



Nina Caputo, Nahmanides in Medieval Catalonia: History, Community, and Messianism

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the bounds of “authentic” Jewish identity, it is far more difficult to assert that one’s own tapestry, woven from threads drawn from the vast range of Jewish writers and thinkers, warrants being used as a standard of authenticity for others.

When one delves into the details, it becomes clear that there are other difficulties in discerning the boundaries of validity. For example, Sherwin disparages the notion of divine omnipotence, which “seems either unknown or irrelevant to biblical and rabbinic theology,” and probably entered Jewish thought in the Middle Ages “through Islamic philosophical influence” (138). On the other hand, Sherwin takes a more positive attitude toward the idea of the immortality of the soul, despite the fact that it “apparently came into Judaism under the influence of Greek philosophy in late antiquity and . . . gained popularity in medieval times” (159). Even transmigration of souls is favorably treated, despite its relatively late popularity; the implication seems to be that a salutary teaching (“no person creates himself from scratch . . . each person is more than she thinks she is”) qualifies a doctrine as normative, as long as it coheres well with the previously existing matrix of beliefs. But this could be fleshed out further, since it stands in tension with the desire to preserve “authentic” Jewish tradition from “inimical, foreign, or incompatible” influences. Moreover, the concern for establishing dogmatic boundaries seems misplaced here, given the tendency to group mysticism together with Talmudic concepts even when they vastly differ (as on questions of evil, or the Messiah) and to cite precedents as far-ranging, and indeed heterodox, as Abraham Abulafia.

If, however, one sets aside the difficult effort to establish authenticity and normativity, one is left with a passionate, elegantly written plea for a re-engagement of the American Jewish community with Jewish theological resources. Sherwin draws on a vast treasury of knowledge, and he expertly arranges his chosen texts in ways that demonstrate theology’s ability to construct and re-construct coherent traditions out of texts emerging from far-flung times and places. Anyone who spends time with Sherwin’s essay will be inspired to explore Jewish tradition as a basis for thinking about ultimate questions, from the problem of evil to the possibility and implications of a meaningless universe.

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CAPUTO, NINA. *Nahmanides in Medieval Catalonia: History, Community, and Messianism*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007. viii+317 pp. \$37.00 (paper).

Nina Caputo’s study undertakes to analyze medieval conceptions of history, communal leadership, and messianism in the writings of Rabbi Moses ben Nahman (Nahmanides), a towering Jewish rabbinic leader and writer from thirteenth-century Spain. Caputo sets herself an additional ambitious project: rather than read Nahmanides in the context of other Jewish figures, models, and documents, as others before her have done, she proposes to understand the broader—that is, non-Jewish—cultural forces that shaped his thinking. As she states on the very first page of her study, “intensive focus on the fairly insular context of Jewish community dynamics and interpretive disputes allows for only a limited view of thirteenth-century Aragonese Jewish intellectual and cultural life. . . . The broader cultural context adds a crucial dimension to an understanding of the forces that shaped his compositions and the expectations

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his audience may have held when reading them” (1–2). As if these were not impressive and daunting enough goals, in her study Caputo actually ventures even further, attempting to show how Nahmanides in turn influenced discourse in the larger Christian society during his day and after his time (chap. 5, 149–57, esp. 178–79).

Given the accepted centrality of Nahmanides’ oeuvre as well as his persona in shaping Jewish thinking, it stands to reason that scholars of Nahmanides and of general medieval Jewish history would be loath to accept a sweeping novel characterization of his thinking without convincing evidence and thorough research. To my mind, while Caputo appears to make a valiant attempt at providing this evidence, her research is not comprehensive or persuasive enough to override the previous scholarly characterization of Nahmanides’ historical position. Nevertheless, she does make an important preliminary contribution to mapping the contours of scholarly research in this pioneering area.

It is undoubtedly the overly ambitious nature of Caputo’s goals that virtually guaranteed that she could not completely accomplish them. It would have required that she analyze completely and carefully all of Nahmanides’ vast and varied oeuvre and then systematically situate his work in the formidable broader literature; unfortunately, she did not do this, focusing rather on select passages in only a number of his works. No doubt, the immensity and complexity of the task she set herself led to difficulty in making clear and compelling arguments. However, if we evaluate Caputo’s work by more limited criteria, the book offers fresh perspectives on several central components of Nahmanides’ literary output. In addition, anyone looking for a primer on the major scholarly issues surrounding Nahmanides and his period will find a treasure trove in the erudite endnotes. They (and sporadic lengthy passages in the book in which Caputo provides general overviews of important topics) contain a wealth of information on many aspects of Nahmanides’ thought and medieval Jewish intellectual history. Caputo’s study might also be of interest to scholars of religion as they probe the ways in which leaders of religious minority groups engage with and influence the rhetoric and discourse of the majority culture in which they find themselves.

The book is divided into five chapters, each of the first four discussing one critical aspect of Nahmanides’ communal involvement or writing: the Maimonidean controversy, Nahmanides’ biblical commentary on the Book of Genesis, his Hebrew account of the disputation at Barcelona, and his writings on redemption in the Book of Redemption. Caputo claims that the first two chapters address documents that reflect an “inward focus relative to the Jewish community,” while the next two (or three) chapters analyze works that “reflect his engagement with the more diverse culture of Catalonia . . . [and] reveal a thinker wrapped up in an ongoing and multilateral exchange concerning the structure and meaning of history and redemption” (12). The final chapter attempts to demonstrate that Nahmanides’ Hebrew account of the disputation at Barcelona “contributed to and participated in an important turn in the development of vernacular literary and narrative forms in the Crown of Aragon” (17).

At some points in the first four chapters, Caputo demonstrates a facile approach in dealing with complex issues concerning Nahmanides’ oeuvre and medieval Jewish intellectual history. For example, she writes, “Though Nahmanides was critical of Maimonides in his biblical commentary (as he was of Rashi, Abraham ibn Ezra, and Saadya Gaon), he never condemned Maimonides

for applying philosophical interpretation to the standard texts of Judaism” (33). Specialists would take exception to this characterization, and it might mislead nonspecialists. The question of whether or not Nahmanides in his biblical commentaries was diametrically opposed to Maimonides’ philosophical interpretations, as a straightforward reading of the commentaries would indicate, is a hotly debated issue in the scholarly literature. While it is legitimate for Caputo to choose one side in this debate and state that in fact Maimonides’ and Nahmanides’ views are reconcilable, she must not ignore the other position. Contrast her characterization with one Bernard Septimus quotes in the name of Baer: “The attack against rationalism . . . is most pronounced in Nahmanides’ commentary to the Pentateuch. His vigorous opposition to the allegorical interpretation of the Torah is expressed on every page of this work” (“Open Rebuke and Concealed Love’: Nahmanides and the Andalusian Tradition,” in *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides: Essays in his Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, ed. Isadore Twersky [Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983], 13). While Baer and Septimus note Nahmanides’ apparently strong opposition to Maimonidean rationalism in his commentaries, Caputo’s characterization ignores this basic fact (see, e.g., Nahmanides’ comments on Gen. 18:1 and Lev. 1:9).

Similarly, Caputo offers a sweeping characterization of Nahmanides’ exegesis of the Pentateuch: “Among the guiding principles behind his analysis of exegetical models was a drive to uncover the *peshat* or plain sense of the scriptures. The *peshat*, he argued, should be universally accessible as long as the reader approached the text after having previously arrived at the appropriate hierarchy of interpretive sources” (56). In fact, scholars typically characterize Nahmanides’ Torah commentary as a unique blend of *peshat*, rabbinic traditions, and philosophical and kabbalistic interpretations. Unfortunately, Caputo provides no proof for her substitute portrayal, which should be forthcoming either from his actual commentaries or some secondary study of his work. A bald statement of opinion, lacking such substantive support, weakens her position and puts her entire analysis into question.

In short, Caputo raises stimulating questions about a very complex figure and his writings. Her treatment of the documents is refreshing and invites further research on the subject.

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COHEN, JEREMY. *Christ Killers: The Jews and the Passion from the Bible to the Big Screen*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2007. 313 pp. \$35.00 (cloth).

This latest book by Jeremy Cohen traces the development and career of the myth of the Jewish Christ killer from its appearance in the passion narratives of the Gospels, through medieval blood libels and scholastic disputations, and into twenty-first-century passion plays, films, newspaper articles, and conciliar decrees. This is a book of epic scale, not only spanning millennia of history but also traversing a wide range of written and visual forms of evidence. Such an enterprise risks overreaching its capacity to cover responsibly and adequately any one piece of the story, but Cohen is careful throughout to identify the parameters of inquiry and qualify the extent of its implications. The advantage of such an ambitious undertaking is that, having set his parameters and made his qualifications, the author can make meaningful and provocative connections between the present day and attitudes and events from the past—between the