

fect and eternal law designed for the physical and spiritual perfection of the individual and society.

Maimonides agrees with Plato that there are certain beliefs that ought to be propagated by rulers whether they are in fact true or known to be false, on the grounds that they are valuable instruments for the promotion of good conduct on the part of the mass of the population. The question suggests itself as to whether intellectuals would support such a scheme to preserve the social order from the corrosive acids of rationalist philosophy. The simple answer is that they had no choice. There were no secular alternatives in Maimonides' age; the only alternatives were religious, and the other monotheistic religions affirmed the same dogmas as Judaism, plus others that could not readily be reconciled with Aristotle's philosophy. Moreover, religious skepticism will often ally itself with political conservatism. Since there can be no rational ground for preferring one set of dogmas over another, one may as well become a conformist and adhere to the rules and customs of one's own group in order to safely pursue philosophic inquiry. This, of course, has no bearing on the question of whether the philosopher in his study ought to believe in, say, the 13 principal dogmas of Judaism. He ought only to believe what is either self-evident, capable of certain or probable proof, or verifiable by sensible or introspective perception.

Haberman examines on their merits Maimonides' views on all major questions such as the existence and attributes of God, creation, the nature of prophecy, and divine providence, assuming that they were advocated because Maimonides was convinced that they were true. Only when such a reading is precluded by the ordinary canons of criticism and when they differ markedly from those Maimonides expressed elsewhere, as in the *Treatise on Resurrection*, is interpretation geared to these views' social utility and political usefulness. Critics generally have found Haberman's study useful and solidly documented, but some reviewers have objected to his participation in the argument. Zwi Werblowsky, in *The Jewish Journal of Sociology* (volume 23, June 1981), wrote, "[T]he reader sometimes gets the impression that there really are three great philosopher-theologians: Maimonides, Aquinas, and Haberman. Lest this sound unkind, let me hasten to add that the book is well-written, extremely readable, and exhibits considerable erudition which, together with a certain charming frankness, goes a long way towards reconciling the reader with the author's occasionally implicit arrogance."

LEAMAN interprets Maimonides as falling squarely within the tradition of philosophy as it developed in the Islamic world. There is much merit to this approach, but Leaman overdoes it. After all, any Muslim philosopher who would assert, as Maimonides repeatedly does, that Moses was the greatest of all prophets, both of those who preceded and those who followed him (i.e., including Muhammad) would have been summarily executed and his books burned. Still, Leaman avoids technical scholarly jargon and has interesting things to say on a number of topics. In regard to creation versus the eternity of the world, for instance, he discusses what he terms the "Maimonides Principle," namely that the laws of nature that govern the universe need not have been in force when the present order of events came into existence. This principle does, after all, find some support from the Big

Bang cosmological theory according to which matter, energy, space, and time were indeed created during a primeval explosion lasting less than a trillionth of a second some 15 billion years ago.

JACOB HABERMAN

See also Maimonidean Controversy

Moses ben Nahman 1194–1270

Catalan-born talmudist, theologian, mystic, and controversialist, died in Palestine

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A leading Spanish talmudist, Moses ben Nahman, also known as Nahmanides and by the acronym Ramban (Rabbi Moses ben Nahman), was the intellectual and communal leader of Catalan Jewry during a crucial period. His writings reflect a synthesis of the dialectical tradition of the tosafists in northern France with the geonic-Andalusian traditions of analytical scholarship and literary culture. The broad scope of Nahmanides' learning enabled him to provide a measure of stability in the face of conflicts that arose from within Jewish society and from the Christian world as well.

CHAZAN's study focuses on Moses ben Nahman's disputation with Pablo Christiani at Barcelona in 1263. Chazan begins by reconstructing the debate and its strategies on the basis of the brief Latin report produced by a Christian observer as well as the Hebrew narrative that Nahmanides himself composed. In doing so, Chazan evaluates the goals and methods of both of these accounts and compares and contrasts their findings, exploiting very effectively the significant differences in style and substance to clarify Nahmanides' aims and tactics. Chazan then moves on to consider the aftermath of the disputation from several perspectives. The "victory" secured by Ramban was followed by new Christian missionizing pressures against which Ramban sought, in turn, to reassure his fellow Jews. His efforts were centered on the interpretation of certain aggadic passages and biblical texts utilized by Christians for polemical purposes. In addition, Ramban wished to demonstrate the certainty and predictability of the messianic redemption. Chazan notes that while Nahmanides is considered to be somewhat conservative

with regard to his kabbalistic teachings, his messianic calculations and interpretations possess an innovative flair.

FUNKENSTEIN discusses Nahmanides' penchant for typological symbolism in his biblical commentary against the backdrop of contemporary Christian typological exegesis. A number of the prefigurations of subsequent biblical developments found in Ramban's Torah commentary reflect a recognizable measure of Christian influence. To be sure, Ramban does not divulge the Christian origins of these interpretations, and many of Nahmanides' typologies are structured to counter Christian constructions. Moreover, Nahmanides' limitation of his use of typology to the patriarchal narratives was due perhaps to his awareness of the importance of this method for Christian interpretation. As a kabbalist, Nahmanides preferred to find biblical symbolism linked to letters and names rather than to events and persons. In his discussion, Funkenstein raises the issue of the relationship between the straightforward approach to biblical exegesis (*peshat*) and the kabbalistic approach (*sod*). He suggests that these categories almost never overlap in Ramban's commentaries.

TWERSKY introduces a rich collection of essays by pointing to the diversity of Nahmanides' achievements and by stressing, against the tendency in earlier historiography, that the corpus of Ramban's writings must be considered as a comprehensive oeuvre and should not be fragmented. Bernard Septimus's opening essay demonstrates the degree to which Nahmanides remained faithful to the Andalusian tradition even as he was exposed to the very different methodologies and ideals of Ashkenazi scholarship and culture. This loyalty is evident in the style of his writing; in the nature of his citations in his biblical and talmudic commentaries; and in the nuanced positions that he took with regard to philosophy and science during the Maimonidean controversy and with regard to the use of aggadah at the Barcelona disputation. As an inheritor of the Geonic-Andalusian tradition, Nahmanides never accepted the absolute authority of all aggadah, nor did he see kabbalistic interpretation as the universal key to the understanding of aggadah. In a brief essay, Ezra Fleischer sketches the parameters of Nahmanides' small but impressive poetic output, which reflects the salient characteristics of the Gerona school of Hebrew poetry. Moshe Idel links the relatively meager output of Ramban in terms of kabbalistic literature to the fact that Ramban was a conservative kabbalist. He was prepared to formulate or record only those kabbalistic interpretations that he had received from his teachers. Even those interpretations suggested by fellow members of the Gerona school of Kabbalah were not accepted by Ramban unless he was certain that they had emerged from a reliable kabbalistic tradition. He took a stand in marked contrast to the approach of other members of the Gerona school who favored direct and open dissemination of kabbalistic teachings. Bezalel Safran compares and contrasts Ramban's views on the sin of Adam and the fall of man to those of another member of the Gerona school, Azriel. Safran notes in passing that Ramban's endorsement of a limited asceticism was linked in his writings to achieving communion with the divine (*devekut*). David Berger argues that Ramban was much more familiar with aspects of Aristotelian thought and other philosophical systems and literature than has been imagined. This assessment leads Berger to a reconsideration of Nahmanides' view of nat-

ural law. In addition, Berger and Septimus both point to numerous instances in Ramban's Torah commentary in which *peshat* and *sod* do coincide.

WOLFSON maintains that Nahmanides was, in his biblical commentary, a kabbalist first and foremost, and a not-so-conservative kabbalist at that. His warning against speculation about kabbalistic secrets and ideas is overshadowed by the fact that he alludes to these secrets in his commentaries, thereby bringing this material to the attention of a general audience. Ramban employed a dynamic kabbalistic hermeneutical method. In the realm of esoteric interpretation, Ramban followed both a theosophical system as well as a mystical tradition that read the text of Scripture as a matrix of divine names. This tradition is but one example of a mystical doctrine found in Ramban's writings that originated with the German Pietists. In Wolfson's view, Nahmanides did not differentiate between rabbinic and kabbalistic modes of biblical and talmudic interpretation. Moreover, he considered aggadic interpretation to be a key to the understanding of Kabbalah. At the same time, Ramban's rejection of certain aggadic passages at Barcelona (and even in his Torah commentary) is readily understood. Even as aggadah was critical to Ramban's understanding of Kabbalah, he did not have to accept all aggadic statements as binding.

CHAVEL has written a basic biography of Rabbi Moses ben Nahman that describes his familial background and identifies his major teachers and students. Chavel also reviews Ramban's many compositions, grouping them under the headings of halakhic treatises and collections, works written in defense of earlier authorities, and talmudic novellae and responsa. The book concludes with a survey of Ramban's views on various matters of religious thought and faith, but it lacks the sophisticated level of analysis that characterizes some of the more recent studies of Ramban.

KANARFOGEL reviews the surge of writings about Ramban produced in the last 20 years, noting the vast difference between these studies and the efforts of historians writing at the dawn of modern Jewish historiography. In addition to focusing on many of the issues discussed above, Kanarfogel deals with Nahmanides' approaches to halakhic formulation and talmudic interpretation and with the diverse figures and movements throughout medieval Europe that may have influenced Nahmanides' thinking in a number of disciplines.

EPHRAIM KANARFOGEL

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Reader's Guide to

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