude. It says: And ye shall fear My Sanctuary [Lev 19:30], an injunction that he has coupled with the precept to keep the Sabbath in order to strengthen fear of the Sanctuary. The need for the altar for incense and the altar for burnt-offering and for their utensils is manifest. As for the table and the bread that was always to be upon it, I do not know the reason for this and I have not found up to now something to which I might ascribe this practice.³²

How did Ibn Tibbon resolve a problem that the master could not? According to Ibn Tibbon, Maimonides' failure to understand the table and showbread was a category mistake: he tried to understand them in relation to his theory of accommodationism, but could not identify a relevant practice in ancient Sabianism that could account for this particular custom. But the true reason, in Ibn Tibbon's opinion, was not any polemic with ancient paganism but the need to teach a theological lesson: that God is not a body and does not experience corporeal sensations. In his opinion, the commandment works to achieve this purpose as follows:

God commanded a House to be built, incense offerings to be given, trumpets to be blown, menorahs to be set up and candles lit. God certainly did not establish these practices in order to satisfy His own sensual desires, Ibn Tibbon maintains. Nevertheless, because these practices involve the senses of smell, hearing, and sight, one could easily be misled into thinking that God did, in fact, seek to gain some sensual experience from them. This is because the experience of sight, hearing, and smell do not require any visible change in the sensible object, which means that an external witness cannot verify with any certainty whether an agent really does or does not see or hear or smell. There is no material evi-

³¹ See *Malmad ha-Talmidim*, ed. L. Silbermann (Lyck: Mekize Nirdamim, 1866), pp. 86b–91a.

³² See *Guide* 3:45, trans. Pines, pp. 577–78.

dence, in other words, that God does not smell the incense, hear the trumpets, and see the candles that illuminate the House. Thus God added the table and showbread, which relate to taste and touch—senses that do involve corporeal change—in order to clearly distance God from any corporeal affections. For when people see that the bread remains on the table unmoved and unchanged, they will know for certain that God does not taste or touch. And when they recognize that God does not taste or touch, they will infer that he does not experience the other senses either. Thus, according to Ibn Tibbon, the very sensual sacrificial cult serves to inculcate a true belief: that God is not a body and does not experience sense perceptions.

B. *The Red Heifer, Scarlet Thread, Hyssop, and Cedar*

More famous than the table and showbread is the red heifer. It was already singled out by the rabbis, was discussed in several places by Maimonides, and became something of a crux in later discussions of the commandments. According to the rabbis, it was the only commandment that Solomon could not understand;³³ and according to Maimonides himself, it was not only the heifer that was inscrutable but the burning of the scarlet thread, hyssop and cedar wood that was included in the red heifer ceremony. Maimonides' focus on these details, with respect to the red heifer, as well as leprosy and the paschal lamb, is found in *Guide* 3:47, the chapter on purification. It runs as follows:

As for the uncleanness of leprosy, we have already explained its meaning. The sages, may their memory be blessed, have also explained it. They have made known to us that the established principle in regard to it is that it is a punishment for slander and that at first this change appears in the walls....If the man repents, the purpose has been achieved. If, however, he continues in his disobedience, the change extends to his bed and his house furniture. If he still persists in his disobedience, it passes over to his clothing, then to his body. This is a miracle that was perpetuated in the religious community like that of the waters of the woman suspected of idolatry. The utility of this belief is manifest, there being also the fact that leprosy is contagious and that, almost by nature, all men find it disgusting. The reason why purification from it was effected by means of cedar wood, hyssop, scarlet thread, and two birds is given in the *midrashim*; but it does not fit in with our purpose, and up to now I do not know the reason for any of these things; nor why cedar wood, hyssop, and scarlet thread were used in the ceremony of the red heifer nor why a bunch of hyssop was used for the sprinkling of the blood of the paschal lamb. I cannot find any reason whereby I could account for these species having been singled out.³⁴

³³ See *Eccl Rabbah* 7:23, as cited in *Guide* 3:26, trans. Pines, pp. 50–78.

³⁴ See *Guide* 3:47, trans. Pines, pp. 596–97.

How did the Maimonidean respond to this challenge of the Master? How did he explain a commandment that Maimonides could not, using principles drawn from Maimonides himself? According to Jacob Anatoli, Michael Scot had already come up with a secret interpretation of the red heifer, but Anatoli does not disclose his explanation.³⁵ In the fourteenth century, Qalonymus b. Qalonymus reports that Frederick II Hohenstaufen, the patron of both Scot and Anatoli, had explained the red heifer in light of Sabian texts that Maimonides had not consulted; perhaps this is the interpretation that Scot possessed as well.³⁶ Anatoli himself, however, develops a different approach, which is more symbolic and homiletical than historical, but which is no less grounded in the principles and interpretations of the *Guide*. His explanation can be summarized as follows:

The practice of burying the dead body in a dignified fashion and mourning its loss is, according to Anatoli, appropriate and necessary; it is no different from mourning the destruction of a house that has served a person well. But there is a danger in valuing the body too much, at the expense of the soul. It is for this reason that contact with the dead is required, on the one hand, but causes impurity, on the other, and why the ceremony of the red heifer was introduced, which serves to emphasize the superiority of the soul over the body. For the heifer itself represents the body, the scarlet thread the vanity of wealth, and the hyssop and cedar wood the vanity of the knowledge of natural science. As in Jer 9:22, Anatoli explains, the ceremony teaches that health (the heifer), wealth (the scarlet thread), and a lower form of wisdom (the hyssop and cedar wood) should not be gloried in; only divine science, the knowledge and cognition of God, should truly cause glory or praise. Thus, following Ibn Tibbon's revised reading of Maimonides' explication of Jer 9:22–23, Anatoli arrives at a symbolic explanation of a commandment that even Solomon could not fathom!

Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined three examples of how Maimonides laid the foundations of a Maimonidean tradition of philosophy and exegesis, but how it was up to Samuel Ibn Tibbon and Ibn Tibbon's descendants and disciples to follow his lead and develop his ideas and principles into a coherent philosophical-lit-

³⁵ See Anatoli, *Malmaḥ ha-Talmidim*, ed. L. Silberman (Lyck: Mekize Nirdamim, 1866), p. 38b.

³⁶ See *Kalonymos ben Kalonymos' Sendschreiben an Joseph Kaspi*, ed. Joseph Perles (Munich, 1879), p. 6: והנה אנחנו מקובלים שומע מפי שומע שהקיסר פרידאליק נתן אל החכם ר' שמואל: תבון טעם מספיק בענין פרה אדומה, ונפלא על הרב איך נעלם ממנו, וזה שהקיסר מנצח בספר מספרי הנצאבא שהיו עושים כדמות אותה המלאכה בערי אדום ומאפרו ישרו הטמאים וכו', ונמרו שלא ראה הרב ז"ל הספר הזה, שאם ראהו לא נסתפק בו. גם בענין השולחן ולחם הפנים והמנורה נתן בו החכם ר' שמואל הנזכר טעם נאה ומתקבל, וכתב בו הרבה, הנה הוא אצלינו ואין לנו דברים אלו בלתי הסברא וי"י אלהים אמת יודע האמת ודי

erary tradition. There are many other examples or fields that could illustrate this process as well. For example, the choice of works translated from Arabic into Hebrew, the methods of exegesis, methods of writing, rhetoric and literary style. Also fruitful would be a study of sources. For in the thirteenth century, Maimonidean scholars tended to cite only Maimonides and the works Maimonides approved of; Maimonides and earlier Maimonideans; and, as the tradition continued to develop, Maimonides, approved Maimonideans, and pre-Maimonideans, who were brought into conversation with Maimonides and harmonized with him.

I believe that this type of study of the Maimonidean tradition in Provence can be applied in the study of other Maimonidean traditions as well: in Italy, Yemen, Egypt, Spain; in the later Middle Ages, the Renaissance, and even the early modern period. This type of study can help us to understand the complex relation between Maimonides and the many diverse traditions his writings inspired, and can help set in greater relief the development of traditions and schools of thought in the Jewish Middle Ages in general. But more than anything, what I hope this type of study can do is help return the Maimonidean tradition to its rightful place in the history of Jewish thought: necessary for making Maimonides into the "True Sage" and "Divine Philosopher," indispensable for gaining access to the secrets of the "Master and Guide."