Philosophy and Science in Medieval Jewish Commentaries on the Bible

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During the Middle Ages – the age of commentary par excellence – four distinct methods of Jewish biblical exegesis developed. These methods, formalized in the thirteenth century, were designated by the acronym PaRDSe. The four methods were peshat, the literal/grammatical/historical/contextual method of interpretation; remez, the philosophical/allegorical approach; derash, the method of rabbinic midrash; and sod, the esoteric method of the kabbalists, who read the Bible through the ten sefirot, the names of God, and letter permutations.¹

This chapter introduces the second of these four canonical methods of interpretation. It surveys the main philosopher-exegetes and schools of thought during the Middle Ages by their period and geographical location. These include the rise of philosophical-theological exegesis in the Islamic East; the exegetical traditions of the Islamic West, especially in al-Andalus; the Maimonidean traditions in Provence, Italy, and to a lesser extent Christian Spain; and the post-Maimonidean developments in Egypt, Iraq, and Yemen. The final section focuses on anti-philosophical and anti-Maimonidean traditions of exegesis. These traditions developed in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, often as a direct response to the spread of Maimonideanism, and continued into the fifteenth century, when Jews were influenced by contemporary trends of anti-Aristotelianism.

One preliminary note about terminology: The survey focuses on philosophical exegesis in general, but attempts to single out examples that relate to subjects of scientific interest in a more narrow sense. In the Middle Ages, philosophy included what we call today "science," that is, discussions based on or related to empirically observed phenomena. In addition, it should be noted that a complete survey of the history of philosophy and exegesis would need to consider a wide variety of sources, including philosophical and theological summas, polemical tracts, controversial letters, popular literature, philosophical sermons, and proper commentaries on the Bible. In this chapter I focus primarily on biblical commentaries, with only occasional reference to the cognate literature. A complete study of all the relevant literature would require a much larger investigation.

¹ I would like to thank Gadi Freudenthal, Angela Jaffé, and Litzu Langemann for many helpful comments and suggestions. For the history of PaRDSe, see especially E. Bahmge, “Apples of Gold: The Inner Meaning of Sacred Texts in Medieval Judaism,” in A. Green, ed., Jewish Spirituality: From the Bible to the Middle Ages (New York: Crossroad, 1986), pp. 313-55; and most recently M. Idel, Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), pp. 429-47.
THE ISLAMIC EAST

The history of medieval Jewish philosophy, science, and exegesis begins in the Islamic East. Under the influence of Christian and Islamic traditions and in response to the spread of philosophy, a distinct Jewish commentary tradition developed.

What was the character of early Islam, and how did it contribute to a Jewish exegetical tradition? During the first three centuries of Islam, a remarkably open intellectual environment developed. The conquest of Iran, Iraq, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt brought the ancient centers of learning under the rule of Islam. Arabic became the common language, but separate religious groups continued to thrive. In particular, Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians were protected and were allowed to continue their traditions. Although Greek paganism was not tolerated, the classical texts were translated into Arabic and stimulated the development of an Arabic philosophical and scientific tradition.

This open cultural and intellectual environment produced some interesting results. Free-thinkers such as al-Rāzī, among the Muslims, and Hiwi al-Balkhi, among the Jews, wrote critiques of traditional religion and Scripture. Philosophical and theological sessions took place in the mosques and included members from all the different traditions: The only requirement for participation was that one check religious dogma at the door. In response, there developed Islamic theological and exegetical traditions interested in using philosophy to explain Scripture, or to defend Scripture against philosophy. Most famous is the Muʿtazzilite school of Kalām, which aimed to show that Scripture is not inconsistent in any way with the findings of reason.

This fluid and open cultural setting is exemplified in the life and work of the first known Jewish verse-by-verse commentator on the Bible. Dāwūd al-Muqammis (ninth century) converted to Christianity and studied in the Christian schools before returning to the religion of his fathers. In addition to his theological summa, entitled Twenty Chapters, he also produced Judeo-Arabic commentaries on Genesis and Ecclesiastes. Only one fragment of the Genesis commentary survives, but as a later report testifies, al-Muqammis drew extensively from the Syriac tradition. Thus this early Judeo-Arabic commentary on the Bible grew out of a direct encounter with Eastern Christianity.

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2 For background on all these developments, see J. Kraemer, Humanism in the Renaissance of Islam: The Cultural Revival during the Buayd Age (Leiden: Brill, 1986); idem, Philosophy in the Renaissance of Islam: Abū Sulaymān al-SijISTAni and His Circle (Leiden: Brill, 1986); D. Gutas, Greek Thought, Arabic Culture: The Graeco-Arabic Translation Movement in Baghdad and Early Abbasid Society (2nd-4th/8th-10th Centuries) (London: Routledge, 1998).


7 In light of this, it is worth suggesting the possibility that Philo of Alexandria, the great Jewish Hellenistic philosophical exegete of Late Antiquity, might have influenced medieval Jewish exegesis indirectly through Syriac Christianity. For some investigation in this direction, see D. Runia, Philo in Early Christian Literature: A Survey (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), p. 16; B. Chiesa, "Dawud al-Muqammas e la sua opera," Henoch 18 (1996): 131-7.
In the 100 years after Dawid, two related, but hostile and adversarial, traditions emerged. The Karaites, a Jewish sect that rejected the rabbinic tradition, developed a strongly grammatical approach to Scripture. Although some of the Karaites exeges were opposed to philosophy, others embraced it and cultivated a rationalistic hermeneutic. For example, Jacob al-Qirqisani (tenth century) defended the use of reason in the introduction to his commentary on Genesis and made use of scientific and philosophical ideas in his explication of individual verses. His defense of reason in the preface to the Genesis commentary reads as follows:

Before beginning this we must prove the validity of rational speculation and philosophical postulates from Scripture by mentioning some passages in it which point and lead to them. We shall do this because some of our scholars, upon hearing an interpretation interspersed with matters pertaining to philosophical speculation, are frightened away from it, regarding it as superfluous and unnecessary; indeed, some of them consider it improper and even forbidden. But this is only because of their ignorance and the poverty of their knowledge. Were the eyes of their mind open, they would have learned that these things are tools for the understanding of Scripture and ladders and bridges toward the perception of revealed truth, inasmuch as the truth of Scripture and religion can be comprehended only by reason. Since the philosophical postulates, too, are built upon rational deductions based in their turn upon the knowledge of things perceived by the human senses and logical axioms, he who rejects rational and philosophical opinions thereby denies all data posited by cogitation or sense perception.

The Rabbanites, the heirs of the rabbinic tradition and defenders of midrash, also embraced the new traditions and methods, mainly due to the efforts of Saadia Gaon (882–942). Saadia hailed from Egypt, but moved to Iraq where he ascended to the position of Gaon in the ancient rabbinical academy of Sura. Writing in Arabic rather than Aramaic or Hebrew, and borrowing and adapting the philosophical and literary trends of his time, he managed to completely transform the literary character of Rabbinic Judaism.


10 Nemoy, Karaita Anthology, pp. 54–5.


12 There is a considerable literature on Saadia. The foundational biography by H. Malter, Saadia Gaon: His Life and Works (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1921), remains extremely useful. See also, in addition to the recent studies by Brody cited in the previous note, his Rau Se’asiah Ga’on (Jerusalem: Merkaz Zalman Shazar, 2006) (Heb.).

13 For the literary developments, see especially R. Drory, The Emergence of Jewish-Arabic Literary Contacts at the Beginning of the Tenth Century (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1988) (Heb.); idem, Models and Contacts: Arabic Literature and its Impact on Medieval Jewish Culture (Leiden: Brill, 2000).
Saadia was a zealous defender of Judaism and the rabbinic tradition. Much of his unnum-
merous career was devoted to polemics. He wrote controversial treatises against freethinking
critics of the Bible and against the Karaites and included attacks on Christianity in his
philosophical work and commentaries on the Bible. Yet his defense of tradition is far from
traditional; on the contrary, his work is very innovative. He borrowed the methods of his
rivals in order to develop a defensible rabbinic tradition.

Saadia's commentaries are long and digressive. They include systematic introductions,
Arabic translation of each verse, and extensive commentary. In his interpretations of verses
and stories Saadia touches on subjects in every area of learning, from the philological and
poetic, to the legal and polemical, to the philosophical, theological, and scientific. He
justifies the use of reason with his famous exegetical rule: If a verse contradicts reason, sense
experience, another verse, or tradition, then it needs to be interpreted nonliterally. The first
part of this rule, as it appears in his Book of Beliefs and Opinions, reads as follows:

And so I declare, first of all, that it is a well-known fact that every statement found in the Bible is to be understood in its literal sense, except that for which cannot be so construed for one of the following four reasons: It may, for example, either be rejected by the observation of the senses, such as the statement: "And the man called his wife's name Eve; because she was the mother of all living" [Gen 3:20], whereas we see that the ox and the lion are not the offspring of womankind. Hence we must conclude that the implication of the statement embraces human descendants only. Or else the literal sense may be negated by reason, such as that of the statement: "For the Lord thy God is a devouring fire, a jealous God" [Deut 4:24]. Now fire is something created and destructive, for it is subject to extinction. Hence it is logically inadmissible that God resemble it. We must, therefore, impute to this statement the meaning that God's punishment is like a consuming fire, in accordance with the remark made elsewhere in Scripture: "For all the earth shall be devoured with the fire of My jealousy" [Zeph 3:8].

Like the Mu'tazilites, Saadia was concerned primarily with biblical anthropomorphisms.
Yet the implication for philosophy and science in general is far-reaching, for sense experience
and reason are made the final arbiters of scriptural meaning.

Saadia had extraordinary influence on the later rabbinic exegetical tradition. In the
Islamic East, his imprint is found in the work of Samuel ben Hohni and others. His writings


spread west as well, to North Africa and Islamic Spain, where they were read, used, and surpassed by a new generation of philosophers, exegetes, and philosopher-exegetes.

ISLAMIC SPAIN

The second major development in the history of medieval Jewish philosophical exegesis took place in Islamic Spain. There, during the tenth and especially eleventh and twelfth centuries, a very diverse Judeo-Arabic culture emerged. It included original contributions in legal scholarship, grammar, poetry, philosophy, theology, and biblical commentary.

The Spanish school of biblical exegesis was primarily concerned with grammar, rhetoric, and history; its members developed what is now called the Spanish school of *peshat.* Yet they were interested in philosophy and philosophical exegesis as well. Thus Solomon Ibn Gabirol wrote Neoplatonic explications of the Garden of Eden and of Jacob’s ladder; Moses Ibn Ezra devoted part of his *Maqālat al-Ḥadīqa fī maʿnā al-majāz wa-l-haqqā* (Treatise of the Garden on Figurative and Literal Language) to the philosophical discussion of biblical words and stories, and *exegesis is found throughout the philosophical-theological writings of figures such as Bahya Ibn Paqudah and Judah Halevi.* Even the grammarians and grammarian-exegeters per se, such as Judah Ibn Bal’am and Moses Ibn Giquatilla, were not averse to introducing philosophical or scientific ideas into their biblical commentaries. Yet there were two exeges in particular – Isaac Ibn Ghiyath (1038–89) and Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089–1164) – who embraced both *peshat* and philosophy. These two figures are the focus here.

Isaac Ibn Ghiyath was a scholar of varied talents; indeed, he is a perfect example of the diverse Jewish culture of Islamic Spain. Legal authority, poet, and biblical exegete, he introduced scientific and philosophical themes, mainly of a Neoplatonic orientation, into his poetry and exegesis. His only commentary is a long Judeo-Arabic explication of Ecclesiastes, which (like Saadia’s commentaries) includes a systematic preface, an Arabic translation of each verse, and a verse-by-verse interpretation of the text. The commentary includes detailed grammatical and rhetorical explications, as well as philosophical interpretations and digressions. According to Ibn Ghiyath, the use of philosophy is necessary because Solomon himself was a master of all the sciences and subtly alluded to every discipline in his work. As enumerated in Ibn Ghiyath’s preface, the expertise shown by Solomon in Ecclesiastes

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18 For the development of Spanish *peshat,* see especially the work of Uriel Simon, of which a bibliography is available in *Studies in Bible and Exegesis* 5 (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2000), pp. 21–9 (Heb.).


includes arithmetic, geometry, astronomy, natural science, music, medicine, logic, grammar, rhetoric, poetics, and metaphysics.22

Perhaps the most important, and certainly the most influential, exegete of the Andalusian tradition was Abraham Ibn Ezra. Although he wrote in Hebrew rather than Arabic and completed his works outside of Islamic Spain, his writings represent the final flowering of Spanish peshaṭ.

Ibn Ezra was a prolific author. He composed poetry, works of grammar and philosophy, introductions to mathematics, astronomy, and astrology; and biblical commentaries, often producing two versions of the same text. His extant biblical commentaries include explications of the Pentateuch, Isaiah, the twelve Minor Prophets, Psalms, Job, the Five Scrolls, and Daniel. Most of these commentaries include philosophical and scientific digressions. His main interest is in mathematics, astronomy, and astrology, but he touches on other subjects as well, especially Neoplatonic philosophy.23

The most famous excursus in Ibn Ezra’s commentaries is in his long commentary on Exodus. After a brief explication of Exod. 33:20-1 (“And He said, Thou shalt not see my face; for there shall no man see me, and live; And the Lord said, Behold, there is a place by me, and thou shalt stand upon a rock”), he proceeds with a detailed explanation of the names of God and the knowledge of God, in light of arithmetic and arithmology, he then presents a lengthy introduction to astrology and astronomy, including discussion of the 12 constellations, 7 planets, 48 forms, 120 conjunctions, and 7 climes and of the relationship between celestial movements and the four elements. He ends his excursion with an attempted resolution to the problem of astral determinism—that human beings can overcome celestial causation through prophecy.24 This he supports with a parable, perhaps borrowed from Rāhūn al-Ṣafā’,25 and concludes as follows:

Imagine the following: The seven moving stars are like horses that run along a path. They do not run with the intention of doing good or bad. They act in accordance with their nature. Now imagine that a blind man is in their path. The blind man does not know how the horses act. He does not know

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25 For this suggestion, see Langermann, “Some Astrological Themes,” p. 80 n. 67.
when they go to the right and when they go to the left. The blind man depends on a person with sight who knows the way the horses run. Now the person with sight will guard the blind man. When the horses run to one side he will lead the blind person to the other side. The course of the horse’s running does not change but the blind man is saved. It is because of this that Scripture states: “The sun and the moon and the stars even all the host of heaven which the Lord thy God has allotted unto all the peoples under the whole heaven” (Deut. 4:19). . . . This is what the Rabbis mean by “Israel has no constellation” as long as they keep the Torah. If Israel does not keep the Torah, then the star rules over them, as has been proven, for any conjunction combined with Aquarius is an evil arrangement. It results in harm befalling Israel. This is admitted by the astrologers. 26

Ibn Ezra’s commentaries were read widely in Christian Europe, where Hebrew rather than Arabic was the language of Jewish culture. In many cases, Jews in Europe had their first taste of the sciences through his commentaries on the Bible. Beginning in the thirteenth century and continuing into the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, a supercommentary tradition developed as well. The supercommentators generally focused on the philosophical and scientific exegesis. They provided relevant scientific background and explanation in their efforts to decode Ibn Ezra’s unstated “secrets.”

MAIMONIDES AND MAIMONIDENEANISM

A turning point in the history of exegesis, as in so many other areas, came with the work of Moses Maimonides, the last major Jewish scholar from Andalusia. Maimonides was born in Cordoba in 1138, fled the Muladhid persecutions in 1148, and settled in Egypt, where he died in 1204.

Although Maimonides did not write a proper biblical commentary, his Guide of the Perplexed is largely concerned with exegesis. It presents a well-developed theory of philosophical interpretation, sets forth an allegorical lexicon, and gives model explications of key biblical texts. These texts include the story of Jacob’s ladder (Genesis 28), Moses’ request for knowledge of God (Exodus 33), the story of creation and the Garden of Eden (Genesis 1–5), the chariot visions (Isaiah 6; Ezekiel 1 and 10), the Book of Job, the binding of Isaac (Genesis 22), and Jeremiah 9:22–3, which he explains in relation to philosophical debates about the final aim of human existence, whether active or contemplative. He also singles out and discusses other verses and stories in relation to miracles, prophecy, divine providence, and the problem of evil. 27


Maimonides identified problematic texts but did not explain them in detail. In addition, although he introduced a method of interpretation, he did not apply it to the Bible as a whole. Instead, he left this task to his followers in Provence and Italy, who devoted themselves to finishing what the master had begun. His impact is felt throughout the exegetical developments in Christian Spain and the later Islamic East as well. Each of these four areas—Provence, Italy, Christian Spain, and the Islamic East—are surveyed here.

The Provençal Tradition

The history of Jewish philosophy and philosophical exegesis in southern France (called "Provence" in Jewish sources) is especially interesting. Over the course of 150 years, from around 1150 to 1300, this ancient center of talmudic and midrashic learning was transformed into the most active center of Jewish philosophy of the time. Supported by the patronage of local scholars and helped by the arrival of refugees from Islamic Spain, Judaeo-Arabic and Arabic works were translated into Hebrew and served as the basis for encyclopedias, philosophical summations, and scientific and philosophical explanations of the Bible and rabbinic literature.29

The first major philosopher-exegete in southern France was Samuel Ibn Tibbon (ca. 1165–1232), the translator of the Guide of the Perplexed into Hebrew. Building on Maimonides, Ibn Tibbon wrote a commentary on Ecclesiastes, in which he discussed several philosophical and scientific ideas. He also wrote a philosophical-exegetical treatise entitled Ma'amor Yiqquam ha-ma'amorim (Treatise on "Let the Waters be Gathered" [Gen. 1:9]) and planned two additional commentaries: one on the internal meanings of Proverbs and an esoteric explanation of Genesis, entitled Ner ha-Hofesh (A Candle for Him Who Searches; cf. Prov. 20:27).30

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In what way was Ibn Tibbon’s exegesis Maimonidean? The best example is his interpretation of verses from Genesis 1. Following Maimonides’ hint in Guide 2.30 — that Aristotle’s Meteorology is the key to understanding the “Account of the Beginning” — Ibn Tibbon translated that work into Hebrew and used it in his interpretation of Genesis. He also used it in the explanation of several additional biblical texts, especially Psalm 104 and (as is seen later) verses from Ecclesiastes.

Here are several other examples of philosophy and science in Ibn Tibbon’s commentaries. He explains Ecclesiastes 1:3 and the locutions “under the sun” and “under the heavens” in terms of meteorological theories about light and reflection. The phrase “a generation comes and a generation goes” (Ecc. 1:14), he interprets in relation to the eternity of matter. He explains the going and coming of the sun (Ecc. 1:5—6) in light of the rival astronomical models of Ptolemy and al-Bitruji. The sea that never fills (Ecc. 1:7) is expounded through a meteorological discussion of rivers and evaporation. He interprets the pairs of “times” (Ecc. 3:1—8) — as Ibn Tibbon calls them — in terms of the Aristotelian notion of time, motion, and celestial influence on generation and corruption. He discusses “man has no preeminence above the beast” (Ecc. 3:19) in light of Aristotelian embryology, citing and explaining Aristotle’s rule that “man comes from man and the sun.” He understands the image of the crackling thorns under a pot (Ecc. 7:6) in relation to thunder and lightning. Finally, in his explication of Ecclesiastes 7:10 and the asking of improper questions, he discusses the unusual properties of limestone, which can be heated by cold water. Ibn


32 For the examples listed, see Robinson, “The First References”; idem, Ibn Tibbon’s Commentary on Ecclesiastes.
Tibbon also introduces considerable medical material into his commentary, although it is mostly philosophical and ethical rather than scientific; he focuses on standard themes of diet, exercise, and psychosomatic illness. Still he does present some interesting material in the commentary on Ecclesiastes 12:2–7. Drawing on the rabbis, Ibn Ghiyath, and Ibn Ezra, he adds some novel remarks about the different functions of veins and arteries.

Ibn Tibbon was the founder of a Maimonidean tradition of philosophical exegesis in Provence. He was followed by his son Moses (fl. 1244–83), who wrote a philosophical explication of Song of Songs as well as several short philosophical-exegetical monographs. Son-in-law Jacob Anatoli (ca. 1194–1256) produced a collection of sermons, Midrash ha-Talmud (A Guide for the Students), which contains dozens of philosophical explications of Psalms and Proverbs. This tradition spread outside the family as well. For example, Samuel Ibn Tibbon’s contemporary David Kimhi (ca. 1160–1235) wrote Maimonidean commentaries on Genesis 2:7–5:1 and Ezekiel 1 and used philosophical ideas in many of his commentaries. Levi ben Abraham (ca. 1235–after 1305) wrote Liturut ha-Mishnat ha-Gadol (The Graceful Garland; cf. Prov. 19:3:49), an encyclopedia of philosophy and religion, which includes several chapters devoted to philosophical exegesis. Even Menahem ha-Meiri (1240–1315), the leading legal scholar of thirteenth- and early fourteenth-century Provence, was bitten by the Maimonidean bug. His commentaries on Psalms and Proverbs include philosophical and scientific explanations borrowed from Maimonides, Ibn Tibbon, and especially Anatoli.


For background on Menahem ha-Meiri, see G. Stern, Menahem ha-Meiri and the Second Controversy over Philosophy, Ph.D. dissertation, Harvard University, 1995; M. Halbertal, Between Torah and Wisdom: Menahem ha-Meiri and the Maimonidean Handbook in Provence (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2004) (Heb.). For his exegesis and influence of Anatoli on it, see Robinson, "Secondary Forms of Transmission."
One example can illustrate the way these writings respond to and build on one another. In the first sermon of Mal'adam ha-talmidim, Anatoli presents a full verse-by-verse explication of Proverbs 30. Borrowing ideas from Guide 1.31–4 and 2.30, he explains the chapter in Proverbs as a commentary on the account of creation in Genesis 1. Following Anatoli's lead, Levi devotes one chapter to Proverbs 30 in his explication of the “Account of the Beginning” in Lurvat Hen (Part 2, 6.3–9), whereas ha-Meiri incorporates passages from both Anatoli and Levi in his verse-by-verse explication of Proverbs 30 in his commentary on that book.

Provençe in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries

The most creative period of philosophical exegesis in Provençe was the thirteenth century, but the tradition continued into the fourteenth as well. Thus Gersonides (1288–1344), the most original Jewish philosopher of the later Middle Ages, wrote commentaries on several biblical books, including the Pentateuch, Joshua, Judges, Kings, Isaiah, Job, Proverbs, the Five Scrolls, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles. In these commentaries, Gersonides borrows from Maimonides and others, but begins to move in new directions as well. Thus he incorporates into them many of his own novel ideas from the Wars of the Lord and develops a new style of presentation, dividing his commentaries into exegetical, grammatical, and philosophical insights.39

“One example of this interface between the commentaries and the Wars is his explanation of Genesis 1.”40 According to Gersonides, the “Account of the Beginning” in Genesis 1 represents the creation of the upper world and the lower world, but not from nothing. Rather, everything, in both the celestial and sublunar realms, derives from a preexistent something, what he calls a “body with no form” or a “body that does not retain its shape.” The original state of chaos, of tohu and bohu, refers to this antemundane unformed stuff, whereas the verses that follow describe the causal relation of all things that come into existence from it: “Light” refers to the celestial intelligences, the “firmament” to the celestial bodies, the water above and below the firmament to celestial and sublunar matter, and so on. The question is, What is this preexistent stuff? Is it the Platonic receptacle? Aristotelian


prime matter? Gersonides rejects both possibilities, arguing instead that it is the same quasi-matter he had hypothesized in his astronomical investigations; namely, he had established the existence of an interspersed quasi-matter that is a residue of the original "body that does not retain its shape."

Another interpretation worth mentioning is Gersonides’ explanation of Joshua 10: – the sun’s standing still in Gibcon – which caused particular ire in the later tradition. In his commentary on the relevant verses he rejects the simple reading of the text and argues that the miracle was not astronomical but political or military. The Israelites’ victory was so swift that it only seemed as if the sun had stood still. For Gersonides, the sun really stood still results would have been catastrophic. The lower world, the existence of which depends on celestial motion, would have been immediately destroyed. A literal reading of the story would violate his conception of miracles as well, since he considers miracles to be the product of the Active Intellect; yet the Active Intellect, the lowest of the celestial intelligences, cannot operate on superior bodies or intelligences.

Several other philosopher-exegesists of fourteenth-century Provence are worthy of note. Nissim ben Moses of Marseilles (fl. 1315–30) wrote Ma’aseh nissin, which includes philosophical explications of biblical pericopes, preceded by a systematic discussion of several key philosophical and theological problems. Joseph Ibn Kaspi (1279/80–1347) wrote commentaries – sometimes in duplicate or even triplicate – on most of the Bible, in which he introduces philosophical ideas and uses logic to unravel the mysteries of Holy Writ. Later in the fourteenth century, Moses Narboni (1300–64), who, despite his name, seems to have lived more in Spain than Provence, also produced philosophical commentaries on the Bible as well as supercommentaries, including a peculiar explication of Ibn Ezra’s commentary on Exodus 33:20–1.11

Much less is known about fifteenth-century Provence, but one important school of commentators is worth mentioning. Its members did not write biblical commentaries per se, but rather commentaries on Judah Halevi’s Kuzari and Levi ben Abraham’s Likkut ha-ne’aseh ve-ha-lehasam. They explained all of these texts, even the Kuzari, in light of Maimonides, Ibn Tibbou, and Naftoli. Moreover, the emphasis in their writings is not only on philosophy but also on philosophical exegesis; they aimed to fully explain the exegesis found in the work of their predecessors.

The philosophical content of these writings is generally not original or creative. Yet it is precisely for this reason that the writings are important. They represent something like a

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The Italian Tradition

Maimonides and Samuel Ibn Tibbon, along with Jacob Anatoli and Judah ben Solomon ha-Kohen (ca. 1215–after 1247), stand at the beginning of the Italian tradition of philosophy and philosophical exegesis. In particular, Anatoli, who spent several years at the court of Frederick II, was responsible for spreading the methods and ideas of the Provencal Maimonidean tradition on Italian soil. The writings of these figures, together with those by Averroes and Latin scholastics (Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, and Giles of Rome), contributed to the emergence of a distinctive school of philosopher-exegeses, including Zerahyah ben Isaac ben She‘altiel Hen (fl. 1277–91), Immanuel ben Solomon of Rome (ca. 1261–before 1338), and Judah ben Moses ben Daniel Romano (ca. 1292–after 1330).

Judah ha-Kohen was originally from Toledo but moved to Italy, where he translated his encyclopedia of philosophy and science, Midrash ha-Hokmah (Search for Wisdom), into Hebrew. In this encyclopedia, Judah incorporated exegetical sections, including philosophical commentaries on select verses from Genesis, Psalms, and Proverbs. Later figures in the Italian tradition cited and developed these sections.

Like Judah ha-Kohen, Zerahyah Hen was from Spain; he was born in Barcelona, but moved early to Rome, where he was active as a translator, philosopher, and exegete. His translations include works by Aristotle, Themistius, and Averroes, as well as the pseudo-Aristotelian Liber de causis — a text that would become particularly popular among the Italian philosopher-exegeses. Zerahyah wrote a commentary on the Guide and two philosophical commentaries on Scripture — on Proverbs and the book of Job. Both commentaries draw heavily from the Provençal tradition, but start to introduce Neoplatonic ideas as well, especially from the Liber de causis.

The most creative of the Italian philosopher-exegeses was Judah Romano. Like Zerahyah, he was a translator, but of Latin scholastic rather than Arabic texts; these he

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18 See Ravid, “Zerahyah b. Isaac b. She‘altiel Hen.”

19 The Guide commentary remains in manuscript form, but both biblical commentaries have been published. See *Tiferet Emunah*, ed. I. Schwartz (Berlin, 1868), pp. 169–293; *Inne Daath: Commentar über die Sprüche Salomo’s von R. Serahya ben Isaac ben Shealtiel aus Barcelonam*, ed. I. Schwartz (Vienna, 1871). The most recent discussion of the commentary on Job is Eisen, *The Book of Job*, pp. 111–45.


used in his commentaries on the Bible. In general, his exegetical method represents an open encounter with the biblical text in light of the latest works of Latin science and philosophy. In Romano's opinion, the Bible is the product of the divine intellect; thus it contains every possible philosophical development, past and future. This premise leads to the peculiar result that Romano's commentaries are fluid and evolving, offering several different interpretations of the same verse, all in response to contemporary developments in science and philosophy. In a sense, then, the biblical commentary develops together with science; they are interrelated processes contributing to the gradual unfolding of divine truth.

Immanuel of Rome was far less creative and original than his younger cousin Judah, but he is no less interesting a figure in the history of philosophical exegesis. Although he is known primarily for his poetry— he is called the "Hebrew Dante" for his Hebrew sonnets and short imitation of the Divine Comedy—Immanuel was also an exegete who produced voluminous commentaries on the Bible. These are mostly compilations rather than original works; they are composed of texts borrowed from his predecessors, including Ibn Ezra, Maimonides, Samuel Ibn Tibbun, Anatoli, and Judah ha-Kohen, as well as Zerahyah and Judah Romano. It seems that Immanuel was interested not only in finding science and philosophy in the Bible but also in disseminating what had already been found. Through the collection and compilation of these sources he aimed to create an authoritative framework for the philosophical and scientific approach to the biblical text.

One final philosopher-exegete-anthologist is worth mentioning. Hanoch ben Solomon Alconstantini's Mar'at elainim (Visions of God; fourteenth century), a philosophical exposition of the chariot visions of the Bible (Isaiah 6; Ezekiel 1 and 10; and Zechariah), collects and synthesizes relevant passages from Maimonides' Guide and Ibn Tibbun's M'amor Yiqraim ha-nayim, together with texts from Averroes and other philosophers, deriving from both Latin and Arabic sources.

Christian Spain

Although Jewish scholarship in Christian Spain was often mystical, kabbalistic, and anti-philosophical (see the later discussion), there were important philosophical developments as well. A few examples are given in this section.

Already in the early thirteenth century, Jewish scholarship in Spain was tending toward kabbalah instead of philosophy. Gerona, Barcelona, Toledo, and Burgos were early centers

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55 See C. Sirat, Les commenaires de Hanoch b. Solomon al-Qonstauni. Introduction, traduction et notes (Jerusalem,
of kabbalah. Moreover, it was in these cities where the most vocal opponents of philosophy and philosophical exegesis were found. Yet the situation in Spain was in no way neat and uniform. Thus Isaac Albalag (thirteenth century), an Averroist, incorporated philosophical explications of Genesis 1 and Genesis 28 into his Tiqquon ha-de'ot (Improvement [or Correction] of the Opinions), whereas Shem-Tov Falaquera (thirteenth century) seems to have produced a philosophical commentary on at least select passages from the Bible.

Even those who tended toward kabbalah made use of philosophical and scientific ideas in their commentaries. For example, Isaac Ibn Latif (ca. 1210–80) drew extensively from Maimonides and the Maimonidean tradition in his commentary on Ecclesiastes, Ša'ar ha-shamayim (Gate of Heaven), and other works. Naḥmanides (1194–1270), the great critic of Maimonides, himself used philosophy in his exposition of creation and other texts, whereas Bahya ben Asher (thirteenth century), who would become the authoritative exegete in the tradition of Naḥmanides, included not only literal, midrashic, and kabbalistic interpretations in his Torah commentary but also explications by way of philosophy. Indeed, a major desideratum in scholarship is to systematically examine all of Bahya's philosophical exegeses in relation to his predecessors and in the context of the history of philosophy.

In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries there were two other important developments in Spain and also in Provence and Italy: commentaries on the Guide and, as already mentioned, supercommentaries on Ibn Ezra. Many of the commentaries on the Guide focus not only on its philosophical content but also on its exegesis; they explain, expand, and develop Maimonides' interpretations of key biblical texts. The supercommentaries on Ibn Ezra show interest primarily in science and philosophy. Their authors were especially attracted to the astrological interpretations, providing fuller discussion, identifying relevant sources, and revealing the secret knowledge that Ibn Ezra had so carefully concealed.

Iraq, Egypt, and Yemen

All of the post-Maimonidean developments discussed thus far took place in Europe and in Hebrew. Exegeses and philosophers responded to and built on the commentaries of Ibn Ezra, which were written in Hebrew, and the Guide of the Perplexed, in its Hebrew translation. Yet during Maimonides' lifetime and after his death, a Judeo-Arabic exegetical tradition continued to develop in the Islamic East as well. This was especially the case in Iraq, in Egypt, and in Yemen.


56 Maimonides and Bahya ben Asher see later notes.
Maimonides’ near contemporary Abū al-Barakāt (d. after 1164), the maverick philosopher and physician of Baghdad, wrote a full philosophical commentary on Ecclesiastes, in which he introduced several of the original ideas found in his Kitab al-Mu‘tabar. For example, in the commentary on Ecclesiastes 3:8 and 3:16, he discusses at length problems of fate and astral determinism. In the commentary on 5:7 he explains the limits of human knowledge and the need for tradition and authority, citing not religious tradition as the proper model but the a priori method of Euclid’s Elements. In the commentary on 7:10 he considers the unreliability of secondhand reports and compares them to the inconsistent nature of natural phenomena. In the commentary on 10:4 he criticizes the astrologers of his time and people who make decisions based on horoscopes. And in the commentary on 12:9 he speculates about the literary history of Ecclesiastes in relation to other wisdom collections.

In the following century, Abraham ben Maimonides (d. 1237) and Tanhum ha-Yerushalmi (d. 1291), the “Ibn Ezra of the East,” wrote commentaries on much of the biblical corpus, building on the grammatical insights of Ibn Ezra and the philosophical insights of Maimonides. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the writings of Maimonides stimulated the emergence of a rich tradition of philosophy and exegesis in Yemen as well. It took the form of Judeo-Arabic commentaries on the Bible as well as midrashic collections (in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Judeo-Arabic) that include many philosophical and scientific explanations, homilies, and digressions.

All of these Eastern figures and movements had somewhat different philosophical interests than the Jewish scholars of Christian Europe. In particular, they gave more attention to Avicenna and post-Avicennan philosophy than to Averroes and had a stronger tendency toward Neoplatonic, Hermetic, Sufi, and Isma’ili ideas and doctrines than to Aristotelian concepts. However, structurally they represent the same tradition of philosophical exegesis, which began in the early Middle Ages and continued through the fifteenth century and into the Renaissance.

ANTI-MAIMONIDEANISM

Although opposition to philosophical exegesis existed already in the early Middle Ages, it continued and gained increased intensity in response to the spread of Maimonideanism. A series of “Maimonidean” controversies divided communities between those who defended and those who opposed philosophy and philosophical exegesis, and mystical-pietistic exegetical traditions that took the undermining of Maimonides and the Maimonidean tradition as their point of departure emerged. In the fifteenth century, this anti-philosophical tradition crystallized into a tradition of its own, with strong connections to contemporary trends of late medieval and Renaissance anti-Aristotelianism. All of these developments are surveyed here.


The Maimonidean Controversies

Near the end of Maimonides’ life and after his death there were four major controversies—one in the East and three in the West—in Christian Spain and Provence. There were several smaller skirmishes as well. All of these controversies related, in one way or another, to the legitimacy and permissibility of philosophical exegesis.

During his lifetime, in the 1180s, Maimonides was accused by the Gaon Samuel ben ‘Eli and others of denying the religious dogma of resurrection.63 Samuel seems to have based this accusation on some reports from Yemen and on the philosophy of his contemporary in Baghdad, Abi al-Barakat. It seems that it was an unsuccessful reply to Samuel by Maimonides’ pupil, Joseph ben Judah Ibn Shim’on, that prompted Maimonides himself to issue a statement on the subject. This took the form of his Treatise on Resurrection (1191), which is not only a defense of his position on resurrection but also an apologia pro vita sua. Among other things, he discusses and defends his method of allegorical exegesis.

The resurrection controversy repeated itself in the West.64 Beginning with a query by Meir ben Todros Abulafia to the scholars of southern France (ca. 1202), it developed into a full intercommunal controversy: Abulafia suggested that Maimonides had denied resurrection, whereas Aaron ben Meshullam, the designated Provencal apologist, defended the master’s orthodoxy. Like the controversy in the East, this one, too, ended with the publication of the Treatise on Resurrection—this time in Hebrew translation. The news of Maimonides’ death in 1204 also seems to have contributed to a (temporary) cessation of hostilities.

Controversy broke out again in the 1230s,65 when Solomon ben Abraham of Montpellier and his two disciples—Jonah Gerondi and David ben Saul—attempted to suppress the study of Maimonides and of philosophy among the Jews of southern France. Solomon appealed to the sages of northern France for support; when they issued a ban against the study of Maimonides, a local dispute turned into an international cause célèbre. At the center of the debate was the legitimacy of allegorical explications of the Bible and rabbinic literature. The dispute came to an end with the public burning of the Guide and Book of Knowledge in Montpellier around 1235.

The final “Maimonidean” controversy, in 1303–6, was most directly concerned with the dangers of philosophical exegesis.66 Maimonides himself was no longer a target; instead it was his disciples and enthusiasts who were singled out for reproach and censure. This controversy began with the agitations of Abba Mari, a conservative Maimonidean who feared the public teaching of esoteric doctrines; it peaked with a ban by Rashba (Rabbi Solomon ben Abraham Ibn Adret) on the study of philosophy in 1305 and ended with the expulsion of the Jews from France in 1306. In the intervening years, many letters were sent between

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64 For background, see especially B. Septimus, Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition: The Career and Controversies of Ramah (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982).

65 For this controversy, see ibid.

Philosophy and Science in Medieval Jewish Commentaries on the Bible

Provençal and Spain supporting and attacking the study of philosophy and the practice of philosophical exegesis. Most famous is Rashba’s critique of philosophical preachers, who say that Abraham and Sarah represent matter and form, and the twelve tribes the twelve constellations.

Anti-Philosophical Exegesis

The controversies were never completely resolved; nor did the bans and censures prove to be an effective deterrent. Philosophy and philosophical exegesis continued unabated into the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. However, there developed a more subtle and more effective way to combat philosophy, science, and philosophic exegesis. This was through the writing of mystical, non-philosophical, and anti-philosophical commentaries on the Bible.57

In fact, a kabbalistic and anti-philosophical tradition of biblical exegesis began to develop already in the early thirteenth century. At exactly the same time that Samuel Ibn Tibbon and Jacob Anaotoli were promoting Maimonideanism, kabbalists in Provence and Catalonia were beginning to write kabbalistic and anti-philosophical commentaries on the Bible. Many of the early kabbalists – such as Azriel of Gerona, Ezra of Gerona, and Jacob ben Sheshet – also incorporated anti-philosophical readings into their systematic works and exegetical monographs.

The most important developments in anti-philosophical exegesis were the writings of Nahmanides and his followers in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and the writings of Isaac Arama, Isaac Abarbanel, and other anti-Aristotelian exegetes in the fifteenth century. These figures and their writings are the focus of this section.

Nahmanides and the Barcelona Tradition. Nahmanides – legal scholar, communal leader, kabbalist, poet, and exegete – was the second major influence on later Jewish thought. He was born in 1194 in Gerona, spent most of his life in Gerona and Barcelona, and died in Acre, where he completed his commentary on the Torah. Although during the controversy of the 1230s he defended Maimonides, he spent much of his later life criticising and undermining the work of his predecessors in law and in philosophy. This is evident in his critical glosses on the Book of Commandments and throughout his commentary on the Torah.58

Nahmanides’ commentary on the Torah, like Maimonides’ Guide of the Perplexed, represents a turning point in the history of exegesis. Building on and criticizing the midrashic, grammatical, and philosophical interpretations of Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and Maimonides, and drawing from kabbalistic traditions to introduce explanations “by way of truth,” Nahmanides developed a rich and detailed, yet often enigmatic, exegetical style.59 Throughout the commentary he is generally critical of philosophy and science; yet, as indicated earlier, he does cite philosophers, scientists, and physicians in positive ways as well – to help explain a difficult point in the text or to agree with their evaluations of nature. This “acceptance and

57 For the history of kabbalistic exegesis, see in general M. Idel, Absorbing Perfections: Kabbalah and Interpretation (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002).
devaluation" of science gives the commentary an interesting dynamic. There is a constant tension between the miraculous and the natural, between a dogmatic call for total resignation to divine will and the admission of evidence for the workings of natural law.

This tension is particularly evident in Nahmanides’ discussion of miracles. Thus he writes (commentary on Exod. 13:16) that “a person has no portion in the Torah of Moses unless he believes that all things that happen to us are miracles; they have nothing to do with nature or the customary order of the world.” This and similar proclamations are modified and moderated in several places in the commentary. For example, he does admit the usefulness of medicine as well as other practical sciences. Nevertheless, the view that science is subordinate to religion generally prevails in his writings. In his opinion, the Torah contains all the wisdom of the philosophers and more; it teaches a spiritual science that links directly to the divine, a spiritual medicine that gives the righteous and pious special power with which they can triumph over the evil effects of this unredeemed world of matter.

The tendency away from science and philosophy and toward the magical is evident in Nahmanides’ discussion of sacrifices. Contrary to Maimonides’ famous historicist reading, Nahmanides claims that the sacrificial cult was not instituted for the purpose of weaning the Israelites from ancient pagan practices but has value in its own right. Sacrifices help realign powers in the upper psychic world and also, it seems, bring down spiritual forces into the sublunar realm. His “secret of sacrifice” was particularly appealing to later students and supercommentators; some interpreted it in the direction of the theurgic, whereas others explained it in relation to hermetic traditions, linking the sacrifices to notions of talismanic magic.

The anti-Maimonidean and anti-philosophical influence of Nahmanides is felt throughout the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, especially in Catalonia. He was succeeded by Rashba – who proclaimed a ban against philosophy in 1305 – followed by two generations of legal scholars, exegetes, and kabbalists. Of particular note are R. Yom Tov ben Abraham al-Ishbili (the Riba), whose Sefer Zikkaron (Book of Remembrance) attempted to harmonize the teachings of Maimonides and Nahmanides; Bahya ben Asher, whose commentary on the Torah anthologized many of Nahmanides’ interpretations; Isaac of Acre, whose supercommentary on Nahmanides’ commentary on the Torah explains and emphasizes its kabbalistic as well as its anti-Maimonidean elements; and Joshua Ibn Shuayb, the first preacher to

introduce extensive kabbalistic material into his sermons. The tradition continued into the fifteenth century as well. After the Black Death, in the mid-fourteenth century, Rabbi Nissim ben Reuben Gerondi (the Ral) reestablished Barcelona as a major center of halakhic scholarship and anti-rationalism. Yet he, and his most famous disciple, Hasdai Crescas, started to move in a different direction as well. They drew on the emerging anti-Aristotelian philosophy of the later Middle Ages to undermine Aristotle and the Aristotelians with Aristotle’s own tools.

The Fifteenth Century. Rabbi Nissim, Crescas, and the apostate Abner of Burgos (Alfonso de Valladolid) are the first major figures of late medieval Jewish anti-Aristotelianism. Yet they were followed by many others, especially in fifteenth-century Spain, when disputations and increased conversionary pressures forced Jews to learn the ideas and techniques of Christian scholasticism. The two most famous and influential late-fifteenth-century Jewish anti-Aristotelians were Isaac Arama (ca. 1420–94) and Isaac Abarbanel (1437–1508). A few remarks about each of these figures are followed by one illustration of their anti-philosophical exegesis.

Arama was the last great Jewish preacher of Christian Spain. His magnum opus is Aqedat Yishay (Binding of Isaac), a collection of sermons on the weekly Torah portion. The sermons are long and detailed and generally follow a formal pattern. Each begins with the citation of a rabbinic dictum or aggadah, presents a systematic discussion of a philosophical or theological problem, explains the verses in the pericope, and then returns to the rabbinic dictum. Throughout his sermons Arama foments against the philosophers and uses philosophy, in quite remarkable ways, to undermine philosophy. In many cases, he shows greater knowledge and mastery of philosophy than do the philosophers he criticizes.


78 For the formal nature of the late medieval sermon, see M. Saperstein, Jewish Preaching 1200–1800, An Anthology (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1989), pp. 60–79.
If Arama was the most creative exegete and preacher in late medieval Spain, Abarbanel was the most refined. He was the last in a long history of Hispano-Jewish statesmen, was the leader of Spanish Jewry at the time of the expulsion, and was also a philosopher, exegete, and messianic theorist. His massive commentaries on the Bible were completed after the expulsion, in Italy and elsewhere, but they represent—sometimes literally—the intellectual developments of pre-expulsion Spain. In his commentaries, Abarbanel cites and criticizes Maimonides and Gersonides, undermining their Aristotelian positions in every area of philosophy and theology—from the theory of knowledge and the Active Intellect to the arguments regarding the origins of the world. In response, he introduces ideas that would become standard doctrines of later anti-Aristotelian thought.

One fairly simple and straightforward example of Arama's and Abarbanel's anti-philosophical and anti-Maimonidean exegesis is the story of Jacob's dream of the ladder in Genesis 28, which was one of the key texts singled out by Maimonides. In the preface to the Guide, Maimonides identifies it as a paradigmatic example of a biblical allegory and then explains it in two different ways in two chapters of the Guide. In Guide 1.15 he explains it politically: The angels ascending are the prophets, who ascend to God through study and then descend to rule the people. In Guide 2.10, by contrast, he hints at a cosmological explanation. Every part of the dream corresponds with some aspect of the natural world: The ladder itself represents the cosmos or chain of existence, which extends from the sublunar world into the celestial world; the rungs are the planets and spheres; the angels of God ascending and descending are celestial intelligences; and the Lord above is the first cause or prime mover.

These different interpretations were combined, expanded, and modified throughout the later Middle Ages by Samuel Ibn Tibbon, Jacob Anatoli, Isaac Albalag, Gersonides, Ibn Kaspi, Nissim of Marseilles, and many others. They understood the dream as an injunction of sorts to ascend the ladder of wisdom toward knowledge of God. In the fifteenth century, in contrast, Abarbanel and Arama set out to sever any connection between Jacob's dream and the claims of philosophy. Abarbanel did this by means of philosophy itself. How can the philosophers associate cosmological ideas with Jacob's dream, he asks, when Aristotle himself had shown that dreams are not a legitimate source of theoretical knowledge? For his part, Arama took an indirect exegetical approach. Even if the dream is cosmological, he argued, its lesson is not philosophical but anti-philosophical. For no matter how far one ascends the ladder of wisdom, no matter how much one masters knowledge of the cosmos, God is still above the ladder. In other words, reason, no matter how well developed, will always remain subordinate to the inscrutable wisdom of God.


82 See Don Isaac Abarbanel, Perush 'al ha-Torah (Jerusalem: Torah ve-Da'at, 1964), commentary on Genesis 28 (pp. 313–20).

CONCLUSION

During the Middle Ages, philosophy and exegesis were closely linked: Philosophical ideas were taught and developed in relation to biblical texts, and biblical texts were explained in light of philosophy. This symbiotic relation between science and Scripture developed in response to a basic epistemological and theological problem: the need to resolve or harmonize contradictions between reason and revelation. In the later centuries, though, especially in Christian Europe, philosophical exegesis had practical functions as well. In particular, writing philosophy as exegesis helped create an authoritative framework for philosophy; it helped legitimize, defend, and even "naturalize" the study of "foreign" ideas and principles. Moreover, because the Bible was read by all, philosophical exegesis was a powerful pedagogical tool, an instrument of mass media, as it were, by which novel ideas and opinions could be introduced to the general public. Indeed, in many cases Jews had their first encounter with the sciences not in straightforward philosophical works but in commentaries on the biblical text.

These different motivations and functions of philosophical exegesis were active, in various degrees and combinations, in all the main periods and centers surveyed in this chapter, including the Islamic East, Andalusia, Provence, Italy, and Christian Spain. They apply in other areas as well, such as Byzantium during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and Italy and Salonika during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Indeed, philosophical exegesis, with all its problems and concerns, continued to flourish into the seventeenth century. However, by the early modern period, the critical opinions and approaches of Arama and Abarbanel regarding philosophy itself and the relationship between philosophy and Scripture were beginning to predominate. In fact, there is a direct link between Crescas, Arama, and Abarbanel, on the one hand, and Benedict Spinoza, the founder of the modern critical study of the Bible, on the other. Thus with Arama and Abarbanel we can recognize the beginning of the end for philosophical exegesis. The Middle Ages were coming to a close; the interactions between philosophy and Scripture were moving in new directions.