

Explorations in the Exegetical Methodology and Theology of  
Ramban's Commentary to the Torah

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## Introduction

Today, there is almost no question that the most recognized name in medieval Jewish philosophy is Moses Maimonides, but this great familiarity of Maimonides as a personal figure does not necessarily mean that he had the greatest influence on Jewish philosophy. Ten years before Maimonides' death in 1204 another Moses was born in Catalonia, whose work and influence would rival that of his older namesake: Moses Nahmanides, or "Ramban". In his lifetime, he was recognized as the intellectual leader of Iberian Jewry, and in that capacity played historic roles in his highly influential (if ambiguous)<sup>1</sup> stance on the raging controversy regarding the study of philosophy, as well as in his defense of the Jewish faith against Christianity in the court of King James I of Aragon. His extraordinary scholarship extended to almost all areas of Jewish intellectual activity, in both form and content, publishing Talmudic and biblical commentaries, sermons, theological treatises, works on Jewish law, and poetry. The staggering breadth and comprehensiveness of his scholarly output, however, is best seen not by noting his versatility in genres of writing, but by studying his specific rabbinic works. While his Talmudic commentaries sufficiently testify to his broad knowledge of both Spanish and Franco-German traditions and methods of Talmudic interpretations, the true expanse of his near-comprehensive mastery of all of Jewish literature is best exemplified by what endures as his most popular achievement: his *Commentary to the Torah*.

This commentary amply demonstrates Ramban's considerable erudition in Bible, philology, Talmudic law, Midrash, medicine, philosophy, and Jewish mysticism, as well as his ability to draw upon and utilize multiple interpretive methodologies and exegetical

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<sup>1</sup> See David Berger, "How Did Nahmanides Propose to Resolve the Maimonidean Controversy?" in *Meah She'arim: Studies in Medieval Jewish Spiritual Life in Memory of Isadore Twersky*, ed. by Ezra Fleischer et al. (Jerusalem, 2001) 135-46

traditions, picking from the best and extending them further. The resulting “Torah commentary” is in fact so much more than implied by such a title. By extrapolating backwards and investigating Ramban’s methods through his predecessors, one can discern how he remained faithful to prior traditions while simultaneously staking out his own path, creating a method of using the Torah as the source for every aspect of Jewish religion. By extrapolating forwards, by analyzing key passages of his commentary, one can indeed construct a veritable theology of Judaism—a theology that, once articulated, appears to have been even more influential than the thought of Maimonides.<sup>2</sup>

This essay will begin by first seeking to identify individual strands of hermeneutical methods in Ramban’s commentary in both halakha and *aggadah*, as well as discuss how Ramban thought that these methodologies relate to one another, before embarking on an exploration of Ramban’s theology as it emerges from key passages in his Torah commentary. Despite being a book of biblical interpretation, Ramban’s commentary includes passages on the fundamental dogmas of faith, on the nature of man and his purpose in life, and how God interacts with the world in the bible and through history. By seeing Ramban as a theologian, his thought emerges as being a highly sophisticated and compelling system meant to rival both the allure of philosophy and the pressures of Christianity, an alternative which, perhaps

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<sup>2</sup> See Responsa *Hatam Sofer* 6:61, who describes Ramban’s Commentary as being replete with theological insight, and see further the similar statements of rabbinic writers quoted in the Preface to *Hiddushei ha-Ramban al ha-Torah* (Machon Hamaor: Jerusalem, 2014). R. Yaakov Kamenetsky is also reported to have stated that the Commentary should be studied as the basis of Jewish theology, in Moshe Eisenmann, “Ramban as a Guide to Today’s Perplexed: Mining the Chumash Commentary for Help in Coping with our Topsy-Turvy World” (Baltimore, MD: Feldheim Publishers, 2006), xxi. In terms of influence upon contemporary Jewish thinkers, see Menachem Genack, “Walking with Ramban,” *Tradition: A Journal of Orthodox Jewish Thought*, 30:4 (Summer 1996), 182-192 regarding Ramban’s influence upon Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik, and Yitzchak HersHKovitz, “R. Aharon Lichtenstein and Ramban: Between Admiration and Influence” [Hebrew], *Da’at* 76 (2014), 69-82. See also Rabbi Yitzchak Hutner, *Pachad Yitzhak: Iggerot u-Ketavim* (Brooklyn, 2006), 83-85, who writes that regarding matters of eschatology, “we are students of Ramban” as opposed to students of Maimonides

more than his actual disputations against Christianity and the proposed ban on philosophy, remains as enthralling to the modern Jew as it did in thirteenth century Spain.<sup>3</sup>

## Part 1. The Harmonizing of Hermeneutical Methodologies<sup>4</sup>

### I. Rashi and the Midrashic Tradition

In the introduction to his *Commentary on the Torah*, Ramban identifies his own influences and predecessors whose work he plans to build on in his own commentary. Ramban's first named source is "Rabbi Shelomo," commonly known as Rashi, about whom he writes that he will study "with love," dealing with Rashi's "*peshatav u-midrashav, ve-khol agadah be-tsurah asher be-feirushav zekhurah*," his original explanations as well as the midrashic interpretations that he quotes. Ramban does contend with Rashi's innovations which he had identified in the previous quote as *peshat*, accepting or rejecting his interpretations<sup>5</sup>—in one place (Ex. 25:39) even acceding that a comment of Rashi adheres to *peshat* but runs counter to the view of the Sages. However, the more interesting question is not Ramban's attitude towards Rashi's *peshat* explanations, which Ramban feels he is at liberty to accept or reject as he sees, but rather towards the Midrash and *aggadah* that Rashi

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<sup>3</sup> See Eliezer Touito, "On the Need to Differentiate Between the Objective of the Commentator and His Commentarial Means," [Hebrew] in *Zekher Le-'Olam Berito* (Rehovot, 2014) who writes specifically of Ramban that although his direct attacks against Christianity can be found in his disputation (and a few other writings), his commentary to the Torah represents his view of Judaism as an ideological and theological competitor

<sup>4</sup> It must be mentioned at the outset that this section owes much to Dr. Mordechai Cohen's course on Ramban taught in the Bernard Revel Graduate School of Yeshiva University

<sup>5</sup> Examples of where Ramban accepts Rashi as providing a *peshat* interpretation include Ramban's comments to Gen. 17:9, Num. 4:20 (discussed in Appendix A) and Deut. 4:21. Rejected interpretations of Rashi are common; examples include Ramban's comments to Gen. 19:30, 30:30 and Ex. 16:14

so often quotes.<sup>6</sup> For Ramban, Rashi's commentary represents a primary resource of typical rabbinic exegesis known as *derash*,<sup>7</sup> which is thus the first major body of exegetical literature that Ramban includes in his commentary that will be analyzed.

Midrash (and its narrative counterpart, *aggadah*) is notoriously difficult to define,<sup>8</sup> but in this context it is both a set of exegetical methodologies as well as a literary corpus of rabbinic interpretation that have used this method of *derash*. Ramban's attitude towards this genre of rabbinic literature is subject to a significant amount of speculation and secondary literature,<sup>9</sup> primarily because of his relatively dismissive comment about Midrash that he made in the course of his disputation with Pablo Chirstiani, as Ramban had recorded it. There, he had said that even a scrupulously religious and faithful Jew is not beholden to believing everything written in the midrashic canon, a body literature which he referred to as "sermons."<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, in his Torah commentary, Ramban appears to be perfectly comfortable offering an interpretation of a verse that runs counter to a midrash that he himself often cites. Despite this tendency, however, Ramban certainly does not dismiss Midrash out of hand, as he devotes a very generous portion of his Torah commentary to discussing and interpreting Midrash. While it is true that sometimes Ramban quotes a

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<sup>6</sup> Rashi's own understanding of those midrashic interpretations which he quotes and their relationship to *peshat*, especially in light of his own methodological comments, is not entirely clear. See Nechama Leibowitz and Moshe Ahrend, *Perush Rashi la-Torah – Iyyunim be-Shitato*, vol. II (Tel Aviv, 5750), 363-406

<sup>7</sup> In his prefatory poem, Ramban indicates that he will discuss only those Midrashim which are quoted by Rashi  
<sup>8</sup> "Modern scholarship abounds in attempts to define and describe the nature of Midrash. Indeed, this evasive *modus interpretandis* fascinates both the younger generation of scholars of Judaic[s] and... literary critics." Moshe Idel, "Midrashic versus Other Forms of Jewish Hermeneutics: Some Comparative Reflections," in *The Midrashic Imagination: Jewish Exegesis, Thought, and History* (Albany: State University of NY, 1993), 45.

<sup>9</sup> See Eliot Wolfson, "By Way of Truth: Aspects of Nahmanides' Kabbalistic Hermeneutic" *AJS Review* 14:1 (Autumn 1989), particularly pages 169-176; Shevat, Ari Y. "The Authoritative Force of *Midrashei Chazal*: Ramban's Position in Light of His Disputation in Barcelona," [Hebrew] *Tzohar* 11 (Summer 2002); Shalem Yahalom, "The Barcelona Disputation and the Stature of *Aggadah* in Ramban's Thought," [Hebrew] *Zion* 69:1 (2004), 25-43; Sklarz, Miriam. "Nachmanides' Exegesis of Midrash in his Commentary on the Torah" [Hebrew] *Shnaton: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 23 (2014), 243-263; Ariel, Yosi. "Avram and Sarai in their Descent to Egypt: the Attitude of Ramban to Midrash *Aggadah*," *Megadim* 51 (Alon Shevut, Israel: 2010) [Hebrew].

<sup>10</sup> *Kitvei Ramban* 1:308

midrash merely to offer an alternative interpretation, it is clear that he accepts Midrash as a legitimate form of exegesis, of uncovering the true meaning of the biblical text, even if it is not *peshat*. Indeed, he has sharp words for those (specifically, Abraham Ibn Ezra) whose attitudes towards *derash* which were too irreverent for his taste.<sup>11</sup>

Before discussing how Ramban sees Midrash as a legitimate methodology, it should be noted that there are multiple ways in which he accepts it as being authoritative to some degree. Perhaps most importantly, wherever the Sages portray a detail of halakha to be sourced in *derash*, Ramban will accept this halakha and its authority as if it were a biblical law, no differently than if such a law were written in the Torah explicitly.<sup>12</sup> Secondly, while Ramban is normally comfortable with positing interpretations which differ from those of the Rabbis, referring to his own insights as *peshat* (being distinct from *derash*), he is unwilling to advance an interpretation which would contradict the midrashic reading completely. He thus rejects Ibn Ezra's characterization of Nimrod as a righteous person, even *al derekh ha-peshat*, because such an interpretation is completely antithetical to the spirit of the midrashic reading. Infrequently, Ramban accepts a midrash as the only plausible reading, even if it requires adding to the narrative. For example, because he finds it impossible that the Israelites at the Red Sea were simultaneously praying and complaining (Ex. 14:10), he accepts the midrashic position that the verses describes two different factions of Israelites with different reactions. In one instance Ramban even advances his own novel explanation "*al derekh aggadah*," saying that Joseph's name was mentioned as a forefather of one of the

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<sup>11</sup> See Bernard Septimus, "Open Rebuke and Concealed Love: Nahmanides and the Andalusian Tradition," *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides, Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, ed. I. Twersky (Cambridge, MA: 1983), 17-22. Septimus, like most of those referenced in footnote 7, believes while it is true that Ramban would never go so far as to treat someone who rejects *aggadah* as a heretic, and he himself would reject an *aggadah* in the face of overwhelming evidence against it, his attitude is still one of much greater reverence than that of Ibn Ezra.

<sup>12</sup> See below, Section III, "Peshat and Halakha"

spies sent by Moses in order to connect the sin of the spies with Joseph's own speaking badly about his brothers.<sup>13</sup> All of these examples show that Ramban clearly understood Midrash to be authoritative, at least to some degree (even if, as Bernard Septimus has written, he would not go so far as to treat one who rejected a Midrash to be a heretic).

Ramban does not merely accept the legal (and interpretive) authoritativeness of Midrash, but also emerges as an important interpreter of both midrashic teachings as well as the midrashic methodology in general.<sup>14</sup> Because he sees Midrash as a manner of legitimate textual interpretation, and not merely as teachings detached from any scriptural source, Ramban engages in attempts to uncover the textual or logical motivation for a Midrash. In fact, Ramban appears to be convinced that *every* Midrash is actually sourced in the biblical text, as he says regarding the rabbinic teaching that Rachel was buried on the road so that the members of the Kingdom of Israel would pass her grave on their way: “there must nonetheless be a hint in the Scripture to the reason given in the *aggadah*,”<sup>15</sup> despite the fact that this interpretation was clearly not meant as *peshat*. Similarly, after presenting both a *peshat* and *derash* explanation of Numbers 3:1, Ramban writes “*ki ha-Torah tifaresh ve-tirmoz*,” indicating the legitimacy of both methods, one as *peshat*, and the other, Midrash, as being based upon hints. Midrashic exegesis is identified by Ramban as the rabbis' attempts to solve certain types of textual issues, such as grammatical and narrative inconsistencies, or the apparent superfluosity of words, letters, or phrases.

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<sup>13</sup> Num. 1:32. Ramban notes that Joseph is sometimes named as the father of the tribe of Manasseh, and sometimes as the father of Ephraim, and so he writes that in the context of the sin of the spies, who spoke evilly about the land, it was more appropriate to associate Joseph with the representative of Manasseh as opposed to Joshua from Ephraim

<sup>14</sup> The following few paragraphs are based largely upon Sklarz, Miriam. “Nachmanides' Exegesis of Midrash in his Commentary on the Torah” [Hebrew] *Shnaton: Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 23 (2014), 243ff

<sup>15</sup> Ramban, *Commentary* to Gen. 48:7

Ramban is thus an interpreter of Midrash firstly in the sense that he consistently inquires into the motivation of a midrashic interpretation, finding features of the biblical text which serve as the stimulus for a rabbinic legal or narrative interpolation, but the Midrash *must*, at the end of the day, be based upon some textual hint. For example, the word “*lekha*” in both Numbers 10:2 regarding production of the trumpets and in Deuteronomy 10:1 regarding construction of an ark is shown to be superfluous (and perhaps even slightly inaccurate, considering that these objects were not made by Moses himself), and thus legitimate springboards for midrashic interpretation, but this is not true of the same word in Genesis 12:1, where “*mishpat ha-lashon kein.*”<sup>16</sup> Sometimes the motivation is not purely textual, but rather due to a conviction of the sages that details are not inserted by the Torah haphazardly or without good reason. Ramban therefore quotes multiple Midrashim regarding the personality of Naamah, the “sister of Tubal-Cain,” because if she were not important, “there would be no reason to mention her.”<sup>17</sup> This rabbinic motivation that he identifies here is shared by Ramban himself even in his *peshat* interpretations, believing that in *peshat* as well there must be a reason why the text would insert extraneous details. Based upon this principle, he rejects Ibn Ezra’s explanation of “and a man went from the house of Levi” (Ex. 2:1) to mean that Amram traveled to a different city in order to marry Jochebed, because “what need would there be for scripture to mention this.”<sup>18</sup> More common impetuses for midrashic interpolation noted by Ramban are narrative difficulties, questions such as, ‘why would God promise such blessings to Abraham without the text first introducing him as a righteous person,’ or ‘why would Moses fear the king of Bashan when God was clearly with

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<sup>16</sup> Ramban, *Commentary* to Gen. 12:1

<sup>17</sup> Ramban, *Commentary* to Gen. 4:22. See also *Commentary* to Ex. 6:23 for a similar case regarding Putiel

<sup>18</sup> Ramban, *Commentary* to Ex. 2:1. Cf. Elman, Yaakov. “It Is No Empty Thing: Nahmanides and the Search for Omnisignificance.” *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 4 (1993): 1-83, discussed later in Section II.



him’?<sup>19</sup> Often, Ramban sees Midrash not as explaining extraneous details, but the opposite: filling a lacuna left by the text. Thus, an *aggadah* which states that the trees “rebelled” by not tasting like their fruit is seen by Ramban as a response to the problem that the verses do not speak of creation of non-fruit-bearing trees (Gen. 1:11).

This type of commentary on midrash—the identification of the textual difficulty upon which the Midrash is based—not only helps elucidate the methodology of the sages, but also provides Ramban with more fodder for his own interpretations *al derekh ha-peshat*. Once he has identified the textual motivation for a midrashic interpolation, he can then present a philological, grammatical or stylistic explanation as an alternative to the Midrash. An example can be seen in a Midrash quoted by Rashi to Gen. 39:19, where the prefix *ka-* used in the phrase *ka-devarim ha-eileh* in the context of Potiphar’s wife accusing Joseph of lewd behavior is understood as an indication that her accusations were made while she was being intimate with her husband, and was thus able to physically demonstrate, and not just relate, the details of Joseph’s advances. Ramban, however, writes that “*al derech ha-peshat ein tsorekh*”: the use of the letter *kaf* is merely a semantic element.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, after quoting multiple midrashic interpretations for why the baby Moses was described as a *na’ar* (Ex. 2:6), a term normally used to indicate a young—but not newborn—boy, Ramban quotes other Biblical passages to make the philological argument that *na’ar* can indeed refer to a baby.

More than uncovering the scriptural basis, however, Ramban is an interpreter of midrash in a manner far beyond being a mere expositor of midrashic methodology; he sought

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<sup>19</sup> Ramban, *Commentary* to Gen. 12:1-2 and Num. 21:34 respectively.

<sup>20</sup> This example is used by Michelle Levine, “Nahmanides’ Literary Approach to Biblical Narrative: Varied Repetition in the Joseph Story”. Rabman makes the same comment regarding the *kaf* prefix to Gen. 45:23

to understand the import of its content as well. While “Nahmanides’ assumption seems to be that Rashi himself quoted it [*aggadah*] at face value,” Ramban on the other hand felt compelled to provide reasonable explanations for difficult midrashic teachings.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps most striking in his approach to *aggadah* is that despite his reverence for Midrash, Ramban is willing to challenge (or at least inquire into) an *aggadah*’s historical accuracy when it threatens the narrative’s coherence. For example, because it is inconceivable to Ramban that the righteous Abraham would allow idols to be brought into his house, he rejects Rashi’s midrashic reading of Gen. 21:9. Comments or questions of this nature abound in Ramban. How can it be that a miracle performed for the idolatrous King of Sodom would result in increased belief in God, instead of belief in the power of his own idols (Gen. 14:10)? Why would Joseph have followed his brothers to Dothan if an angel warned him of their nefarious intentions (Gen. 37:17)? Could Aaron actually have been involved in the remarriage of his parents when he was only two years old (Ex. 2:1)?<sup>22</sup> Because of the seriousness with which he accords Midrash, he approaches these types of questions as worthy of study.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Septimus, *ibid.* note 21. Septimus ascribes this interpretive tendency not to Ramban’s acceptance of the authority of Midrash, but rather as a response to its rejection by Abraham Ibn Ezra; after inheriting the Andalusian tradition, “there could be no return to the innocence of Rashi” (Septimus, 19). However, I believe that another impetus could be that Ramban saw *peshat* and *derash* as distinct. While Rashi was able to quote “*aggadah* which settles the *peshuto shel mikra*” (Rashi to Gen. 3:8), and therefore dismiss whatever he felt did not conform to *peshat* (cf. Rashi to Ex. 6:9), he saw Midrash as legitimate way to explain textual irregularities. Because Ramban prefers to solve questions through *peshat*, he could not accept the fact that Midrash was meant purely to explain the text, and so Midrash must have another purpose, which he sought to uncover. Ibn Ezra, on the other hand, quotes from the Geonim that, concerning Midrash, *ein makshin bo ve-lo mi-menu* (*Peirush Katsar* Ex. 2:10).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Ramban’s comments to Gen. 14:7, 15:5, 26:5, 30:2, 35:18, 37:24, Ex. 2:14, 15:12, and Num. 20:1

<sup>23</sup> Perhaps the most fundamental challenge to Midrash, which is its fantastical tendencies and pervasiveness of miracles not written in the Bible, which otherwise places great emphasis on the wondrousness of miracles, was what spurred Ramban to formulate one of his most well-known theological principles: that of the “hidden miracle.” See Gen. 46:15

Ramban's answers to such questions can be no less groundbreaking.<sup>24</sup> While he sometimes finds a way to explain the Midrash in a satisfactory manner, other times he will admit that a Midrash is simply too difficult to be taken literally, and instead must be interpreted "expositorily," that is to say, as emphasizing a textual point that is otherwise subtle enough to be easily missed. Thus, the story of Abraham's salvation from the fiery furnace could merely be an exaggerated way of expressing the miraculous nature by which Abraham was able to survive in a culture that so strongly stood against his beliefs. Similarly, the Sages' teaching that an angel told Joseph that his brothers were planning to kill him is meant to emphasize the fact that Joseph was willing to risk his life in order to serve his father.<sup>25</sup> If none of these methods of interpreting the Midrash seem viable, Ramban can rely upon a mystical solution, writing that the *aggadah* is meant to be an allusion to some esoteric doctrine, which he was uniquely privy to as a kabbalist.<sup>26</sup> Either way, Ramban consistently, and often creatively, defends the reasonability and value of Midrash against "the rationalistic critique," particularly, the critique of Abraham Ibn Ezra.<sup>27</sup>

## II. Abraham Ibn Ezra and the Spanish *Peshat* School

After Rashi, Ramban makes mention of another earlier commentary upon which he builds his own: that of Abraham Ibn Ezra, towards whom Ramban promises "open rebuke and hidden love." Ramban's "rebuke" of Ibn Ezra is indeed expressed in multiple places, sometimes taking the form of acrid witticisms. On Ibn Ezra's comment regarding Isaac's

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<sup>24</sup> This method of interpreting Midrash may be the influence of Radak. See the works of Michelle Levine regarding Ramban's readings of both Midrash and biblical nuances to arrive at profound psychological insights

<sup>25</sup> Ramban's Commentary to Gen. 11:28 and Gen. 37:15 respectively

<sup>26</sup> Eliot Wolfson, "By Way of Truth: Aspects of Nahmanides' Kabbalistic Hermeneutic" *AJS Review* 14:1 (Autumn 1989), specifically pages 158-178

<sup>27</sup> Septimus, *ibid.* footnote 32. As examples, he cites Ramban's *Commentary* to Gen. 1:1, 24:1, and Ex. 19:13

blindness, Ramban writes of Ibn Ezra, “who blinded his mind’s eye” on this matter (*Comm.* to Gen. 25:34). Ramban refers to Ibn Ezra’s interpretations as nothings,<sup>28</sup> even delivering *ad hominem* attacks such as including him among those who are “of small faith and little wisdom” and, most damningly, declaring Ibn Ezra to deserve having molten gold poured down his throat.<sup>29</sup>

It is apparent, however, that Ramban’s “hidden love” is not so well hidden as to be completely indiscernible, and as Septimus writes, this love is “often to be found hiding not far from his rebuke.”<sup>30</sup> Abraham Lifschutz sees this “hidden love” expressed by multiple favorable citations of Ibn Ezra (although often without explicit attribution) sprinkled throughout Ramban’s commentary, which, taken together, even outnumber his remarks of “rebuke.”<sup>31</sup> Septimus sees this hidden love, however, not in specific citations, but in methodology, noting that analysis of their respective commentaries reveals that Ramban and Ibn Ezra share a deep “spiritual kinship.” This is expressed both in Ramban’s treatment of Midrash with a more critical, rationalizing eye, as opposed to Rashi’s mere acceptance (as discussed in the previous section), and by Ramban’s program of determining the *peshat*, or straight-forward meaning of the biblical text, independent of its traditional Midrashic readings.<sup>32</sup>

It is this *peshat* methodology, developed by the Geonim of Babylon, furthered by Jewish scholars of Andalusia, and most exemplified (at least for Ramban) in the commentary

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<sup>28</sup> “*hevel*,” in Ramban, *Commentary* to Lev. 27:29, Deut. 10:6 and 23:5

<sup>29</sup> Ramban, *Commentary* to Gen. 1:1 and Gen. 46:15 respectively

<sup>30</sup> Septimus, *ibid.*, 17

<sup>31</sup> See Abraham Lifschutz, *Iyunim be-Mishnat Rabbi Avraham Ibn Ezra* (Jerusalem, 1982), 24ff, who lists the many such ‘silent quotes’ from Ibn Ezra in Ramban’s Commentary, and believes that this is what Ramban meant by his “hidden love”

<sup>32</sup> See also Sklarz, Miriam. “Contending with the Disparity Between *Peshat* and *Derash*: Nachmanides in the Footsteps of Ibn Ezra,” [Hebrew] *Shnaton: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 22 (2013), 189-222

of Ibn Ezra, which is perhaps most pervasive in Ramban's Torah commentary. Without exaggeration, almost every comment of Ramban is somehow related to a program of determining the *peshat* of the biblical phrase in question. Many of these interpretations are unique to Ramban, and he sometimes rejects Ibn Ezra's position purely on the basis of *peshat*—an endeavor with which Ibn Ezra would likely have sympathized. For example, on the emphasis of the location of Sarah's burial plot "in the land" promised to Abraham (Gen. 23:19), Ibn Ezra writes that the verse is stressing the value of the Land. Ramban provides an alternative interpretation, indicating that Ibn Ezra's comment 'has no place in *peshat*.'<sup>33</sup> The question of whether or not Ramban was influenced by the tradition of *peshat*-exegesis seems to be answerable with an unequivocal and resounding yes.

What was it about Ibn Ezra, then, that aroused in Ramban such strong condemnations and rebuke, especially considering this "spiritual kinship"? According to Bernard Septimus, the answer is "roughly threefold: cavalier treatment of *aggadah*, overly rationalistic exegesis, and pretention to esoteric wisdom."<sup>34</sup> This "cavalier treatment of *aggadah*" requires elaboration, as Ibn Ezra's own approach to *aggadah* and Midrash is not entirely clear.<sup>35</sup> In the introduction written to what is known as the *Peirush ha-Arokh*, Ibn Ezra enumerates five general methodologies of exegesis, describing how they relate to a metaphorical 'circle of interpretation.' Midrash, he contends, is inside the circle, but not at its center; in other words, it has value and an element of truth, but Midrash is not to be taken as the absolute meaning of

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<sup>33</sup> Other examples include *Ramban, Commentary* to Gen. 21:9, 31:33, Lev. 9:1, Num. 22:20, Deut. 5:5 and 26:15.

<sup>34</sup> Septimus, *ibid*, 17.

<sup>35</sup> See Y. Maori, "The Meaning of the Term *Divrei Yahid* in the Commentary of Ibn Ezra on the Torah: On Ibn Ezra's Attitude Towards Rabbinic Midrash," *Shnaton: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 13 (2002), 201-246, especially the bibliographical information on, 204-206 and Mordechai Z. Cohen, *Opening the Gates of Interpretation: Maimonides' Biblical Hermeneutics in Light of His Geonic-Andalusian Heritage and Muslim Milieu* (Brill: Boston/Leiden, 2011), 76-77. Cohen sees no tension between these comments and believes Ibn Ezra to have consistently held the view that Midrash is subordinate to *peshat* as "pure interpretation"

Scripture. However, in the introduction to his *Peirush ha-Katsar*, Ibn Ezra writes that Midrash is both “on the dot as well as around it,” quoting the Sages’ maxim that “there are seventy facets” to the Torah, indicating that he did believe Midrash to be of equal, though different, hermeneutical correctness. It is usually assumed, however, that Ibn Ezra believed Midrash to be inferior to *peshat* as a form of exegesis, and this is almost certainly how Ramban understood his position.<sup>36</sup> Throughout his commentary, Ibn Ezra will reject Midrash as a correct understanding of the actual meaning of a verse or phrase.

As discussed in the previous section, however, Ramban too will reject Midrash as plain-sense interpretations. If so, why is it that Abraham Ibn Ezra is so deserving of rebuke? It is clear that while Ramban will sometimes accept Ibn Ezra’s interpretations and methodology as they pertain to *peshat*,<sup>37</sup> he insists that the Midrash is equally valid, but operates based upon entirely independent methods. Miriam Sklarz has shown that Ramban even saw Midrash as presenting *itself* as being based upon interpolations of textual hints, rather than explanations of *peshat*. In a fascinating display of loyalty to both methods, Ramban in one case rejects a comment of Rashi’s as *peshat* by quoting in full the very Midrash that is Rashi’s source, showing that the Midrash bases itself on a “hint” instead of on *peshat* of the verse as a whole.<sup>38</sup> Whereas Ibn Ezra’s rejection of Midrash as *peshat* was

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<sup>36</sup> Maori, *ibid.* and Cohen *ibid.* This is especially true regarding how Ramban would have viewed the position of Ibn Ezra, if (as argued by Lifshutz, *ibid.*) Ramban did not have access to Ibn Ezra’s *Peirush ha-Katsar*. However, Miriam Sklarz has recently argued for seeing Ibn Ezra’s position differently, concluding that his and Ramban’s view of Midrash are nearly identical. See Miriam Sklarz, “Contending with the Disparity Between Peshat and Derash: Nachmanides in the Footsteps of Ibn Ezra,” [Hebrew] *Shnaton: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies* 22 (2013), 189-22. Despite Sklarz’s forceful analysis, if she is correct it is difficult to understand why Ramban would have generally felt Ibn Ezra to be deserving of rebuke, unless it is due to his equating the esoteric meaning with his rationalistic philosophy.

<sup>37</sup> For example, see Commentary to Ex. 6:12, 9:30, 24:1, 33:12, Num. 4:20, Deut. 20:19 and especially Deut. 32:1

<sup>38</sup> Sklarz, “Nachmanides’ Exegesis,” 252. Further examples of rejecting Rashi’s reading of Midrash as *peshat* include his commentary to Gen. 12:1, 20:17-18, 23:1, and Num. 16:1.

in essence a rejection of its validity as exegesis, Ramban's rejection of Midrash as *peshat* merely relegated Midrash to a different exegetical sphere.

For Ramban, then, Midrash and *peshat* appear to occupy distinct and non-overlapping realms.<sup>39</sup> As already discussed, however, Ramban does admit to some areas of both convergence between *peshat* and *derash*, as well as for instances where one methodology informs the other. Despite being based upon mere "hints" in the text, Ramban shows that Midrashim often bespeak a sensitivity to more *peshat*-like textual issues, such as the problem of verses or phrases appearing to be out of order (as in Gen. 2:20 and 11:32). He thus sees the Midrash as being bothered by the implication of the verse that Joseph personally allotted produce to the civilians, even if Midrash generally doesn't shy away from the miraculous or unusual.<sup>40</sup> In the story of Jacob's deceiving his father in order to be blessed (Gen. 27:12), Rashi quotes a Midrash saying that it was Jacob's manner of speaking, instead of his voice, which aroused Isaac's suspicion. Although not necessarily accepting this Midrash as a *peshat* reading of the verse, Ramban does cite this Midrash as supporting his own interpretation that Jacob's voice sounded like that of Esau.

Furthmore, as mentioned in the previous section, Midrash also has an influence on *peshat* in that the *peshat* and Midrash cannot be so radically divergent as to lead to opposite conclusions, such as seeing Nimrod or Balaam *al derekh ha-peshat* as righteous people. Additionally, as will be discussed in the next section in the context of Radak, Midrashic sensibilities make their way into Ramban's *peshat* explanations, in his endeavor to find the significance in the Torah's literary features which he uncovers. Notwithstanding this

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<sup>39</sup> Such an approach was taken, interestingly, by another one of Ramban's Andalusian predecessors: the grammarian and lexicographer Jonah ibn Janah, whose influence is only recently being appreciated. See Cohen, *ibid.*, 360

<sup>40</sup> See also *Commentary* to Gen. 42:6, Ex. 2:2, 4:3, 6:2, Num. 14:1, Deut. 6:18 and 12:22.

proximity of Midrash to *peshat*, however, it should be noted that Ramban is still willing to advance a *peshat* interpretation that is historically incompatible with a Midrash.<sup>41</sup> For example, it is not possible for ‘Amram and Yocheved to have been married both once and twice, or for both the paternal first-borns of the Egyptians to have died and not died, and yet Ramban sees both options as legitimate, one as *peshat* and the other as Midrash.<sup>42</sup> He appears to be unconcerned about the actual historical reality, as long as the *peshat* interpretation is not wholly antithetical to the spirit of the Midrash.<sup>43</sup>

It is also worth noting that, perhaps because of Ramban’s appreciation of Midrash as being based in the text, he appears to have a much more expansive understanding of *peshat* than some of his contemporaries. Specifically, it seems as though whenever he can find an explanation of the verse which accounts for repetitions or the like based upon legal or narrative reasons, instead of semantic or stylistic ones, he will prefer the former. Thus, one would not find the phrase, coined by Radak, “*kafel ha-inyan be-milim shonot*,”<sup>44</sup> the verse merely used a superfluous, synonymous phrase. Instead, one finds that Ramban seeks to find meaning in repeated words or phrases, such as in his comment to Gen. 34:23, where he writes that the verse repeated an idea for emphasis. Even more interesting is Ramban’s explanation of Deut. 1:12, where, speaking to the Israelites, Moses complains of bearing “your cumbrance, and your burden, and your strife” (KJV), three words which appear to be synonymous. Well aware of the Midrash, quoted by Rashi (and by Ramban himself subsequent to his own interpretation) which reads all three words as referring to different

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<sup>41</sup> On this issue generally, see Moshe Ahrend, “Peshat and Derash and the Problem of Truth in Education,” [Hebrew] *Hagut Ba-Mikra* 5 (1998), 58-78

<sup>42</sup> In *Commentary* to Ex. 2:1 and 12:30 respectively

<sup>43</sup> Epistemic defense of such a view is given in Rabbi Y. Hutner, *Iggerot Pachad Yitzhak* (Brooklyn, 2006), 49-53

<sup>44</sup> Radak, *Commentary to Isaiah* 5:9. See the next section regarding Radak’s influence on Ramban in general



activities the Israelites would do to make Moses' task of judging them more difficult. Ramban gives a different explanation of his own, namely that these three words refer respectively to teaching, praying, and judging. This interpretation, which maintains the theory that these three words are not synonymous, Ramban nevertheless introduces as being "by way of *peshat*,"

### **III. The Influence of Radak: Literary and Psychological Sensitivity**

Unlike Rashi and Ibn Ezra, who Ramban credits in his introduction as being the two major building blocks of his commentary, Ramban rarely acknowledges a debt to his older Spanish contemporary, Rabbi David Kimhi (Radak), quoting him by name only once. However, comparing the works of these two commentators reveals that Radak actually had a wide and pervasive influence upon Ramban's commentary. A considerable number of Ramban's comments are in fact quotations or at least adaptations from Radak's own commentary to Genesis, although Ramban often refers to him merely as "those who say" or as another anonymous commentator.<sup>45</sup> In addition to quotations or incorporations, Ramban will sometimes provide an explanation that appears to be an extension of a comment or theory of Radak. For example, Radak posits that the famine Abraham encountered not long after traveling to Canaan on God's word was a test of his faith. Ramban concurs—and boldly adds that Abraham in fact failed this test.<sup>46</sup> It might even be that Radak was the one who

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<sup>45</sup> Compare Ramban and Radak to Gen. 1:26, 1:31, 4:11, 11:15, 25:6, 25:31, 30:30, 49:9 and 49:22. Oddly, the only instance where Radak is quoted by name, Gen. 35:16, Ramban gives the impression that he is intending to quote not from Radak's Torah commentary but from his grammatical work. Cf. Novetsky, Hillel. "The Influences of Rabbi Joseph Bekhor Shor and Radak on Ramban's Commentary on the Torah." MA Thesis, Bernard Revel Graduate School (1992), and Ephraim Hazan, "Kavim Achadim Li-Leshono shel Ramban Be-Feirusho La-Torah — Le-Darkhei Ha-Shibbutz Ve-Shilluvei Ha-Mekorot Bi-Khtivato," *Mechkerei Morashtenu* I (1999), 163-174

<sup>46</sup> Radak and Ramban to Gen. 12:10

opened the door for Ramban to be willing to criticize the behavior of the patriarchs, who may have been traditionally viewed as being beyond reproach. Radak sharply criticizes Sarah for her harassment of Hagar, her maidservant, and Ramban has essentially the same interpretation in his own commentary.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, both Radak and Ramban were willing to believe that Rachel's request of Jacob to provide her with children was inappropriate, with Radak seeing her plea as a lack of faith, and Ramban finding fault in her overly dramatic tone.<sup>48</sup>

Radak's influence finds its most pervasive expression on Ramban, however, in certain psychological and literary sensitivities shared by these two commentators. Both display keen psychological insight in their interpretations of biblical stories, treating the biblical personalities as real people with human thoughts and motivations. Both commentators ask, for example, how Sarah could be considered attractive at age ninety,<sup>49</sup> or why Joseph didn't send word to his father as soon as he was able to. For Ramban, this is even a method of exegesis: psychological knowledge can be used to determine the meaning of the text. When Joseph and Jacob finally embrace after being separated for so long, the verse tells us that "he cried" upon the neck of the other. Rashi, quoting a Midrash, believes that the pronoun is referring to Joseph, but Ramban disagrees, noting that it would be much more likely for Jacob, the elderly father who believed his son to have died and grieved for him for so long, to be crying that for the phrase to be referring to Joseph.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Radak and Ramban to Gen. 16:6

<sup>48</sup> Radak and Ramban to Gen. 30:1-2.

<sup>49</sup> Radak and Ramban to Gen. 20:2. This question might also be the motivation for a rabbinic comment, quoted by Ramban, that Sarah had been miraculously restored to her youthful beauty (*Bava Metsia* 87a)

<sup>50</sup> *Comm.* to Gen. 46:29. See Mordechai Cohen, "Great Searchings of the Heart: Psychological Sensitivity in Nahmanides' Commentaries on the Torah and Job" [Hebrew], in: *Teshura Le-'Amos: Collected Studies in Biblical Exegesis Presented to 'Amos Hakham*, ed. M. Bar-Asher, N. Hacham, Y. Ofer. (Alon Shevut: Tevunot), 213-233

As he tells his reader so many times throughout his commentary, Radak strove to determine the *peshat* interpretation of the narrative, quoting Midrash only when necessary or for “those who love *derash*,” or perhaps for educational purposes (he was, after all, a teacher).<sup>51</sup> At the same time, however, Radak often appears to express what Mordechai Cohen has identified as “midrashic sensibilities,” such as the tendency to inquire into the moral-religious lesson that can be derived from an otherwise extraneous phrase or passage.<sup>52</sup> Radak, ever seeking to find educational value in the Bible, often explains why a narrative was included in the Torah. Thus, he writes that the many trials of Abraham allows him to serve as an exemplar of faith (Gen. 14:1), and Jacob’s fear and preparations in greeting his brother Esau are meant to teach both the extent to which one should trust in God as well as the proper way to deal with adversaries.<sup>53</sup> Many of these pedagogical notes are quoted in Ramban, although Ramban also adds such lessons of his own, such as in explaining the purpose of the stories of Sarah’s burial (*Comm.* to Gen. 23:19), Jacob’s encounter with the shepherds at the well (*Comm.* to Gen. 29:2), and the entire Joseph narrative in general (*Comm.* to Gen. 37:16-17). Even Ramban’s more inclusive method of seeing the events which occurred in Genesis as portending the future history of Israel, (to be discussed further in Part 2, Section 8) is perhaps traceable to a statement of Radak to Hosea 9:10: “as the fathers do, so too will do the sons.”<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>51</sup> Yitzchak Berger, “Peshat and the Authority of Hazal in the Commentaries of Radak,” *AJS Review* 31 (2007), 41-59. In light of Radak’s profession, Moshe Kamler, “Introduction” *Peirush Radak al ha-Torah* ed. M. Kamler (Harav Kook: Jerusalem, 1970) explains several features of his commentary and style as being pedagogical in nature

<sup>52</sup> Mordechai Cohen, “Midrashic Influences on Radak’s Peshat Exegesis,” [Hebrew] in *Proceedings of the Eleventh World Congress of Jewish Studies*. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1994) vol. I, 143-150

<sup>53</sup> Radak’s Commentary to Gen. 32:14, 32:36, cf. 34:30. Cf. Radak to Gen. 16:6, 27:1, and 39:7

<sup>54</sup> Ruth Ben-Meir, “The Actions of the Fathers is a Sign for the Sons: Historical Interpretations in Ramban’s Commentary to the Torah,” [Hebrew] *Iyunei Mikra u-Parshanut* 8 (2008) 533-551, n. 7. It should be noted, however, that Radak uses this phrase not to explain the significance of any particular biblical story, but merely commenting on the phenomenon of later generations acting similarly to their forefathers. The same phrase is

This "search" for religious meaning in the biblical narrative was identified by Yaakov Elman as being sourced in a feature of rabbinic Midrash that James Kugel termed "omniscience."<sup>55</sup> To the authors of Midrash, the Torah was God's word, revelation materialized, down to the very letter—and so they bore a religious imperative to expound upon the meaning and value of every single aspect of the Torah, every jot and tittle. Radak at least shared such a value (if not the methodology), extending this sensibility to uncovering religious meaning in and through *peshat*. Because nothing in the Bible is arbitrary, syntactical and structural elements of the Bible's passages must be explained—either as teaching a moral-religious lesson (as in Midrash), or as a feature of the Bible-as-literature, in accordance with *peshat* sensitivities.<sup>56</sup> Beginning with Radak and finding much fuller expression in Ramban, the assumption that every literary aspect of the Torah was worth deciphering allowed for the identification of new literary elements, even if their significance was to be explained through *peshat*.

This is most pronounced in Ramban's explanations for the Bible's sequence and structure. He insists that the Torah would not deviate from chronological order without good reason, and so when it does, he makes sure to provide that reason.<sup>57</sup> Sometimes this is with regards to single phrases that seem out of place, such as the Torah's noting Terah's age of

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used by Ibn Ezra to Gen. 9:18 in reference to the behavior of Canaan as being similar to that of his irreverent father, Ham. Ben-Meir notes that this thinking is even used in halakhic literature, as in *She'elot u-Teshuvot Radbaz* 1:263

<sup>55</sup> Yaakov Elman, "It Is No Empty Thing: Nahmanides and the Search for Omniscience." *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 4 (1993), 1-83

<sup>56</sup> Elman sees this as an almost inevitable result of the rabbinic quest for omniscience: "Ironically, but perhaps inevitably, greater sensitivity to the omniscient demand was accompanied with an inability to account for many of the finer points of Scripture which, in earlier times, had been interpreted midrashically... the renewed claim for omniscience only underscored the impossibility of formulating an adequate response to that challenge." (p. 12)

<sup>57</sup> Ramban to Ex. 24:1, Lev 8:2, 10:20, and Num. 16:1 in particular. Gottlieb (next footnote) notes that Ramban inquires as to the reasoning of the scriptural sequence over forty times throughout his commentary. Elman, *ibid.* p. 17, identifies no less than fourteen reasons provided by Ramban for the potential sequence scriptural passages or lists

death before the story of Abraham's journey to Canaan which occurred beforehand (Gen. 11:32), or the description of Jethro returning to his homeland even before the giving of the Torah at Mt. Sinai (Ex. 18:1, 27). In the first case, Ramban attempts to show that this seeming interruption in the narrative is a common biblical literary style. In the latter, Ramban's interest in keeping the verses in order pushes him to introduce a novel interpretation in order to read the verses as being in chronological order, saying that Jethro returned to his homeland but then traveled back to the desert. More prominent examples of Ramban's sensitivity to sequence are in cases where whole narratives appear to be presented out of order. Whereas Rashi and Ibn Ezra are comfortable with saying that "there is no 'early and late' in the Torah," (Rashi to Num. 9:1 quoting *Sifrei*),<sup>58</sup> Ibn Ezra going so far as to use this exegetical tool when there's little textual evidence to such a phenomenon, such as his opinion to Num. 16:1 that Korach's rebellion occurred immediately after the golden calf, Ramban writes there that "in my opinion, the Torah is always in order except where the verse explicates the prior and later [passage], and even there this is done for a purpose and good reason." The sequence of the Torah, like all of its literary features, cannot be arbitrary.

Ramban is similarly sensitive to thematic structure, giving explanations for ordering of laws and identifying the unifying themes of each book of the Pentateuch. It is not entirely clear whether Ramban would consider this thematic analysis as *peshat* or *derash*, as it would appear to be somewhere in between. Ramban sees the division of the books of the Torah into five as having major thematic significance, and he uses the names of each given by the sages as the key to interpreting their themes. Thus, in Ramban's various introductions to each

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<sup>58</sup> See the comprehensive study of this topic by Isaac Gottlieb, *Yesh Seder Le-Mikra: Hazal u-Parshanei Yemei ha-Beinayim 'al Mukdam u-Me'uhar ba-Torah* (Magnes Press: Jerusalem, 2009), Ch. 6 on Ramban. Gottlieb believes (and quotes others who agree) that Ramban had an unconventionally limited understanding of this concept, which is different than the intent of the Sages. See there for further elaboration

book, Genesis is referred to as the Book of Creation, Exodus as the Book of Redemption, Leviticus as the Law of the Priests, and Deuteronomy as the Repetition of the Torah. These simple titles, however, belie the fact that upon inspection, these books do not appear to be thematically unified as such: Genesis speaks of creation only in its opening chapters, the same is true of the redemption from Egypt in the book of Exodus, and many new laws are introduced in Deuteronomy, which is supposed to be a review of laws previously taught. Ramban exercises great exegetical creativity, therefore, in order to uphold these titles and each book's thematic unity, even if he needs to turn to the esoteric tradition in order to do so.<sup>59</sup>

Elman also notes that Ramban's literary sensitivities extend to his having a sense of proportion, of recognizing where the Bible affords certain topics more quantitative attention than others, or engages in apparent repetitions. As discussed above, Ramban prefers providing explanations for why the Bible might use synonymous words or phrases, and this tendency is applicable to whole passages as well. In explaining why descriptions of the Tabernacle and the priestly induction (Lev. 8:2) is so lengthy, and why the sacrifices of the twelve princes had to be repeated (Numbers 7:2), Ramban extends a *midrashic* concept that repetition or seemingly unnecessary elaboration are expressions of God's endearment. Similarly, Ramban seeks to understand why it is that God had to inform Abraham of the promise that his children would inherit the land multiple times, and attempts to show how each promise was necessary or involved a new element (*Commentary* to Gen. 15:18). Although the laws in Exodus Chapter 34 seem to comprise a summary or repetition of the

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<sup>59</sup> See below, Section VI. Ramban believes that Genesis can be understood as a book of creation because that the travails of the forefathers are also acts of 'creation' in the sense that they lay the seeds for all of history (Ramban to Gen. 2:3), and Exodus is entirely a Book of Redemption because full redemption requires the building of the Tabernacle. See Appendix C on the topic of the book of Deuteronomy

longer code in Exodus Ch. 21-23, Ramban *ad loc.* (and to Lev. 25:1) sees this chapter as being necessary to serve as a renewal of that code. He thus combines his sensitivity to thematic structure with his search for significance in seemingly unnecessary repetitions. The two “covenant passages” which detail the rewards and punishments due to Israel if they are to adhere to—or violate—the Torah, which appear in Leviticus and Deuteronomy to be mere replications of one another, are understood by Ramban to refer to two completely different epochs.<sup>60</sup>

Scriptural phraseology and presentation are also understood by Ramban as meaningful, and Michelle Levine has recently showed how Ramban utilizes biblical intertextualities to weave together interconnected themes and passages both as a method of determining the meaning of the scriptural phrase in question, as well as in order to imbue a biblical episode or teaching with new meaning.<sup>61</sup> To explain why Abraham did not directly request of Ephron to buy a burial ground (Gen. 23:6), Ramban references the story of Naboth (I Kgs 21:3) to show that selling one’s ancestral land is considered disgraceful. In one of his most fascinating insights, Ramban (to Ex. 25:2) sees the scriptural portrayal of the Tabernacle and its laws as paralleling those depictions of Sinai, which leads him to conclude that the purpose of the Tabernacle is to act as a portable Sinai. He is clued into this “secret” (as he calls it) by the Bible’s intertextuality, through the parallel phrase of “the glory of God was upon Mount Sinai” (Ex. 24:16) and “the glory of God filled the Tabernacle” (Ex. 40:24).

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<sup>60</sup> Ramban *Commentary* to Lev. 26:16 and Deut. 28:42

<sup>61</sup> Michelle Levine. “Character, Characterization, and Intertextuality in Nahmanides' Commentary on Biblical Narrative” *Hebrew Studies* 53 (2012). Levine’s analysis characterizes and organizes many of the observations already made by E. Chazan, “Some Trajectories of Ramban’s Language in his Torah Commentary: Methods of Interweaving and Integration of Sources in his Writing,” *Mehqerei Morashtenu* 1 (1999): 163–174

Before moving on, it should also be pointed out that Ramban might have had another commentarial influence who he appears to treat in the same way as Radak, despite not being quoted by name at all: Rabbi David ben Abraham of Posquieres, or Rabad.<sup>62</sup> In a few comments to Leviticus, Ramban introduces an explanation as “there those who say,” or the like, and proceeds to quote from (or at least paraphrase) a passage from Rabad’s commentary to *Torat Kohanim*, the rabbinic Midrash Halakha on Leviticus.<sup>63</sup> This is not the place to elaborate upon the methodology of Rabad, but suffice it to say here that as a commentary on Midrash, Rabad too is occupied with determining the scriptural hint which serves as the basis for midrashic exegesis, and such explanations often seem to be quoted by Ramban though without attribution. In one case where the *Torat Kohanim* adds narrative detail, writing that Aaron was afraid to approach the alter the first time that he was commanded to do so (Lev. 9:7), Ramban quotes Rabad’s psychological explanation for this phenomenon, that the horns of the alter reminded him of a bull, and thus his thoughts turned to his feelings of guilt from the sin of the golden calf. Although it is not clear to what extent Rabad’s commentary impacted that of Ramban directly, they seem to share the same method of interpretation.

#### **IV. *Peshat* and Halakha: Ibn Ezra, Maimonides, and Ramban**

It is impossible to speak of the Torah and its exegesis without discussing its legal portions, the halakha. In order to appreciate Ramban’s views on the relationship between *peshat* and halakha, somewhat of an excursus is necessary here to discuss how Ramban’s predecessors, Ibn Ezra and Maimonides, understood this complex relationship. Ibn Ezra

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<sup>62</sup> Compare Ramban, *Commentary* to Lev. 8:22, 10:6, 19:16 and 9:20 to Rabad’s commentary on *Torat Kohanim ad loc.*, as well as Ramban to Num. 19:16 compared to Rabad’s *Gloss* to Maimonides’ Mishnah Torah, *Laws of Impurity of a Corpse* 12:6. See Isadore Twersky, *Rabad of Posquieres* (Harvard U.P.: Cambridge MA, 1962) p. 56-59

<sup>63</sup> Ramban, *Commentary* to Lev. 9:7-8, to be discussed presently, is one such example. Others include



made a clear distinction between halakha and *aggadah*, insisting that while he was allowed creative freedom in the latter realm to offer *peshat* that different from traditional midrashic readings, this was not so in the case of halakha.<sup>64</sup> More precisely, for Ibn Ezra, a *peshat* cannot contradict the halakha, and if the Midrash provided by the Sages appears not to conform to the plain meaning of the verse, then Ibn Ezra will refer to it as a *semakh*, *remez*, or *asmakhta*, as if to say that the midrashic reading is not the actual source for the law.<sup>65</sup> Such a view—that any Midrash halakha which does not conform to *peshat* must actually be sourced in tradition instead of in exegesis—is extremely difficult to reconcile with much of Talmudic and Midrashic literature. If the halakha that is not explicit in the text actually exists independently of its scriptural source, why is the rabbinic literature so preoccupied with determining the midrashic basis for halakha?

In response to the difficulty of accepting rabbinic *derash*, a type of exegesis that appears far from the actual meaning of the scriptural verses, as the source of halakha, Maimonides develops a highly sophisticated view of Midrash. In his methodological introduction to his *Book of Commandments*, Maimonides writes that any law derived by *derash* is to be considered Rabbinic, implying that only *peshat* interpretations can have the legal force of Biblical Law. Mordechai Cohen and other recent scholars, however, have

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<sup>64</sup> Ibn Ezra's *Introduction to Commentary*, Ibn Ezra to Ex. 12:24, 21:20, 21:26 and Cohen "Gates" (2011), 75-83

<sup>65</sup> See, for example, Ibn Ezra's comments to Ex. 21:8, Lev. 25:9, Deut. 25:6. Sarah Japhet, "The Tension Between Rabbinic Legal Midrash and the 'Plain Meaning' (Peshat) of the Biblical Text--An Unresolved Problem?" in *Sefer Moshe: The Moshe Weinfeld Jubilee Volume*, ed. by Chaim Cohen, Avi Hurvitz, and Shalom M. Paul (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 403-25 writes that Ibn Ezra, unlike Rashbam, was never willing to interpret a verse against the halakha. However, this is entirely accurate, as Ibn Ezra may not always have known the halakha, such as in his comments to Ex. 13:7, 22:13, and Deut. 25:6, which was noted by Martin Lockshin, "Tradition or Context: Two Exegetes Struggle with Peshat," in *From Ancient Israel to Modern Judaism: Essays in Honor of Marvin Fox*, ed. J. Neusner and E. Frierichs (Atlanta, 1989), 173-186

shown that there is actually much more behind this deceptively simple distinction.<sup>66</sup> What Maimonides actually believes, as evident from his Introduction to *Commentary on the Mishnah*, is that there is both a corpus of traditionally received interpretation (*tafsir marwi*) as well as a method of exegesis by which they created new laws that are not intended as representing the straightforward meaning of the text. When the Rabbis engaged in *derash*, they were not offering a *tafsir*, an “uncovering [of] the original meaning of the text; instead, they were drawing inferences from it in order to create new legislation.”<sup>67</sup> It is only this second form of interpretation, using methodology of *hekesh*, or, as it was referred to in works of Muslim jurisprudence: *qiyās*, which results in the derived laws (*furūʿ*) that Maimonides considers to be Rabbinic. However, Maimonides also admits that there are instances where the Rabbis will attempt to find a scriptural indication for a law already known to them by tradition, such as the principle of *lex talionis* that is understood by the Rabbis as referring to monetary compensation. Although the Babylonian Talmud provides scriptural “sources” for this rabbinic interpretation, indicating that it was determined by exegesis, Maimonides insists that this Talmudic exercise is not actually meant to be a form of exegesis at all, but is “merely an artificial, or secondary projection onto the text,” and the law is binding not because of such projections, but due to its nature as the original meaning of the text as transmitted to Moses.<sup>68</sup> Other types of “exegesis” which are actually not to be considered interpretations at all, but are instead “artificial projections” are the attachments of rabbinic laws to scriptural verses, the familiar category of *asmakhta*. Unfortunately, it is not always

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<sup>66</sup> Cohen, *ibid* and Yosi Erel, “Parshanut Peshat of Scripture and the Determined Halakha in the Work of Ramban,” *JSIS* 8 (2009), 117–152

<sup>67</sup> Cohen, *ibid.*, 268, cf., 114–115, 283–335. More focus on Maimonides is provided in an article: Cohen, Mordechai Z. “A Talmudist’s Halakhic Hermeneutics: A New Understanding of Maimonides’ Principle of *Peshat* Primacy” *JSIS* 10 (2012), especially, 286–318

<sup>68</sup> Cohen, “Talmudist” (2012), 302, cf. “Gates” (2011), 278–282

clear from the Midrash itself in which category it belongs, and so Maimonides must either decide this on his own based upon the scriptural context, or rely upon Talmudic discussions that indicate one way or other.<sup>69</sup> For Maimonides, therefore, *peshat* will sometimes determine whether or not a halakhic midrashic reading will be accorded Biblical authority or be relegated to a rabbinic *asmakhta*. This may appear to be similar to the position of Ibn Ezra, who wrote that “one with a mind will be able to discern when they [the Rabbis] speak *peshat* and when they speak *derash*,”<sup>70</sup> but for Maimonides, this is only where the *derash* itself is so far from *peshat* as to appear artificial, not if the *derash* is merely use of a legitimate hermeneutical system of legal derivation.

The relationship between *peshat* and *derash* however, runs deeper for Maimonides than this, and is bi-directional: not only will *peshat* determine whether or not a Midrash should be considered legitimate exegesis or not, but for Maimonides, Midrash and the rabbinic reading has strong implications for how scripture should be read. One way that this is expressed is that where the sages record a transmitted interpretation (*tafsīr marwī*), this becomes the *peshat* of the text instead of its literal meaning. To use the already mentioned example of *lex talonis*, Maimonides admits (in his *Introduction to Commentary on the Mishnah*) that the *literal*, or apparent meaning of the text (*zāhir a-naṣṣ*) would legislate physically injuring the assailant, yet emphasizes that the *actual* meaning of the text (and this is the *peshat* in the context of *ein mikra yotzei midei peshutto*) is determined by tradition to refer to monetary compensation. A second area in which Midrash influences Maimonides’ own biblical interpretation is a desire to demonstrate the halakha as being based in a more

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<sup>69</sup> For an example of the former, see Maimonides’ discussion of the midrashic reading of Deut. 4:6 in Principle #2 of his Introduction to the Book of Commandments (Cohen, “Gates”, 300 and “Talmudist”, 313); for the second, see Maimonides’ defense of the position taken in *Hilkhot Kiddushin* 1:1 in his Responsa #355 (Blau ed., II:631-632)

<sup>70</sup> Abraham Ibn Ezra. *Yesod Mora*, ed. Cohen and Simon, 130-131.

straightforward reading of the text. As noted by Isadore Twersky, Maimonides will often quote an obscure Midrash—and in some cases, even invent a new Midrash—in order to show how halakha is tied to a straightforward reading of scripture.<sup>71</sup>

At this point we can turn to Ramban, who wrote a critical commentary on Maimonides' *Book of the Commandments*. Ramban writes of what he believed to be Maimonides' that that only *peshat* readings of scripture are legitimate sources of Biblical law, that such as view "is shockingly beyond my comprehension, and I cannot bear it." Instead, Ramban insists that *peshat* is not to be taken as the exclusively legitimate interpretation, but rather both *peshat* and Midrash are, so to speak, 'holding on to the text.' Despite this strong condemnation of Maimonides' principle, however, Ramban's own view is not far from that of Maimonides. Both he and Maimonides will distinguish between genuine rabbinic exegesis and interpolations which are categorized as *asmakhtot*, and will often do so based upon their respective Talmudic readings (see Appendix A). Thus, Ramban will sometimes note that despite Ibn Ezra's categorization of Midrash as *asmakhta*, it is actually a legitimate use of *derash*,<sup>72</sup> and Ramban will also take issue with Rashi when he quotes a Midrash that is actually an *asmakhta* or rejected reading as if it were meant as exegesis.<sup>73</sup> Ramban also appears to share Maimonides' attempts to draw Midrash halakha closer to *peshat* by demonstrating that the Rabbis were based upon a reading beyond their stated interpolation. To take just one example of many, Ramban writes that the rabbinic

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<sup>71</sup> Twersky, Isadore. *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides* (Yale University Press, 1980), 57

<sup>72</sup> Compare Ibn Ezra and *Ramban, Commentary* to Ex. 20:8, 21:7, and Lev. 21:1-2

<sup>73</sup> Examples include *Commentary* to Gen. 9:4, Ex. 12:45 and Lev. 25:9; see particularly *Kitvei Ramban Chavel* ed., vol. I, 219. Like Maimonides, Ramban also appears willing to demote a midrashic reading to *asmakhta* based on his own judgement of the biblical text. Cf. *Commentary* to Deut. 25:6 regarding extortion, where Ramban's grappling with an apparent contradiction between *peshat* and *derash* leads him to suggest that the Midrash is an *asmakhta*. (Cf. *Commentary of Ramban to Book of Commandments* Principle #2 regarding Deut. 24:1 and Principle #3 where Ramban rejects Maimonides' categorization of *asmakhta* by arguing against his readings of certain Talmudic passages)

interpretation of Ex. 22:6, “if a man gives to his fellow silver or utensils to guard,” as referring to an unpaid custodian fits with the *peshat*, because silver and utensils are normally guarded for free.<sup>74</sup>

The true difference between Maimonides and Ramban is expressed in two ways. One is a purely legal distinction, in that midrashic readings which cannot be construed as *peshat* will be relegated to having rabbinic authority only in Maimonides’ halakha.<sup>75</sup> However, because Maimonides has a more expansive understanding of *peshat*, instances of such a difference are rare.<sup>76</sup> Because he felt that biblically mandated halakha could not contradict the *peshat*, he needed this more expansive definition to allow *peshat* to be broad enough as to include interpretations transmitted by the Rabbis under its label. Ramban, however, had no such constraints, because he saw even halakhic Midrash as distinct from *peshat* and was therefore free to utilize *peshat* as distinct from halakhic Midrash. Thus, a *peshat* according to Ramban could be entirely different than the halakha recorded by the sages. For example, the obligation “remember the Sabbath” could refer not only to making *Kiddush* in accordance with *derash*, but also *al derekh peshat* to require counting each weekday from Shabbat.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Other examples include Ramban’s comments to Ex. 21:1, 21:9, 21:36, 30:33, Lev. 3:9, 7:25, Num. 6:11, Deut 23:10 and Deut. 25:14.

<sup>75</sup> Cohen, “Gates” (2011), 375-380 and Halbertal, Moshe. *People of the Book: Canon, Meaning, and Authority*. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 63-72

<sup>76</sup> Examples of Maimonides’ unique position include *Hilkhot Kiddushin* 1:1 and his opinion in *Hilkhot Avel* 2:7

<sup>77</sup> *Commentary* Ex. 12:15 although cf. Tanhuma and Rashi ad loc. It is not entirely clear to what extent Ramban meant for these non-rabbinic scriptural readings to have any legal halakhic force. Yosi Erel, “Parshanut Peshat of Scripture and the Determined Halakha in the Work of Ramban,” [Hebrew] *JSIS* 8 (2009), 142 n. 97 quotes the Hassidic thinker Rabbi Zadok Hakohen as writing of Ramban’s methodology, “if we were to interpret the verses according to our heart’s reasoning, we would arrive at many new *halakhot* and every person would interpret [the Torah] according to his will, which was the mistake of the Karaites”

## V. Philosophy and Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*

In addition to his scholarly achievements, Ramban is also well known to history for his role in quieting a controversy that had ravaged Jewish intellectual life over the study of philosophy and the works of Maimonides in particular. There were several waves of such “Maimonidean Controversies,” one of which swept through Provence around the years 1230-1235. When the rabbis of northern France banned study of the *Guide of the Perplexed* and the first book of Maimonides' *Mishnah Torah*, a group of rabbis from Aragon responded by banning anyone who disparaged Maimonides or his works. Eventually, the controversy reaching a dramatic climax in the burning of Maimonides' books by the Dominicans of Montpellier. At that point Ramban stepped in, and he attempted to resolve the controversy by appealing to both sides of the debate, considering philosophy to have its uses in defending Judaism against its detractors, but was not to supplant study of Torah. Ramban is sure to refer to Maimonides with the greatest respect, but yet expresses a negative view of Maimonides' major philosophical work, *Guide of the Perplexed*, implying that it does not represent an accurate portrayal of Judaism.<sup>78</sup> Upon closer study of Ramban's works, however, one finds that he was in fact strongly influenced by both Maimonides' thought as well as by philosophy in general. Indeed, “in the Maimonidean controversy, Nahmanides was faced with a decision as complex as his own personality.”<sup>79</sup>

Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* is, by his own description, a book dedicated not so much to philosophy per se but “to explain the meanings of certain terms that occur in the

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<sup>78</sup> Raphael Jospe, “Faith and Reason: The Controversy Over Philosophy in Jewish History,” in *Jewish Philosophy: Foundations and Extensions, Volume One: General Questions and Considerations* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2008), 55–90

<sup>79</sup> Berger, David. “Nahmanides' Attitude toward Secular Learning and Its Bearing upon His Stance in the Maimonidean Controversy.” Unpublished Master's Thesis, Columbia University, 1965, 82

books of prophecy,” and “very obscure parables occurring in the books of the prophets.”<sup>80</sup> Ramban thus had several opportunities to criticize Maimonides’ views of these ‘obscure parables’ in his Torah Commentary. For example, Maimonides believed that every biblical account of human interaction with angels should be understood as having occurring in a dream. Regarding this, Ramban writes, “These words contradict Scripture; it is prohibited to listen to them or believe them.”<sup>81</sup> Similarly, in responding to Maimonides’ view that sacrifices were merely tolerated by God as a concession to the idolatrous nature of the early Israelites, he writes, (Lev. 1:9) “these words are nonsense, they make God’s table repulsive [in saying that sacrifices] are only to concede [*lit*: to rout out from the hearts of] the wicked and fools of the world, when Scripture states that they [sacrifices] are the burnt meal which are a ‘pleasant smell’ [and pleasing to God].” In both of these instances, Ramban sees Maimonides’ positions as being so incorrect as to verge on heresy.

Ramban appears to harbor even greater contempt for the views of the philosophers in general, disparaging them who blindly follow “the Greek one [Aristotle] who denied everything other than what he could feel.”<sup>82</sup> Avicenna is similarly disparaged as “the fool, Ben Sina.”<sup>83</sup> In multiple instances, however, Ramban utilizes natural philosophy in order to properly understand the biblical text upon which he is commenting. He begrudgingly accepts the identification of the rainbow as a natural phenomenon, and adjusts his interpretation of Gen. 9:12 accordingly. On how the embryo is fertilized, Ramban quotes both the opinion of the sages as well as that of the “Greek philosophers,” without clearly deciding between the two. Besides for in these two cases, medical and scientific knowledge are frequently referred

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<sup>80</sup> Maimonides, *Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. S. Pines (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 5-6

<sup>81</sup> *Commentary* to Gen. 18:1, literally “even to believe them”

<sup>82</sup> *Commentary* to Lev. 16:8. See also *Kitvei Ramban* Chavel ed., vol. I, 20, 147, 155-157, 194 vol. II, 287

<sup>83</sup> *Kitvei Ramban* 1:187

to by Ramban throughout his commentary.<sup>84</sup> It would appear, however, that Ramban makes a distinction that is today taken for granted even if that was not true in his own times; although Ramban is happy to accept statements of natural philosophy, what would today be referred to as ‘science’, he refuses to do so regarding questions of metaphysics, or what is still more closely associated with the term “philosophy” as understood today.<sup>85</sup> In those cases, where the true metaphysics is taught by the Torah, Ramban sees the philosophers’ arrogance as being at fault for them speculating beyond what is accessible to them without the Torah, and he therefore dismissed their opinions, although he would sometimes utilize their terminology.<sup>86</sup>

Upon inspection, Ramban’s relationship to Maimonides appears to be much warmer than this attitude towards the general philosophers, and in many cases (some of which will be discussed in the next section), Ramban and Maimonides seem to bear a close intellectual affinity. Besides for adopting many of his philosophical positions,<sup>87</sup> Ramban’s tone towards Maimonides in his letter concerning a ban over his writings is one of upmost reverence, and Ramban uses Maimonides’ views as the starting point for almost any philosophical discussion throughout his writings, even if he occasionally disagrees.<sup>88</sup> Many Maimonidean concepts are employed by Ramban in different ways or contexts. For example, whereas

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<sup>84</sup> See *Commentary* to Gen. 2:18, 17:17, 19:17, 30:32, 31:35, 45:26, 46:15, Ex. 22:30, 23:25, Lev. 1:14, 11:13, 12:4, 18:19, Num 8:4, 11:6, 21:9 and Deut 14:3

<sup>85</sup> Moshe Idel. “Nahmanides: Kabbalah, Halakhah and Spiritual Leadership,” *Jewish Mystical Leaders and Leadership in the Thirteenth Century*, ed. idem et al. (Northvale, NJ 1998), p. 54-58

<sup>86</sup> Idel, *ibid.* p. 56

<sup>87</sup> It should also be pointed out that Ramban adopts several positions or interpretations from R. Judah Halevi’s *Kuzari* as well. This work is quoted by name several times in Ramban’s writings, see his *Commentary* to Deut. 11:22, *Kitvei Ramban* 1:117, 147, 148, 151, 159. Additionally, Ramban writes to Deut. 18:15 that under normal circumstances, there cannot be prophecy outside of the land of Israel, perhaps echoing *Kuzari* 2:12-14.

<sup>88</sup> Idel, Moshe. “On Maimonides in Nahmanides and his school” in *Between Rashi and Maimonides: themes in medieval Jewish thought, literature and exegesis*, in Kanarfogel, Ephraim and Moshe Sokolow, ed. (Yeshiva University Press, 2010). See *Commentary* Lev. 17:1 and 18:19 besides the praises of Maimonides in his letter to the French rabbis. Ramban quotes Maimonides but disagrees relatively respectfully in his *Commentary* to Gen. 5:4, 34:13, 46:1, Lev. 17:1, and Num. 20:1.



Maimonides describes the manner in which prophets receive their prophecy as resulting from overflow of the Active Intellect, Ramban uses the same mechanism, but ascribes the process to God directly.<sup>89</sup> In some cases, Ramban actually extends Maimonides' thinking and supplies his positions with additional support. For example, Ramban interprets a rabbinic teaching from Pirkei d'Rebi Eliezer that had caused Maimonides great difficulty in a way that accords with Maimonides' own account of the creation story.<sup>90</sup> Similarly, Maimonides' presents his own theory of mitzvot, namely, that commandments have a discernable purpose, as being against a rabbinic position. Ramban, however, bolsters the thrust of Maimonides' opinion by showing how it is actually the unanimous position of the Talmudic sages.<sup>91</sup> Ramban even adopts Maimonides' anthropological-historical reasoning used to explain sacrifices (which, in that context, provoked Ramban's significant ire) in the context of other commandments, such as the prohibition of wearing a wool and linen garment.<sup>92</sup>

In order to explain this seemingly duplicitous treatment of Maimonides, therefore, David Berger concluded that it was not the study of philosophy per se that so displeased Ramban, but its presentation as an alternative to Torah study, as well as the efforts to use philosophy to prove the existence of God and the principles of Judaism. Thus, Ramban fully approved of the incorporation of philosophy in the first section of Maimonides' Code; "the *Sefer Hamadda*, in its literary context, reflects the harmony of speculation and religion; it

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<sup>89</sup> *Kitvei Ramban* I:187. See below Part 2, Section III regarding prophecy. Yair Lorberbaum, "Ramban's Kabbalah Regarding the Creation of Man in the Image of God," *Kabbalah* 5 (2000) p. 298, 302 sees this same analogy regarding the creation of the soul, in that Ramban replaces Maimonides' overflow of the Active Intellect with God Himself.

<sup>90</sup> Maimonides *Guide of the Perplexed* 2:26 finds a passage in the aforementioned Midrash (Ch. 3) to be very difficult, but Ramban sees it as corresponding to his own interpretation of the first chapter of Genesis. See Ramban, *Commentary* to Gen. 1:8 and *Kitvei Ramban* 1:157

<sup>91</sup> *Commentary* to Deut. 22:6

<sup>92</sup> *Commentary* Deut. 22:11. Of course, there is a significant difference between providing a historical reason for a negative prohibition and presuming that God would forever command a positive act for merely historical reasons.

represents a synthesis of religion and philosophy through the literary medium of halakhot... it is, in short, Torah itself,” but felt that the *Guide of the Perplexed* was too dangerous, as “it represented a *form* of speculative thought of which Nahmanides disapproved, a form which did not clearly begin the process of speculation from the foundation of religious premises... which was willing to debate the problem of *creation ex nihilo* as if it were an open question.”<sup>93</sup> It is interesting to note that in rejecting some of the more philosophical positions of Maimonides (or, for that matter, of Aristotle) Ramban will do so by pointing out logical flaws in the philosophical argument, or attack Maimonides’ biblical readings by writing that they contradict the text, as evidenced by both instances quoted above (regarding angels and sacrifices).<sup>94</sup> In other words, he appears to be less concerned with negating philosophy in general than merely showing that in particular instances, rationalism was taken too far.

## **VI. Kabbalah: Mysticism and Symbolism**

At this point it is clear that Ramban grapples with multiple issues of interpretation. He seeks, most basically, to understand the meaning of the Torah’s words, but he also inquires as to their purpose, the meaning of the relevant midrashic material, and the meaning of so many literary and textual elements that have eluded his predecessors. In order to solve these questions, Ramban draws on his extensive knowledge of halakha and considerable creativity, but he also draws upon a completely different canon—the “way of truth,” or esoteric tradition. In the introduction to his commentary, Ramban warns that he is including

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<sup>93</sup> Berger, “Nahmanides’ Attitude,” 89-90

<sup>94</sup> In fact, regarding the prohibition of eating blood, Ramban writes (to Lev. 17:11) that Maimonides’ interpretation is sensible, but is not represented to in the biblical text

esoteric material only by way of hinting, and it is meant to be understood only by those have already been initiated by way of oral teaching.

Several scholars have wondered why Ramban include such esoteric interpretations at all, if it is not meant to be understood by the vast majority of his readers. Moshe Halbertal has strengthened this question, writing that especially considering that Ramban is so strict regarding his esotericism position, in that he believed that no kabbalistic secrets should be taught at all if not through an oral tradition. Why did Ramban not take the approach of similar scholars of his age, such as Rabad of Posquieres and his own uncle Rabbi Jonah Gerondi, who never made any reference to esoteric wisdom at all?<sup>95</sup> Gershom Scholem theorized that by discussing the kabbalah but referring to it as hidden and true wisdom, Ramban gave the kabbalah an allure meant to increase its popularity.<sup>96</sup> Moshe Idel argued that perhaps Ramban meant to merely inform the public of this esoteric tradition and its authority even without explain its principles, in order to assure his readers of the Torah's immense mystical and metaphysical importance.<sup>97</sup> Daniel Abrams has suggested,<sup>98</sup> based on Idel's work, that Ramban meant to rival the contemporaneous kabbalistic school of R. Isaac the Blind, and therefore sought to expose enough of his teachings to make clear that his tradition is different than that of the competing Geronese kabbalists.

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<sup>95</sup> Moshe Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation: Esotericism in Jewish Thought and its Philosophical Implications* (Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 85-92

<sup>96</sup> Scholem, Gershom. *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Princeton, 1987), 385

<sup>97</sup> Moshe Idel, "Nahmanides: Kabbalah, Halakhah and Spiritual Leadership," *Jewish Mystical Leaders and Leadership in the Thirteenth Century*, ed. idem et al. (Northvale, NJ 1998), 40, 60-62

<sup>98</sup> Daniel Abrams, "Orality in the Kabbalistic School of Nahmanides," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 2 (1995),

David Berger and Mordechai Cohen however,<sup>99</sup> have pointed out that, in context, Ramban most often offers kabbalistic interpretations in order to uphold the honor of the Torah and the Sages, in other words, in order to solve exegetical questions that are otherwise only explained with great difficulty and perhaps unsatisfactorily. Halbertal notes that this is very similar to how Ramban himself explains (to Gen. 1:1) why the Torah taught the story of Genesis, despite it being fully understandable only to those initiates of kabbalah. There, he writes that at least the basic idea, that God created the world out of nothing, is important enough to be imparted to the masses. Of course, the point should not be missed that Ramban felt that these interpretations in themselves represent the deepest meanings of the biblical verse, and so perhaps he felt that a true Torah commentary would be incomplete if it were to ignore this tradition of interpretation entirely. Ramban might simply have been motivated by a desire to teach the Torah to whomever would be receptive to his teachings, even if that constituency may be few in number because of the nature of subject and the necessary prerequisites to its understanding.

The first area of exegetical difficulty that Ramban solves by recourse to kabbalah is in simple, *peshat* problems, where the most basic reading of the text is difficult to resolve using a *peshat* methodology alone.<sup>100</sup> This may be true for syntactical obscurities, such as the description of the levirate as “rising in the name of his deceased brother,” or the requirement that sacrifices be made “to the fire,” or due to narrative enigmas, such as in clarifying the dialogue between God and Moses in the aftermath of the Golden Calf or in identifying the sin

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<sup>99</sup> Berger, “Nahmanides’ Attitude,” 63 and Mordechai Cohen, “Interpreting “The Resting Of the Shekhinah”: Exegetical Implications Of The Theological Debate Among Maimonides, Nahmanides, And Sefer Ha-Hinnukh” in *The Temple of Jerusalem: From Moses to the Messiah* (Brill, 2011), 243-262

<sup>100</sup> That this is often Ramban’s objective in quoting kabbalah was noticed by Funkenstein, Septimus and Berger, but developed at much greater length by Eliot Wolfson, “By Way of Truth: Aspects of Nahmanides’ Kabbalistic Hermeneutic” *AJS Review* 14:1 (Autumn 1989). His analysis serves as the basis for much of this section.

of Aaron's sons.<sup>101</sup> Ramban is also able to quote mystical explanations for a Midrash that otherwise completely defies interpretation, and is thereby able to defend even the most fantastical Midrash from its rationalistic detractors. Thus, the reader of Ramban's commentary is told that the Sages' statement that Abraham had a daughter named "Bakol," or their saying that the world was created for the sake of the mitzvah of first-fruits, actually contain deep mystical secrets.<sup>102</sup> Philosophical problems as well, such as the role of angels, the meaning of divine presence, the nature of God's knowledge and His names, and the problem of anthropomorphic descriptions of God which so concerned Maimonides—all of these are given explanations based on kabbalah that fit seamlessly with the biblical text.<sup>103</sup> In all of these cases, the average reader is not meant to understand that interpretation put forth by Ramban, but the knowledge that it exists ensures that the reader knows to treat the Torah and the Midrash with the reverence they deserve.

Not every mystical comment made by Ramban is done so as a solution to an exegetical problem, and because Ramban believed these mystical comments to be part and parcel of any true interpretation of the Torah, questions of motivation are perhaps misplaced. However, it also appears to be the case that where kabbalah is not used to solve some textual or narrative difficulty, Ramban does appear to use these interpretations in order to impress upon the reader the awesome sanctity of Torah and its laws, and in these cases Ramban is usually more illustrative.<sup>104</sup> It is in this vein that even after offering a rationalistic reasoning for certain mitzvot, Ramban will provide another interpretation based upon kabbalah,

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<sup>101</sup> Ramban, *Commentary* to Deut. 25:6, Lev. 1:6, Ex. 33:12ff and Num. 20:1 respectively

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.* to Gen. 18:1 and 1:1

<sup>103</sup> In many of these instances, Ramban first quotes Maimonides' explanation before offering his own mystical one. See Ramban to Ex. 14:19 (as well as Gen. 18:1 and Ex. 33:12), Gen. 46:1, Ex. 6:2, and again Gen. 46:1 respectively

<sup>104</sup> In line with Idel's view, quoted above n. 68, especially regarding Ramban's comment quoted ad loc.

granting these mitzvot or actions mystical significance.<sup>105</sup> Similarly, the locations, time periods, and objects that are the focus of the Torah's rituals are imbued with great mystical meaning, such as the significance of Jerusalem, the Land of Israel, the Ten Days of Repentance, and the vessels of the Tabernacle.<sup>106</sup> Ramban also references the kabbalah in order to bestow greater significance to the Torah's narrative that is otherwise either mundane or lacks clear religious value. The stories of the Garden of Eden and the promise of Israel's future material success do refer to real, this-worldly events, but they also hint to supernal realms and spiritual rewards.<sup>107</sup> The attempt to uncover the religious meaning in the stories of the patriarchs was already identified as a midrashic influence begun by Radak, but using the same symbolic reading, Ramban was able to take this much farther than Radak's moral instructions. Building upon midrashic allusions to this effect, Ramban develops what Gershom Scholem would refer to as a "historiosophy," explaining that the actions and events that befell the forefathers of Israel prefigure all of Jewish history (to be discussed further in the next section).<sup>108</sup>

Such an approach allows Ramban not only to explain the great significance of these biblical narratives, but also fits seamlessly with his literary sensitivity to thematic structure. As mentioned earlier, one of the more unique features of Ramban's commentary, beyond that of Rashi, Ibn Ezra, and the like, is the attention that he allots to such matters of literary

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<sup>105</sup> For some examples, see Lev. 1:9, 18:6, 18:21, 18:29 19:19, and 23:24.

<sup>106</sup> Ramban to Gen. 14:18, Lev. 18:25, Lev. 23:24, and Ex. 25:24

<sup>107</sup> Ramban to Gen. 3:22 and Lev. 26:16. See Elliot Wolfson, "By Way of Truth: Aspects of Nahmanides' Kabbalistic Hermeneutic" *AJS Review* 14:1 (Autumn 1989), 110-125 regarding this "ontological parallelism"

<sup>108</sup> Dan, Joseph. "Gershom Scholem—Between History and Historiosophy," *Binah* 2 (1989), 219–249 and Funkenstein, Amos. "Ramban's Typological Interpretations" [Hebrew] *Zion* 40 (1942), 35-59. Funkenstein places Ramban's symbolic readings in the context of Christian *figurae* and typologies, interpretations of which he was likely aware. On Ramban's relationship to Christian interpretation, see Touitou, E. "The Controversy with the Christians in Nahmanides' Commentary on the Pentateuch," [Hebrew] *Shnaton: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies* (2010), 137-166 and Rosenwasser, M. Y. "Ramban's Commentary to the Torah in Light of his Confrontation with Christianity (I, II)" [Hebrew] *Mayan* 47-48 (Shaalvim, 2007)

structure, sequence, and voice. Mystical secrets provide Ramban with greater means to show how, for example, the first two books of the Torah can be considered to each be centered on a single theme. The entirety of the book of Genesis can be accurately referred to as the Book of Creation—despite creation being described only in the opening two chapters—once one recognizes that the travails of the forefathers are also acts of ‘creation’ in the sense that they lay the seeds for all of history.<sup>109</sup> Such a theosophic reading is possible because of the spiritual parallel that is inherent in even the most mundane descriptions of the lives of the forefathers. Sequence of passages might also have an explanation only through *kabbalah*. Ramban recognizes how the Tabernacle’s utensils and walls are described in order beginning from those that are to be placed in the innermost chamber and moving towards the outside, concluding with the outer walls themselves and finally the priestly clothing, but the Incense Alter is described last, even after the garments. In order to explain this sequential oddity, Ramban draws upon a mystical secret in order to explain the text (Ex. 30:1).

## Part 2. Philosophical and Theological Topics in Ramban’s Commentary

This study will now turn to presenting certain topics in Ramban’s thought as it is expressed primarily, though not exclusively, in his Torah commentary. Before doing so, however, it is important to note a few factors that make this effort both difficult and somewhat speculative, although hopefully not fruitless. One is the fact that Ramban himself did not present his philosophy in any systematic matter,<sup>110</sup> and while this doesn’t necessarily

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<sup>109</sup> In the same vein, Exodus is entirely a Book of Redemption because full redemption requires the building of the Tabernacle. See Ramban’s introduction to the book of Exodus and his comments to Gen. 2:3 regarding creation in general.

<sup>110</sup> Moshe Idel, “Nahmanides: Kabbalah, Halakha, and Spiritual Leadership,” *Jewish Mystical Leaders and Leadership in the Thirteenth Century*, ed. idem et al. (Northvale, NJ 1998), p. 58-60 believes that Ramban was deliberately unsystematic, because presenting his theology in a comprehensive manner would make it too

indicate that Ramban himself was an unsystematic thinker, integrating disparate statements over a wide range of contexts still requires significant amounts of interpretations.<sup>111</sup> Additionally, just as in his interpretations of scripture where Ramban is perfectly comfortable explaining the verse on multiple levels and presenting alternative readings even when they are mutually exclusive, this same tendency to allow for multiple possibilities is often reflected in his thought as well.<sup>112</sup> For example, in Ramban's work on theodicy (the "problem of evil"), *Sha'ar ha-Gemul*, he offers multiple solutions to this crucial problem, each with different philosophical implications. Although Ramban does show that certain positions have advantages over others, he gives the impression that he is not necessarily taking a definitive position.<sup>113</sup> Even when Ramban does posit some interesting theological theory, advances a particular thought, or provides an interpretation of a verse which presupposes some philosophical stance, one cannot be certain if Ramban would adhere to this position absolutely.

A third impediment towards presenting a comprehensive philosophy of Ramban is that so many of his theologically crucial comments are esoteric in nature, written intentionally cryptically in order so as not to divulge the "secrets of the Torah," as he calls

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similar to that of the philosophers, as well as violate Ramban's own insistence upon absolute secrecy regarding mystical teachings. Additionally, this non-systematic presentation allowed for both greater flexibility on Ramban's part, who was able to explain each concept as-is without being beholden to account for variations within his own work, as well as allow for his commentary to gain a greater influence, as his non-scholastic treatments were thus less doctrinal. On the other hand, it should be noted that Ramban's *Torat Hashem Temimah*, while not as systematic as Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, is nevertheless rather close to a comprehensive treatment of the major elements of Ramban's thought. This study, however, will be concerned with Ramban's *Commentary to the Torah*.

<sup>111</sup> This essay will assume that, for the most part, Ramban was essentially consistent in his views despite what may sometimes appear as superficial contradictions. Ofir and Jacobs, in their extraordinary study of the updates and variations that Ramban made to his own commentary, show that some of the apparent contradictions in his commentary are attributable to earlier or later versions that Ramban simply did not edit out when updating his works. See xx

<sup>112</sup> See Moshe Halbertal, *Al Derekh ha-Emet: ha-Ramban ve-Yetsiratah shel Masoret* (Shalom Hartman Institute: Jerusalem, 2006) p. 66-72. Although he discusses only multiple possible legal interpretations of the Torah, it seems reasonable to assume that this would be true of theological positions as well.

<sup>113</sup> *Kitvei Ramban II*, xxx



them. For the most part, we will heed Ramban's own warning in the introduction to his commentary not to delve too deeply into such secrets, but the theological importance of some of these esoteric doctrines make avoiding them entirely nearly impossible. In those cases, I rely on contemporary scholars such as Eliot Wolfson and Moshe Halbertal, who in turn carry on a long tradition of interpretation of Ramban's "secrets," beginning with his own students.<sup>114</sup> Mostly, however, recourse to these esoteric hints will not be fully explained or developed, but rather used to show how even without understanding the deeper meaning behind these hints and how they cohere with Ramban's general philosophy, the mystical secret (whatever it may be) is clearly meant to solve a problem either in the text or in understanding the cogency or Ramban's opinion. If nothing else, it is hoped that such a presentation will at the very least prove that Ramban's commentary offers a sophisticated theological framework for understanding Judaism and its central texts.<sup>115</sup>

## **I. Foundational Principles of Judaism**

To speak of Maimonides in the context of biblical interpretation or as a halakhic authority is important in any discussion of medieval Jewish scholarship, but when discussing medieval Jewish philosophy or theology, the figure of Maimonides is not just important but essential. In attempting to assess the contributions of Ramban in this area,<sup>116</sup> comparison to

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<sup>114</sup> A bibliography of sorts listing some of this early interpretive literature can be found in Daniel Abrams, "Orality in the Kabbalistic School of Nahmanides," *Jewish Studies Quarterly* 2 (1995), pp. 85-102, and in Havivah Pedaya, *Cyclical Time and Holy Text* [Hebrew] (Am Oved Publishers: Tel Aviv, 2003), pp. 98-119

<sup>115</sup> "Nahmanides clearly saw his Pentateuchal commentary as a vehicle for providing theological and legal guidance for laymen whose time for study was limited." Yaakov Elman, "It Is No Empty Thing: Nahmanides and the Search for Omnisignificance." *The Torah U-Madda Journal* 4 (1993), 64. Even when not referenced directly, it should be noted that this section owes much to David Novak, *The Theology of Nahmanides Systematically Presented* (Brown University Press, 1992) and Moshe Halbertal, *Al Derekh ha-Emet: Ramban ve-Yetsirato shel Masoret* (Shalom Hartman Institute: Jerusalem, 2006)

<sup>116</sup> This section draws substantially from Chaim Hanoach, "*Ha-Ramban ke-Hoker u-ke-Mekubal*" (Jerusalem, 1999)

the views and system of Maimonides not only helps to provide the proper contextual framework to appreciate Ramban's philosophy, but Ramban himself was often explicit in articulating his theological opinions as responding to statements of Maimonides. When compared to the system of Maimonides, one fascinating feature of Ramban's system deserves to be mentioned at the outset: while Maimonides' work appears to be intent upon showing the rational and philosophical basis of the Torah by demonstrating how well it fits a philosophical system, Ramban is interested in showing how, to borrow Hermann Cohen's phrase, a "religion of reason" emerges organically "out of the sources of Judaism," that is, the Bible and Talmud. The fact that Maimonides wrote a book of Jewish philosophy (albeit one that is heavily involved in biblical exegesis) and Ramban wrote a commentary to the Torah seems to reflect not only a difference in presentation or style, but is indicative of a more deep-seated dissimilarity between their two approaches: Ramban was less interested in theology as its own discipline than he was in studying the Torah with a philosophical eye; he sought not "not a religious philosophy, but a philosophical religion."<sup>117</sup>

The bedrock of Maimonides' philosophy, as evident from even a casual reading of his magisterial work *Guide for the Perplexed*, is that the core of Judaism is the attainment of a proper definition and conception of God. The Bible itself appears to be most concerned with the prohibition of idolatry, and Maimonides sees himself as translating this preoccupation with monotheism into philosophical terminology and imbuing it with philosophical importance. At the same time, however, such a view of religion clearly has philosophical antecedents, especially in Aristotle and Al-Farabi.<sup>118</sup> For Maimonides, monotheism is both

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<sup>117</sup> David Berger, "Maimonides' Attitude," 4. See also Joseph B. Soloveitchik, *Halakhic Mind* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1998), 98 who clearly has the same impression.

<sup>118</sup> See Howard Kreisel, *Maimonides' Political Thought: Studies in Ethics, Law, and the Human Ideal* (SUNY Press: Albany, NY 1999) for a near-comprehensive treatment of this subject. This understanding of Maimonides

the alpha and omega of the Jewish religion: a minimum of theological correctness and recognition of God is a prior necessity to be included in the People of Israel,<sup>119</sup> and yet the final and ultimate objective of the Jewish religion is the true knowledge and constant apprehension of God.<sup>120</sup> Maimonides' particular conception of God and how it relates to his understanding of Judaism will be discussed in the next section, but first it would be instructive to discuss Maimonides' view that belief in a single, incorporeal God represent a foundational doctrine of Judaism, a 'dogma,' so to speak.

The very fact that Judaism is built upon fundamental beliefs (whether regarding God or otherwise) which are necessary prerequisites for the practitioner of Judaism may not be an invention of Maimonides, but it is also not necessarily intuitive, and there were those who either implicitly or explicitly disagreed with such an approach.<sup>121</sup> Ramban, for his part, does take Maimonides' position that Judaism is built upon foundational beliefs for granted,<sup>122</sup> to the point where he wonders why Rashi would question the importance of the first chapter of Genesis. Is it not evident, writes Ramban, that belief in the creation of the world is a necessary prerequisite for acceptance of the entire Torah, and thus of paramount importance?<sup>123</sup> Such an assumption echoes Maimonides' insistence that inclusion in the

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as placing knowledge of God as the most prominent feature of the religion of the Torah is also informed by Kenneth Seeskin, *Maimonides: A Guide for Today's Perplexed* (Behrman House, 1991)

<sup>119</sup> Maimonides *Introduction to Perek Heilek* ed. J. Kafih, 206

<sup>120</sup> Maimonides *Guide of the Perplexed*, especially III, 51-53. Regarding this, see Harry Wolfson, "Maimonides and the Unity and Incorporeality of God." *Jewish Quarterly Review* 56:2 (October 1956), 112-136 and Howard Kreisel, "Intellectual Perfection, Knowledge of God, and the Role of the Law" in *Maimonides' Political Thought: Studies in Ethics, Law, and the Human Ideal* (SUNY Press: Albany, NY 1999).

<sup>121</sup> See Menachem Kellner, *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Oxford University Press, 1986) and Marc Shapiro, *The Limits of Jewish Theology: Maimonides' Thirteen Principles Reappraised* (Littman Library, 2004).

<sup>122</sup> *Commentary* to Gen. 1:1. Cf. *Commentary* to Ex. 13:16 and Deut. 6:4 where Ramban speaks of "the roots of faith"

<sup>123</sup> "There is a great need to begin the Torah with 'In the beginning, God created,' because this is the root of belief, and [one] who does not believe this and thinks that the world is eternal denies the fundamental [principle] and does not have Torah whatsoever." Ramban, *Commentary* to Genesis 1:1.

Jewish people necessitates that one first accept certain foundational dogmas. Maimonides, and to an even greater extent R. Joseph Albo in his fifteenth century work *Sefer Ha-Ikkarim*, bring scriptural verses as sources for the principles, but ultimately, the principles are understood to be the collective philosophical foundation of Judaism. Thus, Maimonides insists on believing in an incorporeal God because it is a logical corollary of God's eternity and omnipotence, and believes in creation as a necessarily consequence of God having performed miracles and continuous providence over mankind.<sup>124</sup>

However, if we were to inquire as to the source of Ramban's intuition that the Torah necessitates belief in God and His creation fundamental creeds, it is doubtful that he would have pointed to their philosophical prominence. Instead, Ramban indicates that a close reading of the Bible indicates that idolatry is not merely an important prohibition, but a foundational one, in the sense that the entire Torah is founded upon an aversion to idolatry and an adherence to monotheism. Two specific passages in the Torah clue one in to this fact. One is the structure and scriptural context of the Decalogue, which begins with belief in God and the prohibition of idolatry. Ramban is explicit in showing that these commandments are first not merely because of their importance, but because they underlie the entire Torah; *all* of its commandments can be seen as being built upon this foundation of monotheism, and this is how Judaism was introduced by God to its first initiates, the Israelites who left Egypt.<sup>125</sup> Another indication of the foundational nature of idolatry is Ramban's reading of Numbers 15:22. Although the verse literally speaks of a sacrifice for "forgetting the entire Torah," the Rabbinic-halakhic reading of the verse sees it as referring to the sin of idolatry. In reconciling

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<sup>124</sup> Menachem Kellner, *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Oxford University Press, 1986)

<sup>125</sup> Ramban, *Commentary* Ex. 20:1, 20:4, 21:1 and 22:2

the rabbinic reading with its literal words, Ramban explains that idolatry represents a corruption of the Torah's fundamental beliefs, a "forgetting" of the entire Torah.

The fact that Maimonides sees dogmas as philosophical principles while Ramban sees them as being implied by the Torah expresses itself in at least one important practical differences between their two systems. Because Maimonides is convinced of the importance of monotheism from a philosophical perspective, then it is the philosophical notion of God which is demanded by the Torah: belief a God without any bodily or physical features is an absolute necessity for acceptance into Judaism, even if such a conception is borne more out of philosophical than Jewish sources.<sup>126</sup> For Ramban, however, the principle concern of the Torah's dogma is the belief in the God of the Torah, a being who is identified with the exodus from Egypt and the divine lawgiver.<sup>127</sup> The God that a Jew must believe is He who is "first, from Him originated everything through His will and power, and He is God in the sense that we are obligated to serve Him."<sup>128</sup> Thus, for Ramban, it is crucial that God is perceived not as the solution to a philosophical riddle regarding the origin of the universe, but as the object of religious worship. In fact, Ramban may go so far as to say that one who believes in a corporeal God, despite being incorrect, is not to be branded a heretic for having

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<sup>126</sup> In *Guide* 2:24, Maimonides writes that if it were philosophically necessary to reinterpret the Bible as teaching in the eternity of the universe, he would be able to do so, "just as we did regarding verses indicating God's corporeality." Thus, it appears that although Maimonides is convinced that his biblical interpretations are correct in not truly ascribing physical features to God, it was his philosophical position (which he felt had been proven to the point of certainty) which drove him to his particular understanding of the verses ascribing to God various qualities. The incorporeality of God, therefore, is more accurately seen as stemming from philosophy than from the Bible.

<sup>127</sup> Ramban, *Glosses to Maimonides' Book of Commandments*, Positive Command #1 and Negative Command #5

<sup>128</sup> Ramban, *Commentary* to Ex. 20:2

such a view, because although corporeality may be a philosophical impossibility for an eternal God, belief in His incorporeality is not as essential to serving Him.<sup>129</sup>

Perhaps an even more prominent point of divergence between these two medieval sages concerns the place of the Exodus from Egypt in the system of beliefs. Maimonides does not count belief in the Exodus as a principle of Judaism at all, despite the fact that elsewhere he admits that fulfillment of the commandments is based upon the historical Exodus.<sup>130</sup> The reason for this omission appears to be that Maimonides felt that, as a historical event, the Exodus itself is thus not a timeless philosophical truth, and therefore despite it being the bedrock of Jewish observance, it is still not a “principle of Judaism.”<sup>131</sup> Thus, these principles of Judaism are, for Maimonides, philosophical tenets much more than they may be related to actual Jewish life. Although Ramban never collected his “principles” into a comprehensive list for easy reference, it is clear from several of his comments that if he were to have done so, belief in the Exodus would have appeared prominently on that list. Ramban considers belief in the Exodus to be *the* fundamental teaching of the entire Torah. He writes that this must be the case, because the Torah consistently refers back to this even as the reason why Israel must adhere to the commandments of God—because He took them out of Egypt.<sup>132</sup> In explaining this biblical phenomenon (i.e. the fact that the Bible has multiple exhortations to remember the Exodus), Ramban writes that the Exodus is what established Israel as God’s people and created the debt that Israel owes to God, which is to be repaid through fulfillment to His commandments. The Exodus is therefore very literally the

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<sup>129</sup> Cf. *Kitvei Ramban* xxx where Ramban does indicate that one who believes in a corporeal God, while certainly incorrect, should not be considered a heretic for such a view.

<sup>130</sup> Maimonides, *Hilkhot Geneivah* end of Chapter 7:12

<sup>131</sup> Kellner, *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought*, p. 23-25

<sup>132</sup> See especially Ramban, *Commentary* to Ex. 13:16

principle foundation of Judaism, in the sense that it is the reason for any Jew to observe to his religious obligations.

Besides the ‘foundation of the law’ that is the dogma of God’s existence, Ramban also supposes that a Jew is required to believe in the creation of the world *ex nihilo*. From a purely philosophical standpoint, there seems to be no reason for such a principle, and in fact Maimonides himself is not entirely clear on this point.<sup>133</sup> Ramban, however, is concerned with the principles of Judaism as they would appear from the Bible, and considering the prominent place which is afforded to the story of the world’s creation, namely, that it is the Bible’s opening passage, considering it to be a foundational belief is perfectly reasonable. Ramban sees another biblical hint to the primacy of belief in creation *ex nihilo* in the Torah’s repeated insistence on keeping the Shabbat, which is inextricably linked with belief in God’s creation of the world in six literal days.<sup>134</sup> Why this is a foundational belief, and not merely an important one, can best be understood in light of another set of beliefs that Ramban identifies as required by the Torah: the belief in providence, miracles, and God’s omnipotence.<sup>135</sup> According to Ramban, only a world which was created *ex nihilo* allows for the possibility of God’s miraculous intervention.<sup>136</sup> Thus, belief in creation is necessary for belief in miracles and in God’s providence, which in turn is a foundation of the entire Torah, which consistently promises material success or devastation as a result of man’s actions. These beliefs (in creation, providence, and the omnipotence of God) are all adduced from scriptural verses that all contained the word “to know,” further tightening the knot between

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<sup>133</sup> Regarding Maimonides on creation, see most recently Kenneth Seeskin, ed. *Maimonides on the Origin of the World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005)

<sup>134</sup> Ramban, *Commentary* to Ex. 20:8 and Lev. 19:30. This might explain Ramban’s motivation for insisting on reading the six days of creation as literal days of 24 hours each (in his *Commentary* to Gen. 1:1).

<sup>135</sup> This and the following few sentences refer to Ramban’s *Commentary* to Ex. 13:16

<sup>136</sup> Berger (“Nahmanides’ Attitude,” 25) notes that in this matter Ramban is following both R. Saadiah (*Emunot ve-De’ot* I) and R. Judah Halevi (*Kuzari* I, 91 and II, 50)

dogmas and the Torah.<sup>137</sup> In this context, Ramban also lists belief in prophecy, a direct consequence of believing in the miraculous history of the exodus. All of these are foundational beliefs in the sense that there are necessary prerequisites for accepting the Torah, but not in the Maimonidean sense of being necessary for man's intellectual perfection.<sup>138</sup> Thus, while it is true that Ramban discusses "principles of Judaism," and in their enumeration agrees largely with Maimonides, his perspective on these foundations is entirely different.

## II. *Shekhinah*—The Divine Presence

As already mentioned, Maimonides makes the 'divine science,' the correct conception and understanding of God, the cornerstone of his philosophical system. Belief in an incorporeal God, Maimonides thought, should be obvious to anyone with even a basic Torah education, because the popular translation of the Bible, sanctioned by the Rabbis and known as *Targum Onkelus*, consistently avoids describing God using terminology that would indicate physicality.<sup>139</sup> However, for Maimonides, a true conception of God meant not only a rejection of any direct physical description, but includes rejecting ascribing any positive attributes to God whatsoever, because doing so implies change or corporeality in God. A Jew hearing this for the first time might be rather surprised by such a doctrine, considering the numerous apparent descriptions of God throughout the biblical writings, and Maimonides thus spends about a third of his *Guide of the Perplexed* offering new readings of the Bible to

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<sup>137</sup> Ramban (to Gen 12:2) indicates that the principle of creation *ex nihilo* and belief in the Torah's authenticity are actually inter-dependent, both relying upon the other, because we only know of creation through the Torah

<sup>138</sup> This distinction (though without mention of Ramban) is explored by Menachem Kellner in his introduction to Abarbanel, *Rosh Amanah* (Bar Ilan University Press, 1993). Kellner's description of Maimonides' view, however, may not be entirely correct; see Maimonides *Guide of the Perplexed* 3:27-28 for example

<sup>139</sup> Maimonides *Guide of the Perplexed* I, 35



negate any indication of God's corporeality or possibility of change. Some of Maimonides' biblical readings are ingenious; some are thoroughly convincing, but many others are less so. Ultimately, Maimonides admits that even while the Bible does not actually advance a belief in a corporeal or emotional God, it is nonetheless intentionally ambiguous in not dispelling such beliefs explicitly for the sake of the general populace at the era of its revelation who were unable to conceive of an incorporeal God.<sup>140</sup>

A corollary to Maimonides' view of anthropomorphic representations is his view of the *Shekhinah*, of the physical manifestation of God's "glory" described in the Bible.<sup>141</sup> For Maimonides, as for Saadiah, (*Emunot ve-De'ot* 2, 18) the cloud that appeared in the desert or on Mount Sinai to represent God's glory (cf. Ex. 16:10, 24:16) and His "glory which filled the Tabernacle" (Ex. 40:35) are all clouds which God created—entirely separate from Him—for the people of Israel to better be conscious of His existence. According to Maimonides, "glory" can sometimes refer to a created symbol of God's light, such as the cloud of Sinai and the Tabernacle, and sometimes it refers to the ability for man to apprehend God. Maimonides admits that sometimes the Bible will use this word in order to refer to God Himself, but it never has such a meaning in a context involving a physical representation or spatial-temporal manifestation.<sup>142</sup>

Ramban's discussion of this issue (*Comm.* to Gen. 46:1) begins with his disagreeing with Maimonides regarding the Targum's avoidance of corporeal descriptions of God—in

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<sup>140</sup> Cf. Maimonides *Guide of the Perplexed* 1:26, 1:33, 1:35

<sup>141</sup> The term *Shekhinah* itself is never used in biblical literature. On its development from biblical sources, see <http://www.biu.ac.il/JH/Parasha/pekudey/hor.html>. Cf. Saadiah, *Emunot V'Deot* 2:12, *Saadya's Commentary to Genesis*, ed. M. Zucker (New York, 1984), 175-176, *Kuzari* 4:3, Maimonides *Guide* I, 11, 25, 46, and 64, Alexander Altmann, *Studies in Religious Philosophy and Mysticism* (Ithaca, 1969), 152-155

<sup>142</sup> Maimonides *Guide of the Perplexed* I, 19, I, 25, and I, 64. See Simon Rawidowicz, "On Corporeality in Rasag and Maimonides" [Hebrew] *Hebrew Studies in Jewish Thought* (Jerusalem 1969)

fact, Ramban writes, the Targum does not share Maimonides' philosophical concerns at all. However, Ramban certainly does not believe that God does have a physical form, and the reader expects him to provide an alternative explanation for why the Bible (and perhaps even Targum) speak as if God does have physical form and limitations. Instead, not only does Ramban appear to ignore this fundamental problem that was clearly a great concern for Maimonides, but he continues by further compounding the issue, insisting, "Heaven forbid that the thing called *Shekhinah* or 'glory' [*kavod nivra*] is anything other than God, gloried and exalted [*hashem ha-nikhbad yitbarakh*]," implying that even when the verses speak of God's glory as being limited or manifest in a particular time and place, it refers to God Himself. This claim appears to border dangerously on corporeality, a view that, as already mentioned, Ramban himself considers to be heretical:<sup>143</sup> if God's glory 'filled the Tabernacle' and His glory is to be identified with God himself, does that not imply that God was in fact *inside* the Tabernacle and not outside of it, and so God was spatially limited? Ramban assures his reader that the solution is a mystical one, and that only someone privy to the secrets of the Torah will understand the true reason for why it speaks of God in anthropomorphic terms and depicts the *Shekhinah* as God Himself. Due to its relative prominence and pervasiveness in Ramban's commentary,<sup>144</sup> however, we will permit ourselves to offer some exploratory comments in understanding this esoteric doctrine.

In addition to the issues outlined above, Ramban appears to closely associate the *Shekhinah* with biblical appearances of angels. Although Ramban appears to insist that the

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<sup>143</sup> *Kitvei Ramban* I, 344-346

<sup>144</sup> Ramban himself identifies the *Shekhinah* with God's glory as it was revealed at Sinai and through the Tabernacle which they built there (*Commentary* to Ex. 19:9, 21:6, and his Introduction to the book of Exodus), as well as with God's glory that guided the forefathers Abraham Isaac and Jacob, and as the glory to be revealed in the redemption "at the end of days." (*Commentary* to Lev. 26:12. Cf. Comm. to Gen. 2:8, 6:6, 46:1 and to Deut. 21:22)

*Shekhinah* is not independent of God, the term “*kavod*,” which he uses to refer to the *Shekhinah* (in his commentary to Gen. 18:1, 46:1 and Deut. 18:5) is also used by him to refer to angels. The reverse is also true, where Ramban uses the term “*malakh Hashem*,” or “angel of God,” to refer to what in context appears to not be an angel at all, but the *Shekhinah*, a manifestation of God’s presence (to Gen. 22:12 and Ex. 14:19). Similarly, Ramban writes of both “angels” and the *Shekhinah* that “the conduct of the world” depends upon them (cf. Gen. 24:1, 46:1, Ex. 3:13, 23:20, and Lev. 18:25). On the other hand, Ramban writes that prostrating oneself before an angel—even only in recognition that the angel is an emissary of God’s—is completely prohibited (to Ex. 20:3), but on the other hand Ramban also indicates that Abraham bowed to angels in recognition of their lofty divine status, “as they [the angels] are called *Elohim*” (to Gen. 18:3). How are all of these comments to be understood, especially in light of the fact that Ramban (to Num. 22:23) considers angels to be separate, created beings with their own intellects?

In solving this seemingly intractable problem, Eliot Wolfson uses a distinction that Ramban himself makes (to Gen. 18:1) regarding the Torah’s descriptions of angels.<sup>145</sup> While it is true that under normal circumstances, angels are indeed to be understood as separate intellects that cannot be seen with natural human vision, Ramban makes an exception for those angels that are described by the Torah as appearing in the guise of human beings.<sup>146</sup> In these cases, such as the angelic visit to Abraham, where the Torah describes angels as “men,” they are to be understood according to what Ramban identifies as the *sod ha-malbush*, or “secret of the garment.” It is this secret that Wolfson interprets as stating that an angel can act

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<sup>145</sup> Eliot Wolfson, “The Secret of the Garment in Nahmanides,” *Daat* 24 (Winter 1990), xxv-xlix

<sup>146</sup> Although Ramban there (Gen. 18:1) insists that seeing such angels does not require prophecy, he does believe that the ability to see such angels requires a lofty spiritual level. The same is true regarding the vision of the *Shekhinah* at Mount Sinai, where Ramban writes (*Commentary* to Ex. 24:10) that despite the fact that the “glory” and revelation was accessible to the entire nation, the elders perceived more than the rest of the nation.

as a “clothing” for God: “[the angel] is a manifestation of God’s individual providence, a quality that is, in turn especially entrusted to the *Shekhinah*.” Thus, when an angel appears as a man, it is a true representation of the *Shekhinah*, of the mediating *sefirah* between God and earthly goings-on,<sup>147</sup> and so one is permitted to bow to it. Like this very specific type of angel, Ramban believes that the *Shekhinah* too “is not distinct from God yet appears to human beings in various forms.”<sup>148</sup> Angels, or *malakhim*, are literally the messengers of God in carrying out His will, and when that will is for His glory to be seen by humankind, then the medium is the message; the *malakh* can be said to be the *Shekhinah* and vice versa.<sup>149</sup> The angel which appears as a man, as well as the *Shekhinah* embodied by a cloud or the like, can thus be the object of worship, because it is no different than God as He presents Himself to His creatures.<sup>150</sup>

Allowing, as Wolfson does, that the *Shekhinah* can take a perceptible form may appear to be dangerously close to a belief in the corporeality of God in general, and when speaking of angels in human form, this might even seem close to a Christian concept of divine incarnation.<sup>151</sup> Perhaps an alternative explanation (though very similar to Wolfson’s)

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<sup>147</sup> Wolfson, *ibid.* Cf. Ramban, *Commentary* to Gen. 24:1, 31:13 (and Commentary of R. Menachem Ricanti there), 46:1, Ex. 3:2, 20:16, Lev. 18:25, and Deut. 33:23. Wolfson also discusses the place of *Shekhinah* in the context of the ten *sefirot*, which is discussed at even greater length by Halbertal, “*Al Derekh*,” 181-190 and 232-244.

<sup>148</sup> Wolfson, *ibid.* xxxix.

<sup>149</sup> Cf. Commentary of R. Menachem Ricanti to Genesis 31:13, who writes that the *Shekhinah* is called *malakh* because the world is conducted according to it.

<sup>150</sup> Haviva Pedaya, *Nahmanides: Cyclical Time and Holy Text* [Hebrew] (Am Oved Publishers: Tel Aviv, 2003), 333ff takes Wolfson’s interpretation even further, writing that this physical appearance of God’s glory exists on a continuum, to the point where even the entire world can be understood as a manifestation of this glory on differing levels.

<sup>151</sup> See Shlomo Pines, “God, Glory, and Angels According to a Second Century Theological Theory,” [Hebrew] *Mehkarei Yerushalayim be-Mahashevet Yisrael* 6 (1997) 1-14, and *idem.* “Ramban’s Comment on Adam in the Garden of Eden in Light of Alternative Commentaries to Genesis 2 and 3” [Hebrew] in *Galut Ahar Golah: Studies in Jewish History* (Jerusalem 1988), 159-164. Ramban would not be the only Medieval Jewish scholar to express such a view (see, for example, R. Moshe Taku, *Otzar Nehmad* vol. 3, Vienna 1860), and it may even be supported by Talmud Yerushalmi, *Yoma* 5:2. Importantly, a similar view (referring to the “inner minister,” not the *Shekhinah* per se) is expressed as a mystical secret in one of the only extant kabbalistic passages from

could be that Ramban is speaking purely in terms of terminology, or names, by which God is referred to according to His attributes (as Ramban explains in his comments to Ex. 3:13). Perhaps the term “*Shekhinah*” does not refer to any physical manifestation or even a *perceived* physical manifestation, but is instead simply another name for one of God’s attributes, describing a particular manner in which God interacts with the created world. Bowing to “the *Shekhinah*” just refers to bowing to God Who is acting according to the attribute of *Shekhinah*. An angel carrying out such an action on God’s behalf looks like a man and can be bowed to, because such an angel is ‘clothed’ in the glory of God, in the sense that he is an emissary of God acting through the attribute by which He manifests Himself in the world.

It is worth repeating here that the doctrine of the “garment” and *Shekhinah* in general is meant to be esoteric, a ‘secret’ of the Torah. As Mordechai Cohen has written regarding this very issue, “one could argue that... it is even inappropriate to attempt to unlock the secrets to which he alludes,”<sup>152</sup> because of his own warning against speculating about the meaning of such teachings without an oral tradition as to their proper interpretation. Regardless of which interpretation is correct, it is nonetheless likely that Ramban felt that including these esoteric passages in his commentary would serve a purpose even for those who do not understand them. By bringing in these concepts, Ramban ensures his readers that God can be wholly transcendent and incorporeal while simultaneously allow humans to

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Rabad, quoted and discussed in Gershom Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah* (Jewish Publication Society, 1987) p. 212. The parallel appears to be especially strong since (although Scholem does not point this out), the phrase used by Rabad to refer to that which should never be anthropomorphized, “*ilat ha-‘ilot*,” is the same phrase used by Ramban in his defense of Maimonides’ doctrine of incorporeality in *Kitvei Ramban* 1:348. See Yair Lorberbaum, “Kabbalah of Nahmanides on Man’s Creation in the Image of God” *Kabbalah* 5 (2000) p. 306-312, and beginning on page 312 where he discusses *Shekhinah* directly, providing (n. 100) a rabbinic source for Ramban’s theory as understood by Wolfson, and relates the “secret of the garment” to the “secret of the face,” alluded to in Ramban’s Commentary to Ex. 20:3

<sup>152</sup> Cohen, *Shekhinah* p. 262

interact with Him on an intimate level. The promise made by the Torah that, in the future, Israel will be on so lofty a level as to have God “walk among them” (Leviticus 26:12), which Ramban interprets along these same lines as other passages regarding the *Shekhinah*, might be theologically difficult, but the Jew reading his commentary can still rest assured that the passage has a coherent kabbalistic meaning, and so the promise is not hollow: he can still look forward to seeing God’s glory in whatever manner He was seen by Israel while they were in the desert, and by Adam in the Garden of Eden.<sup>153</sup>

### **III. Prophecy and the Torah**

Ramban’s view of prophecy in general, as well as his more particular conception of the greatest product of prophecy, the Torah, are excellent examples of how he gives unique flavor to ideas that were current in his time and place. Like most of the medieval philosophers, it would appear that Ramban believed that prophecy was not an arbitrary act of God spontaneously causing some person to prophesy, but requires that such a person reach a specific prophetic stature, and that the quality of the prophecy varies according to the prophet’s attained measure of holiness.<sup>154</sup> Thus, Ramban writes that the description of Moses’ first prophetic experience as recorded in Exodus (chapter 3), involving the apparition of the burning bush, shows that prophecy requires sufficient mental preparedness, and that although Moses was later destined to be the greatest of prophets, he was told not to approach the burning bush too closely, because he had not yet reached his future prophetic

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<sup>153</sup> Ramban writes to Lev. 26:12 that the Messianic Era will involve a revelation of *Shekhinah*. Ramban’s comment which served as the basis for much of this section, that of Gen. 18:1, also included a statement that sometimes there is a revelation of *Shekhinah* which occurs not to relay a divine message, but as a reward or display of divine favor

<sup>154</sup> See Kreisel, Howard. *Prophecy: the History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Amsterdam Studies in Jewish Philosophy, 2001)

greatness.<sup>155</sup> However, Moshe Halbertal has noted that a crucial difference between their positions: although Maimonides, among other thinkers, see prophetic stature as stemming purely from intellectual development, Ramban appears to assume that it depends upon a different measure of holiness. For Ramban, the type of “knowing God” that is actualized by prophecy refers not to any cerebral accomplishment, but rather to an individual’s level of piety and his corresponding relationship to the God as present through His attributes.

Ramban sees this relationship between prophetic quality and divine attributes as being closely tied to the scriptural depictions of prophecy, which are obviously very many considering that the bible presents itself as a product of prophecy. One who reads through the bible will discover that prophetic visions and messages come in a variety of forms and contexts, at times through an angel, sometimes being accompanied with a vision, and sometimes including a descent of the spirit or hand of God. For Ramban, such descriptions are never arbitrary, and are instead clues as to the specifics of how the prophet is interacting with the divine in order to receive his prophecy. The mechanism of prophecy is, unsurprisingly, a topic that belongs primarily to “the secrets of the Torah,” and as in the case of the topic of *Shekhinah*, only the basics will be discussed here according to the excellent treatment of this topic by Moshe Halbertal. Sensitive as he always is the slightest textual nuances, Ramban differentiates between the terms “*malakh*” (angel) and “*malakh YHVH*,” when the term is appended to the Tetragrammaton. As discussed previously, *malakh* is equivalent to *Shekhinah*, the attribute by which the world is governed. However, this is not the purest of God’s attributes, and so it cannot be that Moses, the greatest of prophets, was spoke to through *Shekhinah* even at his initiation. Therefore, Ramban writes (Ex. 3:2) that

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<sup>155</sup> Commentary to Exodus 3:2 and 3:5

the *malakh YHVH* which appeared to Moses at the burning bush was the angel about which is written “my name is within him,” the name referring to this higher attribute, *tiferet*, which dwells within the *Shekhinah* “as a king dwells in his house.”<sup>156</sup>

The system of divine attributes is also the manner in which Ramban differentiates between the prophecy of Moses and that of the other prophets. Maimonides writes in several places<sup>157</sup> that although every prophet received his prophecy via angelic intermediaries, Moses’ prophecy was direct. Ramban also understands Moses’ prophecy to differ qualitatively and categorically from that of the other prophets, and similarly refers to intermediaries, but in terms of divine attributes, not angelic beings. Commenting on the verse (Num. 12:6) which states that “even if one of your prophets be [through] *YHVH*, in a vision I would make Myself known to him,” Ramban writes that there are three potential levels of prophecy. First, the verse indicates there are those who have no access to the Name *YHVH* at all, which Ramban refers to as prophesying through the “holy spirit,” which is hinted to throughout the bible by terms such as “the spirit of God spoke through me” (Samuel II 23:2) or the “hand of God” which appears in Ezekiel (37:1). A higher level is that of those prophets who do prophesy in the “name of *YHVH*,” but who do so through a “vision,” as stated by the verse. Ramban writes that Moses was greater even than those prophets, however, and refers his comments on Deuteronomy 34:10, where he clarifies that Moses God made Himself known to Moses “by name,” that is, directly through the name without the intermediary of vision, or, to use kabbalistic terminology, Moses interacted directly with *tiferet*.<sup>158</sup> The

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<sup>156</sup> Ramban *Commentary* to Ex. 23:20, Halbertal, *Al Derekh*, p. 188 based upon that passage as well as Ramban’s comments to Gen. 31:13 and 48:15

<sup>157</sup> *Mishnah Commentary*, Introduction to Sanhedrin Ch. 10 (*Perek Heilek*) and Maimonides’ *Mishnah Torah, Laws of the Foundations of the Torah* Ch. 7

<sup>158</sup> See Halbertal, *Al Derekh*, p. 186-7, 190-207. This particular difference is easier to understand how it would be expressed in the actual prophecy: Moses did not experience his prophetic messages as apparitions, but as the



specifics of prophecy are, as mentioned, meant to be understood only by students of the esoteric wisdom, but what emerges from Ramban's commentary is that, whatever the details may be, they are closely tied to nuances in phraseology of the scriptural verses.

Another one of Ramban's more extensive discussion on the nature of prophecy surrounds the description of Balaam's experience conveying the word of God in Numbers 24. This chapter presents somewhat of an interpretive difficulty for the traditional Jewish scholar not only because the text itself seems to give conflicting implications as to his level of prophecy, but because Balaam is characterized by the rabbinic tradition as a wicked man, and thus undeserving of prophecy. In explaining why Balaam consulted his magic before his first two speeches, but did before his third, Ramban writes that the charms employed by Balaam were means to circumvent the normal preparations necessary for prophecy, but his third speech was made using normal prophetic measures. On Balaam's actual level of prophecy, Ramban offers three possibilities: because he "sees a vision of God [*Shaddai*]," (Num. 24:2) he writes that Balaam is either on the level of the forefathers, or perhaps "a level below them," for "a vision of *Shaddai* is not [identical to seeing] *Shaddai*," or he was "two levels below them" as indicated by the description that Balaam's eyes need to be uncovered to engage in a prophetic vision (Num. 24:1 and 22:31) which is equivalent to the description of mere students of prophets in Kings II 6:20. Ramban needs to contend, however, not only with the verses which depict God as communicating with Balaam, but also with the difficulty inherent in a rabbinic Midrash (Sifrei, *V'zot ha-Beracha* 39) which implies that Balaam was

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message itself. Thus, although prophecy is generally discussed using a motif of sight or vision, Ramban writes (*Kitvei ha-Ramban* II p. 297) that the righteous in the future will comprehend the divine as Moses did: through the eye of his mind, not as a clothed vision. Eliot Wolfson, *Through a Speculum That Shines* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, NJ 1994), p. 299-306

on the same prophetic level as Moses, the greatest of prophets.<sup>159</sup> Ramban insisting that this Midrash is not referring to Moses' prophetic ability, which far surpassed that of Balaam, but rather in determining God's will independent of His prophetically spoken word. According to Ramban, Balaam's advantage was that he was able to intuit God's will and then seclude himself to prepare for receiving a prophecy, but Moses never needed to prepare himself for prophecy at all; he was of such impeccable character that he was constantly ready for prophecy. The topic of determining God's will independent of His word will be discussed below, but at least it is clear that Moses was superior in knowing God's word, and in his conception of God, both of which are crucial to the unique status of the Torah.<sup>160</sup>

The Torah, Ramban insists, is fundamentally different than any other work of prophecy in its form and text. This qualitative prophetic difference expresses itself in the realm of *peshat*, as it explains why the Torah is written from a third person perspective (instead of being in the voice of the prophet-narrator), and in *sod*, being written "before the creation of the world... with letters of black fire upon white fire," with the exact same letters in the same order as in our Torah, with the only difference being that the heavenly version lacked spaces for words. Such a theory is fascinating, but it is extraordinarily difficult to understand reasonably if Ramban truly means to refer to the entire Torah as we know it. Were the sins of Adam, Cain, Sodom, and the rest truly inscribed with fiery eternity in a supernal manuscript? Why would God use the Hebrew language to specifically record this supernal Torah, when Ramban himself admits that it is merely one of the ancient Canaanite

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<sup>159</sup> Ramban similarly felt the need to clarify another Midrash which compared Moses with Samuel, explaining that the intent was merely to refer to their respective statures, but not, "heaven forbid," to say that Samuel was as great of a prophet as Moses was (*Commentary* to Num. 12:6).

<sup>160</sup> In one instance (*Kitvei Ramban* 1:261), Ramban actually refers to Moses by the unusual epithet "the prophet of the mitzvot," a clear nod to the relationship between Moses' uniquely superior prophecy and the Torah's legislation

dialects that happen to have been spoken by the prophets to whom God expressed His will?<sup>161</sup> It is not clear how Ramban would have answered what appear to be very basic questions on his mystical view of the eternality and nature of the Torah. However, regardless of what this “black fire on white fire” is supposed to mean, the lesson that Ramban intends his reader to draw from this description of the Torah is clear: the Torah is far from an ordinary book. While it may refer to historical facts and legal precepts, the Torah’s content at its core transcends earthly realities, and is instead a book about God, of His mystical names.<sup>162</sup>

In a very real sense, then, the Torah is not merely the product of divine revelation, but it is revelation itself, being written by Moses who received his own prophecy without the usual divine intermediaries. Such a view could potentially have several far-reaching ramifications, although few of them are spelled out by Ramban himself. For example, perhaps Ramban would say that just as the Tabernacle and the two Tablets that Moses received at Sinai were meant as a way to transport God’s dramatic revelation at Sinai with them through the desert and ultimately to Jerusalem,<sup>163</sup> the Torah can also act as a similar “hidden revelation” that has accompanied the Jewish people throughout their exile even to the present day. Another somewhat subtler conclusion that Ramban appears to draw from this thesis is the great sense of humility that one must have when approaching the task of interpreting the Torah (and, indeed, this sense permeates all of Ramban’s own writings). The

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<sup>161</sup> Ramban, Commentary to Ex. 30:13. Ramban contrasts this with the view of Maimonides, who believes that Hebrew is a “holy language” because it lacks explicit terms for the sexual organs and act of procreation. Instead, Ramban writes that the language is holy both because it was used to create the world, and because it is the language spoken by the prophets

<sup>162</sup> All of this is according to *sod*. Even before saying that he will introduce *sod*, however, Ramban asserts that the Torah describes all of creation to the detail that all of science to be derived from it. See *Kitvei haRamban* II:142ff

<sup>163</sup> Cf. Ramban to Ex. 25:2

Torah is complex, multifaceted, and multilayered; it can “sustain them all,” *peshat*, *derash*, and *sod*,<sup>164</sup> and one must never assume that he has reached its very depths or plumbed all of its secrets.

#### **IV. Interpreting the Torah and the Will of God**

The message that Ramban wishes to impart regarding the Torah is the same title as his classic sermon: “*Torat Hashem Temimah*,” the Torah of God is perfect. One may be surprised, therefore, to discover an intriguing undercurrent of Ramban’s thought inherent in his understanding of several passages in the Torah, which will require a bit of elaboration. In explaining the meaning of the verse, “you shall do the right and the good,” (Deut. 6:18), Ramban writes that “it is not possible to mention in the Torah all of man’s behaviors with his neighbors and fellows, and all of his business and everything needed for the establishment of society and government. But after mentioning many of them, such as ‘do not be a gossipmonger’ (Lev. 19:16), ‘do not take revenge’ (Lev. 19:18), ‘do not stand [idly] by the blood of your fellow’ (*ibid*)... then the Torah went back to state in general to do the good and the right regarding all things.” A very similar understanding underlies Ramban’s comment to Lev. 19:1 on the command to “be holy,” where he writes, “once the Torah warned against illicit relations and forbidden foods, but allowed intercourse for a man and his wife and the eating of meat and wine, a glutton can find a way to be awash in lewdness with his wife or many wives... therefore Scripture came after detailing all of the prohibitions that are unconditionally prohibited to command in a general sense, to abstain [even] from what is permitted.”

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<sup>164</sup> Such is Ramban’s own formulation in his glosses to Maimonides’ *Book of Commandments*, Principle #2

In these two commandments, Ramban shows that the Torah's demands far outnumber its formal legislations. These examples relate to a broader theme: the requirement to follow God's will, even if that will is not formulated in terms of an explicit command. Shalom Carmy and David Shatz show two examples where Ramban appears to value following the will of God even if that will clashes with the observance of specific commandments.<sup>165</sup> In order to explain why Joseph never sent word to his father telling him of his whereabouts, prolonging his father Jacob's suffering, as well justify Joseph's cruelty towards his brothers, Ramban explains that Joseph was acting in order to carry out what he understood as the divine will as communicated to him through his dreams.<sup>166</sup> Likewise, Ramban maintains<sup>167</sup> that if they had not been as harsh, the Egyptians would not have been punished for oppressing the Israelites if they did so with the intent of fulfilling God's prophecy to Abraham, and the same would be true of the many other nations who have oppressed Israel in the Bible such as Babylonia and Assyria. This attitude is taken to an almost shocking extreme by Rabbi Nissim b. Reuben of Gerona, a student of one of Ramban's greatest students, Rabbi David Bonfil. In one of his homiletical essays,<sup>168</sup> Rabbi Nissim attempts to show that the "binding of Isaac" was actually never presented to Abraham as an obligation, but as the non-legislated "will of God." In other words, God did not command Abraham to sacrifice his son, but rather made it clear that this was His will, and nonetheless Abraham was willing to carry out this non-command. Such thinking appears to be built upon Ramban's

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<sup>165</sup> Carmy, Shalom, and David Shatz. "The Bible as a Source for Philosophical Reflection." *History of Jewish Philosophy*. Ed. Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman. (London: Routledge, 1997)

<sup>166</sup> Ramban, *Commentary* to Gen. 42:9

<sup>167</sup> Ramban, *Commentary* to Gen. 15:14. Ramban there notes the similarity in implication of these two verses. Cf. *Maggid Mishnah, Commentary to Maimonides Mishnah Torah, Laws of Neighbors* 14:5

<sup>168</sup> *Derashot Ha-Ran, Derush Shishi* ed. A.L. Feldman (Mossad Harav Kook: Jerusalem, 2003) p. 238-240

belief that it is appropriate for man to determine and implement the will of God, independently of His explicit commands.

The logic behind this understanding of acting in order to bring about God's will as being even more important than specific commands is evident once we take into account Ramban's general theory of the obligatory nature of commandments. In explaining the phrase "*le-ratzon*" in the context of worship, Ramban writes:

"Your worship should be favorable (*ratzon*) before Him, and He should be desirous (*yeratzeh*) of you, as a slave appeases his master by doing all that he commands him... do not perform the worship of the exalted God in order to receive reward,<sup>169</sup> but rather to do His will, for His express will (*retzono ha-pashut*) is proper and obligating" (Lev. 19:5)<sup>170</sup>

It would appear that commandments themselves are only obligatory because they represent God's will, and that is the source of their binding power. If God's will is expressed in some other manner, it stands to reason that acting towards its fulfillment is no less essential.

Later prophecies and open-ended commands such as "be holy" make it clear that the Torah alone is not the comprehensive expression of God's will. Ramban concedes to the fact that the Torah must sometimes revert to speaking in generalities in legal and religious context, because it cannot describe every single eventuality. Does this non-comprehensiveness not indicate that the Torah is in some way lacking, or incomplete?

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<sup>169</sup> Cf. Ramban, *Commentary* to Num. 15:22, where he again emphasizes that commandments are not to be fulfilled in order to receive reward or avoid punishment, but as servants follow the will of their master.

<sup>170</sup> See also Ramban *Commentary* to Deut. 6:13, where he writes that a person should imagine himself as in a constant state of servitude towards God, "so the even [fulfilling] bodily needs is done for the sake of worshiping God." Although he doesn't invoke the concept of an independent will of God, it is clear that this attitude reflects Ramban's belief that even activities that are not included in any particular commandment are still considered religious worship.

Ramban might simply respond that an inability to describe the law in every possible circumstance is not a deficiency at all, as this is simply an impossibility, and nobody would consider a legal code to be incomplete for not detailing every possible eventuality. However, it could also be that the Torah's system was set up in such a manner for reasons beyond mere practicality. Being, as it is, a source of continuing divine revelation, the Torah is able to provide those who study it with an insight into what God wants even beyond the explicit commandments and prohibitions. Commandments such as "do the right and the good" and "be holy" require human interpretation of the Torah through careful study in order to connect the dots, so to speak, and apply its values to new circumstances. Perhaps, then, the Torah is actually "complete" in the sense that it provides the entire framework necessary for uncovering new laws and meaning, but also intentionally "incomplete" in that it provides a way for those who study it to constantly find new meaning in its laws and stories, so that all those who engage in its interpretation are participating in a continued revelation.

Whether or not Ramban would provide such an explanation for the Torah's potential deficiency, it does appear to be the case that he saw rabbinic interpretation of the Torah's laws as a prophetic process. The two specific commandments of "be holy" and "do the right and the good" are certainly not the only instances where the Torah's laws leave the details to either oral teachings or rabbinic elaboration. Where Ramban (to Deut. 17:11) discusses the authority of the Sanhedrin, the highest rabbinical court, in his comment, he writes that one should assume that the sages of the court have ruled or interpreted the law correctly, because "the spirit of God is upon those who serve in His temple, and He will not abandon His pious

ones;<sup>171</sup> forever they will be saved from error or faltering.” Similarly, in his commentary to the episode of Moses gathering seventy elders, Ramban comments that the same number is used for the rabbinical court of later generations, because “the *Shekhinah* is with them to agree on their hand” (Num. 11:16). In his Talmudic commentary, Ramban is even more explicit that prophetic influence allows the sages to interpret the Torah correctly: “the prophecy of the sages, which comes through wisdom, was not removed from them [even now that the era of prophecy has ended], but rather they know the truth through the Holy Spirit within them.”<sup>172</sup> It would appear that the wisdom of the Sages is equivalent to that of the lowest level of prophecy discussed above in his three-tiered system.<sup>173</sup>

The connection between determining the will of God and the highest rabbinical court might underlie Ramban’s opinion regarding the authority of the rabbinic sages. The Talmud is full of rabbinic enactments, decrees, and details which are presented as having less legal force than biblical commandments, but are nonetheless assumed to be obligatory. While Maimonides sees all of these rabbinic decrees as falling under the biblical command to follow the elders in Deut. 17:11, Ramban disagrees, insisting that the many distinctions made in the Talmud between biblical and rabbinic duties are incomprehensible if the Torah itself legislates following the sages. However, Ramban fails to explain how he himself understands the nature of rabbinic decrees—if there is no Torah command to follow them, why should they be binding at all? Perhaps the answer lies in the topic of this section: if the sages are

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<sup>171</sup> It is not entirely clear to me how to punctuate this phrase, because the first clause is scriptural quotation (Psalms 37:28), but the quotation continues to the next clause

<sup>172</sup> *Hiddushei Ramban*, Bava Basra 12a (Machon Maarava: Jerusalem 1996) p. 15

<sup>173</sup> Halbertal, *Al Derekh* p. 73-75. These formulations are much stronger than Ramban’s comments to Exodus 21:6 and to Deut. 19:19, where Ramban is merely discussing the divine assistance afforded to judges to rule correctly



able to intuit what God wills of His nation, then certainly their enactments and interpretations are binding, but would still be completely separate from a particular biblical command.<sup>174</sup>

This heavy emphasis on the importance of God's will brings up an important question for Ramban. Earlier, we discussed how Ramban differentiates between Moses and Balaam, who are considered to be equal by a Midrash. Ramban clarifies that certainly Moses was the greater prophet (with Balaam perhaps not even reaching the level of the patriarchs), but Balaam possessed a skill independent of prophecy: the determination of God's will. However, now that we have seen how Ramban sees the determination of God's will as being related to prophecy, how can his explanation of Balaam's divine knowledge remain tenable? How would Balaam be able to so expertly know God's will if not through superior prophetic insight? It is possible that the above analysis is in fact incorrect, and that Ramban actually does not believe knowledge or determination of God's will to be related to prophecy, but to "dreams". However, this would not explain Ramban's understanding of the prophetic inspiration of the sages, or the fact that, when God appears in a dream to make His will known to Laban (Gen. 31:24), Ramban *ad loc.* characterizes this dream as being prophetic. Therefore, it would appear that the solution to this puzzle is, once again, reliant upon Ramban's mystical understanding of prophecy. Perhaps it is precisely because Moses communicated directly with *tiferet*, and not with that attribute being clothed in apparitions or the usual prophetic vision-intermediary, he knew God's will only through direct instruction. Balaam, however, who merely communicated with God through visions, was able to intuit God's will through those visions better than any other prophet.

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<sup>174</sup> This question is discussed by R. Elchanan Wasserman, *Kovetz Shiurim* vol. 2, *Kuntres Divrei Sofrim* 1:18. See also Halbertal, *Al Derekh* p. 31-46, and R. Shlomo Fischer, *Derashot Beit Yishai* (Jerusalem 2004) p. 124-126 for several traditional sources which discuss Ramban's opinion.

## V. Ramban's Religious Anthropology

Now that it has been established that man is obligated to serve God and carry out His will, this study will now turn to the other side of the equation: who is man that he is to be commanded, how do those commandments serve God and/or man, and what is the place of commandments in the development of a religious relationship between man and God. The most natural place to look for Ramban's understanding of human nature and man's place in creation would be to analyze his interpretation of the bible's description of the creation of man, as well as the subsequent narrative describing the first human couple's primordial sin. However, such a study proves to be rather difficult, as Ramban's comments on these essential passages—while intriguing—are fraught with complexity, contradiction, and obscurity.

God is described in the first chapter of Genesis as creating the earth and its contents, often through speech acts. The creation of man, however, is uniquely introduced by God's pronouncement of "*na'aseh*," (Gen. 1:26) *we* will make man, in the plural. While this troubling verb is discussed by almost every traditional commentator, beginning with the Midrash, Ramban's interpretation is fascinating in its relevance to the nature of humanity. He notes that previously, the creation of plant and animal life is described as being created "of the earth" (v. 12, 24) which he had explained earlier (to 1:1) as being a generic term referring to the natural, physical universe. Therefore, the plural form of the verb "to make" indicates that God meant to say, "I, and the aforementioned Earth, will make man: that the earth should produce the body from its foundations as it did with the animals and beasts... and He [God] may He be exalted the spirit from the supernal mouth" (Ramban's Commentary to

Gen. 1:24). The human being therefore has an animalistic component which is similar to that of the animals, as well as a divine soul. He continues to explain the next phrase “*be-tzalmeinu ke-demuteinu*,” as reiterating the fact that man’s body bears likeness to the earth (that is, to the natural world) but his soul is similar to the heavens, being immaterial.<sup>175</sup> While this interpretations of Ramban imply that it is only the body of man which is animalistic-naturalistic, and that the entire human soul is wholly and directly attributable to God alone,<sup>176</sup> later statements of his are indicative of a very different perspective.

In concluding this above explanation, Ramban writes that he was paraphrasing from Rabbi Joseph Kimhi (father of R. David Kimhi, discussed in Part 1). However, Ramban does not end with this citation, but continues to provide further elaboration upon the term “*be-tzalmeinu ke-demuteinu*,” writing that the word *tselem* means *toar* (appearance) quoting verses to the effect that *tselem* refers to *toar marito*—the quality of appearance, and that *demut* means “similarity in form (*tsurah*) and in deed.”<sup>177</sup> These explanations are very

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<sup>175</sup> Unlike the animals, whose soul also came from the earth (cf. Ramban to Gen. 1:20). This last statement, that man’s spirit bears likeness “to the heavens,” seems to be assuming that the soul was made from heavenly stuff, to the same extent that man’s body was made out of earthly stuff. Such an assumption appears contradictory to the earlier explanation that the soul was created directly from God, out of nothing.

<sup>176</sup> This is especially true considering Ramban’s distinction between the terms *bara* and *yatsar*, in that the former word alone refers to creation *ex nihilo*. According to Ramban, by using the term *bara* to refer to the creation of man’s spirit (Gen: 1:27) the Torah means that the soul is a new form of matter, different than that of the natural world (and probably different than the spiritual world of the angels as well). To Gen. 2:7, Ramban makes this explicit: the soul “did not come from the foundation which was hinted to by the animate spirits, but also did not emanate from the immaterial intelligences, but it is the spirit of the Great Name [HaShem HaGadol], from whose mouth [comes] knowledge and intelligence, for one who breaths out into another’s nostrils, from his own soul he gives.” This, despite the indication (as noted in the previous footnote) from Ramban’s statement on *be-tzalmeinu ke-demuteinu* that the soul was made of heavenly matter (cf. *Kitvei Ramban* 1:156). Ramban also sees the soul as belonging to both the “legions of the Earth” as well as the “legions of the Heavens” (Gen. 2:1). It is not clear to me how to resolve this tension, since God Himself is surely not the created Heavens of the first verse of Genesis. Perhaps one could propose that with the exception of physical matter, anything created by God out of nothing is automatically similar in matter in the heavenly spheres. See Moshe Idel, “On the Divinity of the Soul in Ramban and His School,” [Hebrew] *ha-Hayim ke-Midrash: ‘Iyunim be-Psikholgyah Yehudit li-khevod Mordekhai Rotenberg*, ed. S. Arzy et. al (Israel 2004), pp. 338-380, who, based on writings from Ramban’s students and contemporaries, understanding that according to Ramban, the soul emanated from a different set of *sefirot* than anything else in creation. Cf. Ramban’s Commentary to Lev. 18:29, Ex. 32:3, and *Kitvei Ramban* 1:159

<sup>177</sup> As will be discussed, this interpretation is in clear contradistinction to that of Maimonides, *Guide* 1:1

strange, especially in light of Ramban's preceding sentence. Does man really *look* like the earth, or like God? Does he act similarly to the earth? The use of the term *tsurah* appears to be a nod to Aristotelian hylomorphism, already alluded to in Ramban's comment to Gen. 1:1, which divides between matter (*hulê*) and form (*morphê*),<sup>178</sup> but Ramban uses the wrong word of the pair: although one would expect Ramban to see man's soul as being of earthly *matter*, as per his discussion throughout the first chapter of Genesis, he refers to its *form*!

The matter of man's creation is brought up again in the second chapter of Genesis, where Ramban is perhaps more fleshed-out. In his commentary to Gen. 2:7, Ramban discusses the question debated by the "scholars of inquiry" of whether or not the human being possesses one soul with multiple faculties, or if he possesses multiple souls which serve different functions (which, incidentally, is the opinion of Maimonides in his Eight Chapters). Ramban writes that although the verses might indicate at first glance that man has a single soul, the opinion of the rabbis is that man, in fact, has two souls. According to Ramban's conclusion, man was first created out of the earth with the same *élan vital* as that of the animals, and was animated by the ability to feel and move. Only afterwards did God breathe into man his divine soul through which he is able to think, speak, and act deliberately. Based upon this presentation, Yair Lorberbaum<sup>179</sup> has concluded that in his original comment to Gen. 1:26, Ramban was actually advancing two entirely disparate interpretations, one as a *peshat* interpretation of R. Kimhi, and the second as *sod*. While it is somewhat difficult to accept this second explanation as *sod*, because afterwards Ramban introduces yet another interpretation as *derekh ha-emet*, it does seem as though his first statement accords with what Ramban sees as the *prima facie* opinion of the verses.

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<sup>178</sup> Bernard Williams, "Hylomorphism," *Oxford Studies in Ancient Philosophy* 4 (1986), 189–99

<sup>179</sup> "Kabbalah of Nahmanides on Man's Creation in the Image of God" *Kabbalah* 5 (2000), 287-326

It would therefore appear that in referring to the form of the earth, instead of its matter, Ramban is not speaking of man's body, which of course bears no resemblance to the Earth's shape, but to the "appearance" of man's animating spirit, which is identical to the animating spirit of all of the earthly creatures. This is the "spirit which is in the blood" that is referred to in Leviticus 17:11 as the reason why consuming blood is prohibited—explains Ramban there, because the same spirit which resides in animal blood is what animates the human being.<sup>180</sup> Applying this line of thought to the *tsurah* of man's rational soul, which bears actual resemblance (in Ramban's words, "*demut mamash*") to the heavens, then we would expect the divine soul to therefore be uninvolved in any earthly matters. The similarity of the rational soul and the heavens, however, is described by Ramban as being involved in man's "ambition in wisdom, knowledge, and capacity of action [*kishron ha-ma'aseh*]." The message of this last phrase is repeated in Ramban's comments to 2:7, where he writes that it is through the divine soul that man "performs actions," and it is hard to see how it should relate to the rational, thinking soul—unless Ramban means to refer to the ability to decide to act deliberately and by rational choice, a unique feature of the human soul.<sup>181</sup>

If the capability of man to freely choose and act deliberately is a function of his divine, thinking soul, then it should be the case that man would have had free choice even before having eaten from the Tree of Knowledge Good and Evil. Here, we come to a

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<sup>180</sup> This is also why, in his commentary to Gen. 1:29, Ramban explains why man was initially prohibited from eating animal meat altogether. In another clear rejection of Maimonides and the Aristotelian tradition, Ramban writes there that it is this animal spirit which emanated from the Active Intellect, which according to the Aristotelians is the source of the rational soul, while Ramban believes that the rational soul is a product of God's direct creation. As noted by Lorberbuam *ibid.* and Dauber, "Knowledge of God" *ibid.*, this is very similar to Ramban's discussion of prophecy, where he replaces the Aristotelian Active Intellect with the involvement of God Himself.

<sup>181</sup> As Ramban writes regarding the animal soul (to Gen. 1:29): "they [too] choose what is good for them and their sustenance, and flee from pain and death." Once man received his uniquely divine soul, however, "all that he produces now became attribute to this [divine] soul," (concluding remarks to Gen. 2:7) instead of his animalistic drives.

fundamental issue in Ramban's commentary, which is the question of how he understands the nature of man as it existed before and after the original sin of Adam, and how this nature relates to free will. In explaining the effect of eating from Tree of Knowledge Good and Evil, Ramban rejects the opinion (mentioned in Ibn Ezra and Radak) that it brought about the sexual drive. Instead, he proposes that before eating from the tree:

“Man would have done naturally what is proper to do according to its consequences, just as the heavens and all its legions... and in their actions there is no love or hate. And the fruit of this tree would instill the will and desire, that whomever eats from it can choose something or its opposite, for good or for ill... and so after [Adam] ate from the tree, he had in his hands free choice, and the desire to do evil or good whether to himself or to others. And this is a godly trait on the one hand, but bad for man that he has a drive and desire. Perhaps this is the intent of the verse on this matter, “that God created man straight, but they sought many calculations,” (Ecclesiastes 7:29) the “straightness” being that he should take the single straight path, and the “seeking of many calculations” is the seeking of different actions due to the choice in the matter” (Ramban to Gen. 2:6)

This paragraph is difficult for various reasons, most notably because Ramban implies that man had no conflicting desires for good or evil before eating from the forbidden tree. If this is so, how could man have sinned in the first place?<sup>182</sup> Furthermore, Ramban appears to equivocate on whether or not the change brought about by eating the tree is positive or

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<sup>182</sup> That man had free will from as soon as he was created is implied by Ramban to 30:6, where he initially writes, “from the time of creation it was in man's ability to act according to his will, [to be] righteous or wicked,” but later in that same paragraph writes that in the future, “man will return at that time to how he was before the sin of Adam, which was that he would naturally do what is proper to do and there was no will in him to perform one thing and its opposite, as I explained in the portion of Genesis.” See similarly *Kitvei Ramban* 1:280

negative; although God did forbid man from eating of its fruit, the tree is described as “good to eat” (3:6), and so Ramban (to 3:22) asks (without answering), ‘why would God, who desires good, prevent man from eating it’?

At the conclusion of his commentary to the story of man’s original sin, after also asking without answering why snakes no longer appear to speak, Ramban writes that the entire chapter alludes to mystical secrets, “all of these matters are doubled: the revealed and hidden are both true.”<sup>183</sup> On the surface meaning (which Ramban insists is “also true”), Adam had the ability to freely choose to eat from the fruit of the forbidden tree, despite his general disposition to only perform those actions which are correct and intelligent. This could either be due to a mistake in his judgement, or, as Rabbeinu Bahayei explains (to Gen. 3:6), it was his intellectual faculty which indicated to Adam that the fruit of the tree was good to eat, despite a conflicting thought that he should adhere to the command of God.<sup>184</sup> However, enough difficulties remain unresolved by the external meaning of this passage that it would be worth attempting to understand what Ramban believes to be the hidden meaning of this story. Based upon Ramban’s comment to Lev. 23:40, where he writes that the Etrog, which represents the Shekhinah, was the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge Good and Evil and that “the sin was in it alone,” Betzalel Safran understands that, according to Ramban’s esoteric position, Adam was actually compelled to sin by the Shekhinah.<sup>185</sup> Thus, man was indeed

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<sup>183</sup> See similarly *Kitvei Ramban* 2:296-7. As discussed in Part 1 regarding kabbalah in Ramban’s commentary, Eliot Wolfson sees this principle as indicative of Ramban’s approach to all of scripture, not just the story of Eden

<sup>184</sup> Betzalel Safran believes that this cannot be Ramban’s opinion, since Rabbeinu Bahayei then explains that angels are also capable of sin, which is not true according to Ramban. However, it is possible in my opinion that Ramban does believe that this is the “revealed” interpretation of the passage, even if it is not its “secret” explanation. Many traditional rabbinic authors have struggled with these issues in interpreting the position of Ramban, and most have developed similar theories, see R. Hayim of Volozhon, *Nefesh Hachayim* gloss to 1:6, R. Eliyahu Dessler, *Michtav Meeliyahu* 1:111-3 and 2:138-9

<sup>185</sup> Betzalel Safran, “R. Azriel and Nahmanides: Two Views of the Fall of Man” in *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides, Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, ed. I. Twersky (Cambridge, MA: 1983). This approach is

meant to have free will, but this would only have been possible through the introduction of Samael, the emissary of Judgement,<sup>186</sup> which is represented by the snake.

Returning to the question of man's soul and its divine source, it seems rather straightforward that Ramban believes that only the divine soul is created in God's image, whether that image refers purely to man's ability to think and speak or if it also provides man with the ability to act as a free agent. However, what Ramban writes regarding man's body should also not be ignored, as it may be key to several features of his theory regarding the commandments. Once Ramban has opened up the possibility of "image of God" referring to an actual shape, there is good reason to believe that the physical body of man is also mystically patterned after something in the divine.<sup>187</sup> Thus, in discussing the fact that the body will be resurrected along with man's soul (see Section IIIV, below), Ramban writes that "the figure [of man] contains deep secrets," alluding to some mystical isomorphism between God's "image" and the human body.<sup>188</sup> Similarly, Ramban explains "by way of truth" that the priests are required to wash their hands and feet for reasons that relate to the fact that the hands and feet are "in the figure of man a hint to the ten *sefirot*" (Ex. 30:19).<sup>189</sup> Connecting this to the phenomenon described above, that only if an angel represents the Shekhinah does

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largely followed by many other scholars of Ramban, such as Yair Lorberbaum and Moshe Halbertal, with certain differences of detail, such as Pedayah's disagreement with Safran regarding the role and symbolism of Eve. See Pedayah, "Cyclical Time," p. 345-346

<sup>186</sup> Ramban to Lev. 16:8, Gen. 1:31, and *Kitvei Ramban* 1:24-26

<sup>187</sup> Jonathan Feldman, "The Power of the Soul over the Body: Corporeal Transformation and Attitudes towards the Body in the Thought of Nahmanides," (Ph.D. dissertation, NYU 1999) and Yair Lorberbaum, "Kabbalah of Nahmanides on Man's Creation in the Image of God" [Hebrew] *Kabbalah* 5 (2000)

<sup>188</sup> *Kitvei Ramban* 2:305. This is corroborated by a statement of Ramban in his commentary to *Sefer Yetsirah*, and Lorberbaum shows, quoting Idel and others, that this was a common understanding of the early kabbalists. One important source not quoted by Lorberbaum (but noted by Pedaya in a different context, "Cyclical Time," p. 231 n. 34) is in *Keter Shem Tov*, written by a student of Ramban, R. Shem Tov ibn Gaon. To *Parashat 'Im Behukotai'*, ibn Gaon records a fascinating tradition that "we have received regarding the soul that it has a shape [*tsurah*] and it is the shape of man, a male [shaped soul] for a male and a female [shaped soul] for a female" (page 46b in the edition printed along with R. Judah Kureit, Levorno 1839). If the body and divine soul share a shape, it stands to reason that the shape and form of the body is also representative of the divine.

<sup>189</sup> Cf. Ramban's allusion in Deut. 21:22 to this concept, which is elaborated upon in Derashot ibn Shueib there.



the angel appear as a man, Lorberbaum notes that the human being obviously has such a shape at all times, and is thus always representing this Shekhinah. According to the doctrine of the *sefirot*, the body, and not just the soul, is a divine being.

## **VI. *Taamei Ha-Mitzvot*: Reasons for the Commandments**

Ramban's religious anthropology is closely related to his theory of mitzvot, (as well as related to his eschatological beliefs, which will be discussed later). While the obligatory nature of the commandments may stem from their being expressions of God's will (as explained earlier in Section III), it remains to be seen as to whether or not that all of the various mitzvot delineated in the Torah are meant to reach one or more particular goals, and if the many disparate commands make up a larger structure. Just as in his scriptural interpretations, Ramban is loath to see the many literary features of the Torah as being arbitrary or meaningless, and sees its many laws and narratives as having a coherent order and structure, so too when it comes to the commandments Ramban insists that they have comprehensible functions and goals, and that together they make up a systematic program which put together reveals a distinct vision for mankind and the world.

As in so many of his theological discussions, Ramban's treatment of this topic begins with Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*. Although Ramban is known for his harsh condemnation of the reason offered by Maimonides for the sacrifices, namely, that they exist purely as a concession to the pagan impulses of the fledgling Israelite nation, he accepts

Maimonides' general orientation that the commandments are fundamentally intelligible.<sup>190</sup> The locus of this discussion surrounds a rabbinic teaching which states that it would be inappropriate to praise God by saying, "your mercy extends to the bird's nest," referencing the commandment to shoo away a mother bird before taking its eggs (Deut. 22:6). The Talmud (B. Berakhot 32b) provides two explanations for why such a praise would be improper: either because it accentuates an inequality among God's creatures (since this mitzvah applies only to birds), or because "he makes God's ways merciful, when in fact they are decrees." Maimonides understands this second position to mean that God's decrees—that is, His commands—have no reasons at all, but insists in his *Guide of the Perplexed* that we reject such a view, and follow the alternative position in the Talmud.

Ramban, in his commentary to Deut. 22:6, not only agrees with the essential position of Maimonides that God's commandments are purposeful, but adds that such a position is not contrary to the explanation of the Talmud. Rather, Ramban writes, the Talmud means only that the reason for the mitzvah is not due to God's mercy towards the birds, but instead has another purpose. Similarly, Ramban to Lev. 19:19 comments upon a Midrash quoted by Rashi which states that certain laws are *hukim*, "decrees which have no reason," writing that in actuality, these *hukim* are only *seemingly* arbitrary; they are "decrees" in the sense that their reasoning might be hidden from the king's subjects, but not that they have no reasons at all (to Lev. 18:6).

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<sup>190</sup> Although this is unambiguously the position that Maimonides takes in his *Guide of the Perplexed*, many other statements of his appear to contradict, or at least severely restrict, the view as presented there. See the discussion of this issue in Isadore Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides*, (Harvard, 1980) p. 448ff, and Joseph Stern, *Problems and Parables of the Law: Maimonides and Nahmanides on the Reasons for the Commandments* (SUNY Press: Albany, 1998), p. 49-56

Maimonides not only saw each of the commandments as being essentially goal-oriented, but he saw all of them as fundamentally pointing to the very same goal: the apprehension of the true monotheistic God, which is the greatest form of intellectual perfection. All of the mitzvot, in his view, exist to either directly teach those truths that contribute to human perfection, such as the commandment to believe in one God, or were commanded by God in order to establish the proper environment for the Torah's adherents to have the mental and physical ability to better contemplate those truths (*Guide of the Perplexed* 3:27-28). A few comments of Ramban also indicate that he too saw the Torah as having one underlying goal in its message to mankind. In discussing the reasoning for why so many mitzvot appear to be reminders of the exodus from Egypt, Ramban writes, "the intent of all of the mitzvot is that we should believe in our God and admit to Him that He created us, and that is the intent of creation, for we have no other reason for the initial creation and the Almighty God has no desire in lower [creatures] other than that man should know and admit to his God that He created Him" (Ex. 13:16). The meaning of mitzvot, then, is for man to recognize His Creator—a rather similar understanding to that of Maimonides.

Towards this specific objective of bringing man to a state where he is able to recognize God and acknowledge Him as the Creator, Chaim Henoch has helpfully categorized Ramban's reasons for commandments into three general categories, for each of which he provides a biblical name: *edot*, *hukim*, and *mishpatim*.<sup>191</sup> This three-fold division is based upon Ramban's comment to Deut. 6:24, where he does indicate that *edot* represent what is done as reminders about God, *hukim* are performed "because they are good... despite

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<sup>191</sup> Chaim Henoch, *Ha-Ramban Ke-Hoker u-Ke-Mikubal* (Jerusalem, 1992). Henoch sees R. Saadiah Gaon as giving four general rationalizations for all of the commandments (based on the end of Treatise I of *Beliefs and Opinions*), and credits R. Judah Halevi (in *Kuzari* 2:48) as introducing the idea that all of the mitzvot have as their unified goal the perfection of man and the realization of his transcendence

their reason not having been made evident to all,” and *mishpatim* refers to “*mishpatei yishuv ha-medinah*,” or laws for political and social stability. Although he gives only very few examples for this categorization, it is not hard to see how he understands different mitzvot based upon his comments elsewhere. In the first category of *edot*, Ramban would likely include anything discussed in his long comment regarding the many mitzvot established to remind Jews of the Exodus, such as celebrating Passover, redeeming the firstborn son and animals, donning *tefillin* and affixing a *mezuzah*.<sup>192</sup> Remembering the miraculous exodus from Egypt is directly related to belief in what Ramban refers to as the primary principles of that Torah: that God is the creator and the omnipotent God in complete control of all of the world’s affairs, which was proven by the display of His power at the Exodus.<sup>193</sup> Perhaps more directly, Ramban also recognizes as mitzvot the command to believe in God (Ex. 20:2), the recitation of Shema (Deut. 6:4), and remembering the events at Sinai (Ramban to Deut. 4:9 and Ex. 20:17), all of which themselves teach the central truths of God’s existence and providence. As for *mishpatim*, Ramban to this verse provides examples such as the laws of custodianship and the setting up of a court system to administer punishments and the like.

While it is certainly clear how the *edut* contribute to what Ramban has identified as the overarching goal of the commandments, the roles of both *hukim* and *mishpatim* in servicing the objective of acknowledging God is much less apparent. In fact, Ramban also has written (to Ex. 20:23) that the mitzvot “each one of them, has many reasons,” and so perhaps the comment quoted above stating that the commandments have one unified goal is

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<sup>192</sup> Ramban to Ex. 13:16. See also his commentary to Ex. 20:13, Lev. 17:11, Lev. 20:30, Deut. 4:6 and Deut. 22:6

<sup>193</sup> It should be pointed out that when Ramban refers to the Exodus he likely does not mean the narrowly defined single event of leaving Egypt, but rather the entire process, beginning with the miraculous signs and plagues that Moses brought about against Pharaoh and his subjects, and extending to all of the events in the book of Exodus, such as the giving of the Torah and Mount Sinai.

imprecise.<sup>194</sup> To resolve these sayings of Ramban regarding the commandments, it must be remembered that Ramban should not be expected to have the same understanding of acknowledging God as Maimonides does. While the latter sees this connection to God as being forged purely through intellectual contemplation, Ramban likely understanding that anything which contributes to man's moral advancement and spiritual health are in themselves useful in bringing man closer to God, and thus more deeply able to acknowledge and thank Him. Ramban writes that the Torah commands man to "be holy," meaning that man must "attach himself to God" by making himself holy (Lev. 19:1). While Maimonides saw the utility of *mishpatim* only insofar as they would provide enough peace of mind for the servant of God to focus on contemplating Him, Ramban's more expansive concept of "clinging to God" as acknowledging Him as the creator allows for Ramban to see more value in social mitzvot. Returning to the issue of shoing away the mother bird, Ramban writes that this mitzvah is not in the Torah for the bird's sake, but to better inculcate in people the trait of compassion. Explaining a Midrash which refers to the mitzvah of slaughtering as being commanded "in order to purify humanity," Ramban writes that such things were commanded "so that His creatures should be purged and purified of any dross of evil thoughts or vile traits" (Deut. 22:6).

Several commandments, both "between man and God" and those "between man and his fellow man" are thus explainable as helping a person become a more moral, and therefore more spiritual, individual. Circumcision, for example, serves as a reminder that the sexual act should not be done to fulfill one's desires, but only for the purpose of procreation (Gen.

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<sup>194</sup> Actually, it is possible that Ramban believes that adherence to any mitzvah, by virtue of it being commanded at Sinai, is an expression of recognizing God's authority, as Ramban writes to Ex. 20:17. However, this would not be able to explain any of the meanings of the commandments, because even if the mitzvot were entirely arbitrary rituals one would still be fulfilling this purpose by carrying out the command of God.

17:9). Otherwise permitted forms of material indulgence are prohibited as such, so that man can be holy “like God is holy” (Lev. 19:1). Not only does this context of mitzvot as means to purify man’s baser natures explain many individual commandments, but it also helps understand a general orientation of some of the Torah’s vaguer obligations. Therefore, verses which require man to “do the right and the good” (Deut. 6:8) and “cleave to God” (Deut. 11:22) are explained by Ramban as referring to all of the behaviors that give a person this higher moral standing. Doing the right and the good means for Ramban acting towards others even beyond that which might be required by the strict laws of the Torah, because the more a person behaves with kindness and moral rectitude, the closer he is to God. The *nazir* who further distances himself from worldly pleasures is therefore a perfect example of a person who is automatically advancing towards God (Ramban to Num. 6:11).

The *hukim*, Ramban has written, all have reasons, such that even the nations will recognize the benefit of these *hukim* to serving God properly (Deut. 4:4). However, the exact reasons are not evident to the common man, and are thus usually given a more mystical treatment by Ramban, but seeing how he explains a few of these types of mitzvot is indicative of how he likely understands them as a whole. Ramban definitely sees some of these *hukim*, such as the Torah’s dietary restrictions, as serving the same purpose as *mishpatim*, namely, keeping man’s moral standing and his ability to recognize God properly. The Torah, in Ramban’s view, prohibits foods which cause the soul to be “thickened” or “stopped up,” which is why only the people of Israel who are required to be a “holy people unto” God are prohibited from clogging up their souls through eating these ‘denser’ foods (Ramban to Ex. 22:30 and Deut. 14:3). Therefore, these commandments are also essentially directed towards man’s intellectual and spiritual development, even if only those who know

of the theurgic connections between food and mental abilities would understand the relevance of these laws. Similarly, Ramban sees the prohibition to cohabit with a menstruating woman as being vital for the mental health necessary for serving God properly, quoting medical knowledge and experimentation as verifying the deleterious effects of coming in contact with a woman's menstruating blood (Gen. 31:35, Lev. 18:19). All of these serve, in Betzalel Safran's words, to "spiritualize" the body, in order to better prepare one's person for approaching the divine.<sup>195</sup>

In fact, one can even see in Ramban's reaction towards the reason provided by Maimonides for the sacrificial orders a commitment to that essentially Maimonidean ideal of commandments being sensible and having a good reason, as Ramban writes, (to Lev. 1:9) "far be it for the [sacrifices] to not have a purpose or desire other than the negation of pagan worship." He therefore attempts to provide a reason for the commandment that takes into account not only the basic idea of killing an animal as religious worship, but also to provide meaning for more of the sacrificial details, explaining that the one bringing the sacrifice places his hand on the animal "standing in for deed," and that innards and kidneys are burnt upon the alter "for those are the instruments of thought and desire" in man, so that all of these together will inspire the person to realize that all of those body parts were involved in his guilt. Ramban's reason for sacrifices is closely related to penitence, both in the sense that the supplicant is meant to imagine himself as deserving "having his blood spilled and sprinkled upon the alter," (to Lev. 1:9) as well as in a more mystical-theurgic sense, in that "all sins produce a disgrace in the soul and presents as a blemish to it, and so it [i.e. the soul]

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<sup>195</sup> Betzlel Safran, "R. Azriel and Nahmanides: Two Views of the Fall of Man." Yair Lorberbaum, "The Divinity of the Soul," explains that this concept is directly related to Ramban's mystical view of the human body being shaped according to certain divine secrets: because the body itself is a reflection of the divine *sefirot*, it too is spiritualized along with man's soul through these mitzvot.

cannot receive the face of its master unless it is pure from sin... which is why the soul that has sinned unintentionally must offer a sacrifice” (Ramban to Lev. 4:2).

The entire discussion so far has been in the context of Ramban’s assertion that “we have no other explanation for God’s original creation” of the world other than for His creatures, that is, the human race, to recognize Him as the creator. Man specifically is singled out for this purpose, because of his unique status as having a soul which is the loftiest of all created beings, a soul which came directly from God’s “breath,” as well as due to his ability to choose freely to serve God only of his own volition, as discussed in the previous section.<sup>196</sup> We have assumed, therefore, that all of the mitzvot are essentially oriented towards that goal, which we have identified as being the same goal as *deveikut*, or attachment to God. However, this equation between *deveikut* and acknowledgement of God has not been adequately explained above, and Ramban does not seem to deal with this connection explicitly in his writings. Perhaps, then, as in most problems in interpreting Ramban, we should turn to his esoteric hints. In the same comment in which he discusses the importance of remembering the Exodus (13:16), Ramban writes that “by way of truth... for the sake of His name and glory did he act for us and take us out of Egypt.” He similarly explains the verse which states that God took Israel out of Egypt on order for His Shekhinah to dwell among them (Ex. 29:46), that “by way of *peshat* the Shekhinah which dwells in Israel is for the need of the layman [i.e. humanity] and not the On High [i.e. God], but [by way of truth] the matter is like that which the verse states, ‘Israel—that through you I will be glorified’

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<sup>196</sup> The fact that this role is primarily taken by the people of Israel instead of by all of humanity will be discussed in the upcoming sections. That this is the primary purpose of creation, and that man is uniquely suited to fulfill this role because of his free will, is stated by Ramban to Deut. 32:26, but that it is (also) related to his loftiness of soul is implied by Ramban’s comments to Ex. 13:16, 20:13, Lev. 17:11, 20:30, Deut. 22:6, Iyov 36:7, and *Kitvei Ramban* 1:142, as discussed above, with the role of Israel in particular discussed in Ramban to Num. 14:32, Deut. 26:17 and 32:26.



(Isaiah 49:30.”<sup>197</sup> According to kabbalah, the Shekhinah serves not the purpose of man, but the needs of God.<sup>198</sup>

However one is to make sense of such a concept that the Shekhinah “services God,”<sup>199</sup> it is clear that the idea of *deveikut*, of man’s attachment to God, is a two-way street: just as man’s spiritualization brings him closer to the heavens, his performance of mitzvot bring the divine Shekhinah into the world.<sup>200</sup> This could possibly be the key to understanding the relationship between the commandments involved in *deveikut* and those involved in recognizing God. As much as man can recognize God as creator, pray to Him and acknowledge his own status as a beneficiary of divine kindness, all of these are through abstractions and the keeping alive of a memory of when God played a much more active role in history. By mitzvot actively involving the Shekhinah even in man’s current affairs through history, this recognition of God becomes possible not only by recalling the Exodus, but by God’s current presence, which will eventually be recognized not only by the people of Israel, but all of mankind.

## **VII. Miracles, Nature, and Divine Providence**

Considering that, as discussed in the previous section, Ramban believes that the entire purpose of the creation of the world (whether it be for God’s sake or for humanity’s) is so

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<sup>197</sup> See also Ramban’s Commentary to Ex. 2:25, 29:45, and Ex. 31:2

<sup>198</sup> Joseph Stern, based upon this esoteric idea of Ramban, sees him as having a two-tiered systems for the reasons for the commandments: each mitzvah is doubly significant as a means by which man perfects himself, as well as through a mystical mechanism by which the mitzvah accomplishes some rectification in the divine and the relationship between God and His world. See Joseph Stern, *Problems and Parables of the Law: Maimonides and Nahmanides on the Reasons for the Commandments* (SUNY Press: Albany, 1998), p. 67-86

<sup>199</sup> After all, Ramban writes to Deut. 10:12, proving from Job 35:7, that God receives no harm or benefit from man’s actions. See Halbertal, *Al Derekh ha-Emet* p. 276-281 and R. Eliyahu Dessler, *Michtav Me-Eliyahu* 3:269

<sup>200</sup> See Ramban to Gen. 23:3, Ex. 22:30, Lev. 19:2, Deut. 11:22 and 26:19, as well as Safran’s article cited above.

that human beings will acknowledge their creator, it is not surprise that Ramban places a heavy emphasis throughout his commentary on how God reveals Himself to His creatures. The Torah also provides Ramban with ample opportunities to discuss such topics, because the Bible is full of both miraculous occurrences, as well as revelations of the Shekhinah, the vehicle by which God interacts with humanity. At the same time, however, Ramban must account for the fact that “not in every generation does God perform miracles,”<sup>201</sup> both in the Bible and in the reality which Ramban was facing. He therefore advances a theory, already developed by earlier authors such as R. Judah Halevi, that there are two distinct forms of miracles: the revealed miracles and the hidden miracles. While such a position would appear to be relatively straightforward, there is of course much lying beneath the surface. What exactly constitutes a “hidden,” as opposed to a revealed miracle? If these miracles are ones that are not recognized by human beings, then why would God perform them in the first place, if the function of miracles is to bring about man’s recognition of God’s omnipotence?

One of the first contexts in which Ramban introduces this distinction between revealed and hidden miracles is in his comments regarding the birth of Yocheved. Ibn Ezra, to Gen. 46:23, rejects the Midrash which states that Yocheved was born as Jacob’s family descended into Egypt, because she would consequently have been 130 years old when giving birth to Moses, which is far older that Sarah was when she gave birth to Isaac, and the Bible presented that event as being miraculous, but never even hints that Moses’ birth was even more miraculous. Ramban, however, (to Gen. 46:15) strongly disapproves of Ibn Ezra’s attitude towards the Midrash’s willingness to supplement the biblical text with miraculous events. Responding directly to Ibn Ezra’s reasoning that the Torah would have noted if a

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<sup>201</sup> Ramban’s words in his commentary to Ex. 13:16

particular event occurred by way of miracle, Ramban insists that this is not the case at all, but rather the Torah only points out if a miracle was previously promised by a prophet or the miracle is meant to serve as a message of some kind, but the types of miracles which surround the righteous or exist to punish the wicked are not going to be stated explicitly. The reason for this, writes the Ramban, is because those are all hidden miracles, and there is no need to speak of them because “the entire foundation of the Torah” is based upon such miracles, as it is not natural for a sinner to die from his sin, or rain to fall due to the deeds of the righteous, but rather “the nation of the Torah has in all of its affairs nothing but miracles.” This passage ascribing the birth of Moses to a “hidden miracle” is fraught with difficulty. First of all, how can a miracle sensibly be called “hidden” if it is completely outside the realm of the natural order, as would be a woman giving birth at the age of 130? How can it be that the status of hidden or revealed is dependent not upon the magnitude of the miracle (as one might assume from reading *Kuzari*), but determined by whether or not the event was foretold by a prophet or an angel?

Ramban’s statement that reward and punishment is entirely attributable to hidden miracles is strengthened by the passage which discusses the great importance placed upon the Egyptian Exodus (Ramban’s comments to Ex. 13:16). There, Ramban writes that there would be many who would deny God’s existence, or at least even if they would admit to His existence, deny His involvement with the world on behalf of human beings. At the Exodus, when God chose a group of people to perform great miracles for them, and spoke to one of those people through prophecy to convey to him the message of why this was occurring and how people should act towards Him, these heretical views were disproven, which is why

belief in the Exodus is *eo ipso* belief in all of the principles of the Torah. *Therefore*, Ramban appears to say,

“through these great and prominent miracles man recognizes the hidden miracles which are the foundation of the entire Torah, since a person does not have a share in the Torah of Moses our teacher until he believes that in all that occurs and happens to us, all of them are miracles, there is no nature or ‘way of the world,’ whether together or as individuals. Rather, if he will perform mitzvot, he will be rewarded with success, and if he violates them he will be cut off by punishment, all according to the Almighty’s decree.”

The connection here is somewhat obscure; if a person believes in the clearly miraculous nature of the Exodus, why does that necessitate that he believe that “there is no nature or ‘way of the world’ at all”? Does it not indicate the very opposite, that the world generally operates according to a set of natural laws that were violated in the miraculous Exodus?

Many have taken these words of Ramban literally, and assumed that he believes (and insists that every Jew believe) that there is no such thing as a natural order.<sup>202</sup> However, not only is this a difficult position to take in and of itself, but it appears to be directly contradicted by countless other statements of Ramban throughout his writings. Perhaps most explicit is Ramban’s comments to Job (36:7) where he writes that only the righteous are dealt with via God’s providence, but as for the rest of humanity, they must fight wars with weapons and are subject to the chance of the natural order, and he explicitly ascribes this to the nation of Israel as well. Similarly, in his comments to Lev. 26:11, Ramban writes that

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<sup>202</sup> Gershom Scholem and others, cited at the beginning of the article by David Berger, “Miracles and the Natural Order in Nahmanides” in *Rabbi Moses Nahmanides, Explorations in His Religious and Literary Virtuosity*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, MA: 1983)

while ideally Jews should not be reliant upon doctors or natural medicines, but instead seek to better their ways in order to improve their health, once people became accustomed to using doctors God did leave them “to natural accidents,” meaning that they were governed not by providence, but by nature. Returning to Genesis, Ramban writes regarding Abraham (Gen. 18:19) that although “human beings are left to chance until their time of reckoning, regarding His pious ones [God] puts His ‘heart’ upon him [the pious one] to ‘know’ him specifically, to guard him always,” again indicating that with the exception of a *Hasid* such as Abraham, God generally leaves man’s incidences up to chance.

Several solutions have been proposed to deal with this rather glaring contradiction in Ramban’s commentary regarding the role of divine providence. Chaim Hanoch, in a footnote,<sup>203</sup> proposes that Ramban to Ex. 13:16 might only be referring to the entirety of the Jewish people when he writes that they are not subject to nature, but this overlooks the fact that Ramban has explicitly stated there that there is no nature “not regarding the group or the individual.” Yaakov Elman suggests that perhaps these different attitudes were meant to be taught to different audiences, although it is hard to imagine that Ramban would have presented such opposing views within in the very same book intending for different readers.<sup>204</sup> The most thorough study of this topic however, is that undertaken by David Berger, who has argued that Ramban actually holds a view which is almost the exact opposite of the view one might ascribe to him by reading only the passages regarding the Exodus and Yocheved.<sup>205</sup> Comparing his opinion to that of Maimonides, Berger writes that

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<sup>203</sup> Chaim Hanoch, “*Ramban ke-Hoker u-ke-Mekubal*”

<sup>204</sup> Yaakov Elman, “Moses ben Nahman/Nahmanides (Ramban),” in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of Its Interpretation* 1, 2 (2000), p. 416-432

<sup>205</sup> David Berger, “Miracles and the Natural Order in Nahmanides.” In the introduction to that volume, Isadore Twersky notes that the position taken by Berger diverges somewhat from that taken by Betzalel Safran in his

Ramban does not even believe it possible for there to be providence through natural means, but rather a person or nation is either left entirely to chance, or to miraculous intervention—be it through openly revealed or hidden miracles. When Ramban speaks in the context of Exodus of the requirement to believe that nothing that occurs happens by chance, he does not mean nothing *at all*, but nothing in the context of reward and punishment. Read thusly, Ramban is making the somewhat obvious claim<sup>206</sup> that when it comes to God acting on behalf of Israel or a righteous person, He is performing a miracle, as it is not natural for the rain to fall due to someone's good deeds or to be prevented by the sins of mankind.<sup>207</sup>

This approach to Ramban is not only attractive for its solving of this internal contradiction in his commentary, but also because it accords well with everything discussed in the previous section regarding Ramban's understanding of *deveikut* and the purpose of the world's creation. If, as is indicated by Ramban to Gen. 18:19 and Lev. 26:11, the divine providence afforded to a person is commensurate with his status as a *Hasid* or otherwise level of righteousness, then it is easy to understand how performance of mitzvot brings about the Shekhinah's greater involvement in the world, and at least the mechanism by which it would be in God's interest, so to speak, for man to fulfill his divine duties. Additionally, this accords with another statement of Ramban regarding the prevalence of miracles in general. In explaining why God told Noah to make such a large wooden ark, when the entire project would be dependent upon miracles in the first place, Ramban writes that God is

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article also published in *Ramban: Explorations in His Religious Virtuosity*. See Safran, "Fall of Man," n. 101 and n. 104

<sup>206</sup> But not entirely obvious, as one could have argued (as indeed seems to be the position of Betzalel Safran) that the rewards and punishment occur not through miracles, but through a divine guidance of nature. The difference between these two possibilities probably has no practical consequence other than in which of the *sefirot* is enacting this reward.

<sup>207</sup> The similarity of this view to the view of Halevi is noted by Michael Nehorai, "Nahmanides on Miracles and Nature," [Hebrew] *Daat* 17 (1986), 23-31.

interested in keeping the violation of nature to a minimum (Gen. 6:19. If every natural occurrence is in actuality a miraculous one, it would be hard to understand why this would be the case.

What remains to be seen, however, is the precise difference between “hidden” and “open” miracles, as it is still difficult to accept why Moses’ birth would have been a hidden miracle simply because it was not predicted by an angel. According to Betzalel Safran, Michael Nehorai, and Moshe Halbertal, the true difference between hidden and revealed miracles is actually not one that is discernable through the nature of the miracle itself, but due to a difference in how God is dealing with this particular case. The metaphysical difference between these two types of miracles, argues Halbertal, lies in the fact that hidden miracles are manipulations of nature, while revealed miracles involve the same name of God and attribute involved in the creation of the world: those miracles recreate nature.<sup>208</sup> Which type of miracle to be used will be determined based upon the level of *deveikut* of the person or nation for whom the miracle is being performed. Thus, Ramban has an extensive esoteric comment to Gen. 17:1 and Ex. 6:2 showing how the different names of God used in the contexts of the prophecies of the forefathers versus the prophecy of Moses, because not only was Moses on a greater prophetic level, but his attachment to a different sefirotic realm meant that he would merit bringing about miracles of an entirely different order.

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<sup>208</sup> Halbertal, *Al Derekh ha-Emet* 157-169.

## VIII. Historiosophy and Eschatology

By now it should be clear that Ramban places great importance on the revelation of God's presence, and so Ramban's philosophy of history is unsurprisingly one that is centered on the revelation of God over the course of history. Beginning from the second chapter of Genesis, Ramban sees all of history as being symbolized in the first week described by creation, with each week corresponding to another thousand years, with the first thousand years being represented by the act of creation, and the final seven thousand years, the "Sabbath," as being the final era (Commentary to Gen. 2:1). This symbolic reading of the Bible as referring to historical events, past and future, is not foreign to rabbinic Midrash and Jewish exegesis, but the particular interpretation of the first week of creation as prefiguring the rest of history is identified by Amos Funkenstein as being adopted from Christian readings.<sup>209</sup> Many later scholars have pointed out, however, that while Ramban may have adopted this method of symbolic exegesis, (which may itself have been taken from rabbinic midrash) he utilized the method not so much for the purpose of interpreting post-biblical events, but for establishing a framework for history to be seen as a religious progression.<sup>210</sup>

Based upon this theory, Ramban sees the first thousand years, the era of the forefathers described in the book of Genesis, as being a 'creation' of sorts (Ramban's Introduction to the Exodus), allowing Ramban to explain the rabbinic title of the book of Genesis as being entirely a "Book of Creation," because the stories of the forefathers which take up the majority of the book are also a creation. Practically speaking, this translates into

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<sup>209</sup> Amos Funkenstein, "Ramban's Typological Interpretations" [Hebrew] *Zion* 40 (1942). Interestingly, Funkenstein believes that Jews, unlike Christians, do not need to see history as expressing a religious progression or development.

<sup>210</sup> Eliezer Touitou, "The Controversy with the Christians in Nahmanides' Commentary on the Pentateuch," [Hebrew] *Shnaton: An Annual for Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies* (2010), 137-166 and Micah Goodman, "Typological Interpretations and the Idea of Progress: Studies in the Historical Theory of Ramban," *Daat* 56 (2005)



one of Ramban's most well-known keys of biblical interpretation, commonly formulated as *ma'aseh avot siman le-banim*, the actions of the forefathers are a sign for their children. This theory of "prefiguration," where actions and happenstances of the Biblical personalities are omens of what was then (and in some cases, still is) yet to come, is likewise shown by Funkenstein to have developed by early medieval Christian exegetes, and he points out that it can be understood in a variety of ways, a line of thinking which was developed even further by Ruth Ben-Meir,<sup>211</sup> whose analysis will be followed in this study.

One very simple way in which the acts of the forefathers serve as models for the behavior of their children is for their actions to serve as role models. As already mentioned in Part 1, both Radak and Ramban seek to understand why so many stories and passages are included in the Torah which concern the patriarchs, and often they conclude that the purpose is for moral or religious instruction, for the forefathers to either act as aspirational examples, or sometimes as warnings of behavior worth condemning. Ben-Meir notes that Ramban actually sees the biblical characters as themselves seeing their forbearers in this light, as he writes that Isaac was motivated to descend to Egypt during a famine because he wanted to follow his father Abraham's own example, and the same is true regarding Isaac's making a treaty with Abimelech.<sup>212</sup> Similarly, the story of Jacob's meeting with Esau, despite not having any clear moral value, is still seen by Ramban (quoting the Midrash) as meaning to convey instruction for the future (Gen. 32:9). A rabbinic Midrash adds to this *peshat* however, writing that various occurrences happened to the forefathers as harbingers of what would happen to their children.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Ben-Meir, "Ma'aseh Avot Siman Le-Banim," [Hebrew] *Iyunei Mikra u-Parshanut* 8 (2008) 533-551

<sup>212</sup> Ramban's Commentary to Gen. 26:1 and 26:29 respectively

<sup>213</sup> Midrash Tanhuma, *Parashat Lech Lecha*, 12

The most interesting of senses, however, in which Ramban utilizes this topic of “the actions of the fathers are signs for their children,” is how he introduces the topic to Gen. 12:6. There, he associates the actions of the forefathers with specific actions performed by the prophets such as Jeremiah, who were instructed by God to act out their prophecies in order to ensure that they would come true. This, says Ramban, is the same reason for why the forefathers underwent the same travails as would occur to their progeny: in order to ensure that the promises that God made to them would be kept, by “bringing down,” so to speak, the heavenly prophecies to the realm of physical action. In this way, the actions of the fathers are very literally just like a “creation” for their children, in that just as God created the earth and the heavens, the fathers determined the destinies of their children, whether for good or for ill. Thus, by Abraham leaving Canaan to go to Egypt during the famine, which Ramban sees as expressing a weakness of faith on Abraham’s part, he caused his children to have to be exiled in Egypt (Ramban to Gen. 12:10).

Just as the stories of the forefathers preconfigure later biblical events, Ramban also sees many allusions to the future events of the Messianic redemption. Although Ramban wrote other works dealing with the final chapters of history that would still be forthcoming, such topics do not directly pertain to his interpretations of the Torah. Even though Ramban does see prophecies for the future included both in hints from the actions of the forefathers, as well as in visions of the future towards the close of Deuteronomy, Ramban seems to spend more ink picking up on allusions to the present, instead of speculating about prophecies yet to come. Ramban attributes the current length of the exile to the initial conciliatory stance taken by the Second Temple-era kings towards the kingdom of Rome (Gen. 32:4, cf. 32:26). Using Jacob’s ultimate triumph as a foreshadowing of the redemption, Ramban assures his

readers that there will always be members of Jacob's family who remain alive (Gen. 32:9) and Israel will come out on top even after all of its travails. The fact that Jacob returns to Canaan only after having died in Egypt is seen by Ramban as indicating that the redemption will come after the nation of Israel will have become so downtrodden and desiccated in their exile that they will be like Ezekiel's dead bones. It was thus up to Ramban to "calm those weary of the exiles and troubles... to tug at their hearts through *peshat* and pleasant interpretations," (Ramban's Introduction) showing how the Torah foresaw all of their troubles, and promised that they would be redeemed at the end.

## Appendix A. Elucidation of Ramban to Numbers 4:20

In order to better illustrate Ramban's exegetical methodology, a representative passage from his commentary is elucidated here. To provide the context: after describing the encampments and traveling arrangements of the entire people of Israel, the Torah (Num. 4:20) describes how the priests and Levites would prepare the Tabernacle for transport by first covering all of the holy vessels. Ramban writes, beginning with the scriptural quotation (my translation):

“And they should not come to see when they cover [*ke-vala'*, *lit.*: consume] the Holy [lest they die].” (Num. 4:20) “When they insert the vessel into its sack, as described in the above passage, ‘and they should spread upon it such-and-such garment’ and ‘cover it with such-and-such covering,’ and its *balua'* is its covering.” This is the opinion of Rashi and Onkelus. And our rabbis said in Tractate Sanhedrin (81b) that this is a negative commandment [*lit.*: ‘warning’] on one who steals a service-vessel, who is liable to death and zealots attack him, as stealing and robbing are called *beli'ah*, from the language of “*he ‘swallows’ riches and vomits them*” (Job 20:15), “*and I remove what he ‘swallowed’ from his mouth*” (Jeremiah 51:44). And Rabbi Abraham [Ibn Ezra] said as is its *peshat*, that “they should not come to see when the covering curtain is removed and the ark is uncovered,” only afterwards once it is covered should they come to carry it. Then, “*ke-vala' et ha-kodesh*” [means], when the structure is removed from upon the ark which is holy, from the language, “*God swallowed without pity*” (Lamentations 2:2), “*together round, and have consumed*<sup>214</sup> *me*” (Job 10:8). And here the Levites are warned not to touch the Holy Ark [or] they would die, rather they should carry it by its poles, and also it warns them not to come

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<sup>214</sup> The meaning of this term in context is itself obscure

to see the removal of the structure while Aaron lowers the curtain, similar to [the inhabitants of Beth Shemesh who had died] “*because they saw the Ark of God*” (Samuel I 6:19).<sup>215</sup> And he [Ibn Ezra] explained this [lit: ‘said’] well. However, by way of truth [i.e. kabbalah], the reason for the verse is because, considering that the glory [*kavod*] of the One Who sits among the cherubs is there, the Levites were warned not to [come to] ruin by seeing God until the priests lower the curtain, for then the glory [*kavod*] will be seen in its mighty absconsion [*be-hevyon ‘oz*], and return to its original place to the Holy of Holies, and then “*ke-vala’ et hakodesh*” is [to be read] according to its *peshat*. And the discerning will understand.

*Prima facie*, Ramban here is merely quoting his predecessors—Rashi, the Talmud, and Ibn Ezra—and then providing a kabbalistic explanation, so that four completely disparate interpretations of the verse (with only one of them, the kabbalistic, attributable to Ramban himself) are provided. However, after all that has been said above regarding Ramban’s methodology in general, it is clear that these are no mere quotations, but Ramban’s weighing of interpretive options available to him.

Perhaps the first interpretive issue at play is the proper definition of the word “*ke-vala’*,” which is a word usually used to refer to consumption, a translation that hardly seems to fit the context of the priests’ preparing the Tabernacle for travel. For each interpretation that he quotes, Ramban must therefore account for how the source is translating this word, besides the meaning of the phrase as a whole. Ramban first quotes Rashi, identifying him as translating the word *bala’* here as “covering,” as does the traditional Aramaic Targum. Ramban does not provide any philological support for such a translation, but this is probably

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<sup>215</sup>See Ramban’s comments to Gen. 2:16 where he writes that Biblical “death” can indicate merely that one is liable to be killed by God, but not that this penalty would occur with any immediacy

because its meaning is readily understood: the vessels are metaphorically “swallowed” by their respective garment-sacks. Ramban does not challenge this interpretation, indicating that he believed it to be a plausible one—but not an interpretation so compelling as to rule out other alternatives.

The second interpretation Ramban quotes is the Talmudic one, which sees the verse as referring to a prohibition of stealing the vessels of the Temple. Such an interpretation appears to completely strip the verse of its context, and is almost certainly not its straightforward meaning. Thus, Maimonides (*Book of Commandments*, Principle #3) declares this Midrash to be merely an *asmakhta*, although Ramban in his critical glosses on Maimonides vehemently disagrees, for reasons that are principally halakhic. Due to his own reading of the Talmudic passage in question (as well as his reading of several other key passages), Ramban is compelled to declare this teaching prohibiting the robbery of the Temple’s vessels as a legitimate derivation from the verse. At the same time, however, we have already seen that Ramban sympathizes with Maimonides’ view that a true *derash* cannot be completely contrary to the verse’s actual meaning, and so Ramban uses his knowledge of Scripture to show that the interpretation of the Sages is philologically justified, by quoting two verses that refer allegorically to stealing as swallowing.

Despite this justification, however, Ramban still recognizes that the Midrash of the sages cannot be the *peshat* interpretation, and while he already quoted Rashi, Ramban believes that a more correct interpretation was provided by Ibn Ezra. As he did when paraphrasing the Talmud, Ramban does not merely quote Ibn Ezra’s words, but demonstrates why such an interpretation is tenable by quoting proof-texts. Additionally, by introducing Ibn Ezra’s words with “*ke-fshuto*,” Ramban reminds the reader that there is no competition

between Ibn Ezra's interpretation and that of the Talmud, but they operate under different rules and can exist simultaneously; the verse remains both "in the hands of *peshat*" as well as in those of *derash*. By the end of this analysis, however, one might still sense a slight feeling of unease as far as *peshat*, considering the fact that Ramban felt the need to quote both Rashi and Ibn Ezra; if either of their interpretations were fully persuasive, why quote both? Even if tenable, it appears as though Ramban is not fully satisfied with either of them.

Enter, then, Ramban's final "trick," so to speak. The exact meaning of his intentionally cryptic interpretation, prefaced with "by way of truth," need not concern us, especially as we should heed Ramban's introductory warning not to delve into esoteric matters if they were not already explained to us by word of mouth. Even without understanding its meaning, however, we can still appreciate how this comment services Ramban's exegetical program. Interpretations of this obscure verse abound, and while "scripture can sustain them all,"<sup>216</sup> all require 'stretching' the verse in some degree. The kabbalistic interpretation, even if not meant to be understood by the average reader, is still meant to impress upon him that there exists an interpretation which fits the verse perfectly, taking *ke-vala'* at its literal meaning of 'swallowing' while maintaining contextual reasonability, and so Ramban concludes this esoteric interpretation by assuring the reader that it allows reading the verse *ki-fshuto*. The Torah's words are perfect and precise, even if—or perhaps especially if—one must interpret it "by way of truth".

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<sup>216</sup> Ramban, *Glosses to Maimonides' Book of Commandments*, Principle #2, referring specifically to the simultaneous validity of both *peshat* and *derash* interpretations.

## Appendix B. The Book of Deuteronomy as an Example of Exegesis\*

Because Ramban's legal theory and philosophy of halakha and its development does not play a significant role in his Torah commentary,<sup>217</sup> this topic was not deemed necessary to be included in this study. However, in discussing Ramban's view of the Torah as it relates to determining the will of God and rabbinical laws (Part 2, Section IV) we noted that the relationship between rabbinic enactments and the biblical texts, as well as the general will of God. Regardless of whether or not Ramban believed that rabbinic authority was sourced in the requirement to carry out God's will, he probably still saw these rabbinic obligations as being extensions or safeguards of the Torah's laws and values, as the Talmud often presents them as such.<sup>218</sup> The manner in which rabbinic laws are related to biblical ones appear to be remarkably similar to the way in which, in Ramban's understanding, the laws in the book of Deuteronomy are related to the previous books of the Torah.

Sensitive as he always is to literary style and textual nuances, Ramban notes in his introduction to the fifth book of the Torah (and in his comments to Deut. 1:5) that unlike in the previous three books, nowhere in Deuteronomy does God "speak to Moses, saying," or commands Moses to instruct the people of Israel—instead, the book consists almost entirely of Moses speaking in first person. Ramban combines these details with a rabbinic comment categorizing the book of Deuteronomy as "*Mishneh Torah*," a review of the Torah, to develop a theory of this fifth book as representing Moses' own particular explanations and

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\* This section borrows heavily from Yaakov Elman, "The Book of Deuteronomy and Revelation: Nahmanides and Abarbanel," *Hazon Nahum*, eds. Y. Elman and J.S. Gurock, (New York 1997) pp. 229–250 and Albert (Dov) Friedberg, "Ramban's Daring and Creative Contribution to the Parshanut of the Book of Deuteronomy," *Hakirah* 13. However, presenting these elaborations as similar to rabbinic interpretations, and the differentiation of these new laws into three categories, differs considerably from both of their analyses.

<sup>217</sup> See Halberal, *Al Derekh* Ch. 1, specifically pages 40, 291. In that chapter, Halbertal focuses mainly on the laws that are derived from midrashic exegesis, but he appears to agree that the same concept might ap

<sup>218</sup> The general statement of the Sages regarding rabbinic enactments in Talmud Bavli *Yevamot* 21a refers to them as safeguards for the laws of the Torah, being a fulfillment of a biblical instruction "make a safeguard to my safeguards"



elaborations of the laws given to him at Sinai. Despite the fact that the book technically teaches over a hundred “new” commandments, some which are taught here because of their previous irrelevance or the like, Ramban attempts to show (whenever possible) that these newly taught mitzvot are clarifications or extensions of those laws taught previously.<sup>219</sup> Probably, Ramban does not mean that Moses had invented these mitzvot or legal details on his own, but rather that their placement in the book of Deuteronomy is due to their presentation as extensions or elaborations of earlier commandments.<sup>220</sup>

These elaborations of earlier mitzvot can be divided into three major categories. One category consists simply of additional details or specifications added on to commands that were taught previously. This would include the law requiring one to rejoice on the festivals (Deut. 16:1), an additional provision to the already known requirement to celebrate the festivals through abstention from work and bringing sacrifices.<sup>221</sup> Many additional details are similarly provided by the passage in Deuteronomy chapter 19 regarding the circumstances of unintentional manslaughter and the cities of refuge designed for such a criminal, which Ramban writes is repeated (after being already explained in Exodus 21:13 and Numbers 35:9-34) “in order to explain what must be added to the commandment.” A similar reason for repeating commandments is to extend laws that were already legislated to include more

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<sup>219</sup> This is besides for mitzvot which were left until Deuteronomy to be taught for practical reasons: either because they occur too rarely or are only applicable in the Land of Israel

<sup>220</sup> Ramban explains that term *hoeil Moshe* used in Deut. 1:5 means that Moses decided on his own to embark on this book-length elaboration of the Torah’s commandments. Exactly what was left up to Moses’ own discretion is left slightly ambiguous, but because all of these laws and legal details were taught to Moses at Sinai anyways, it would appear that Moses’ input is limited to the manner, order, and time of presentation. Either way, in discussing how these new commands relate to previous ones, Ramban invariably uses the term “*be’er*,” elaboration, the word used in Deut. 1:5 to describe Moses’ speech which makes up the bulk of the Deuteronomy.

<sup>221</sup> Ramban writes that this is an explanation of the commandment “regarding the festivals.” It is not entirely clear which specific command regarding the festivals he has in mind, either Exodus 23:14-19, 34:18-26, Leviticus chapter 23, or Numbers chapters 28-29. It could very well be that Ramban had all or at least multiple of these passages in mind.

people or situations. Thus, the law of paying a worker's wages on the *day* that he was hired (Deut. 24:15) is meant to clarify that the law of Lev. 19:13, which refers to the paying a night-laborer before sunrise, is equally applicable to a day-laborer. The prohibition of cutting oneself in mourning (Deut. 14:1), which was already a command directed towards the priests (Lev. 21:5), is "explained" in Deuteronomy to be applicable to all of Israel, for "the entire nation is holy."<sup>222</sup>

Another category of "elaborations" upon previous commandments are extensions of those commands, not to new situations, but as completely new obligations which Ramban understands as new applications or specifications of the values expressed in other laws. Commands such as reciting the "Shema" twice daily (Deut. 6:4) is thus interpreted as an extension of the obligation to believe in God (identified by Ramban as being the intent of Exodus 20:2, the first statement of the Decalogue), and the requirement to give gifts of the shoulder, cheeks, and maw of the animal to priests (Deut. 18:3) is an appendix to the previous command of the portions already meant to be donated to the priest from Numbers 18:9. The new laws of the "rebellious son" who is so insubordinate that he is to be punished by death (Deut. 21:18-21) is also suggested by Ramban to be a particular case of the general obligation "honor thy father and mother" (Ex. 20:12). The command to shoo away the mother bird (22:6) is explained as having the same basis as the prohibition to slaughter an animal and its mother on the same day (Lev. 22:28). Perhaps the boldest of such possible interpretations is Ramban's proposition that the commandment to affix a passage to the doorpost (*mezuzah*) is also an extension of the mitzvah of *tefillin*, to have it as a

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<sup>222</sup> This is the language of the Ramban in his comments there. Interestingly, he is paraphrasing the verse from Numbers 16:3, which was said by Korach in his rebellion against Moses.

“remembrance between your eyes,” as the Torah is instructing one to have the text of this passage be placed in conspicuous locations so as to be a reminder of the Torah.

Sometimes these new commandments which Ramban identifies as “elaborations” upon previous ones are actually entire new mitzvot, but are decreed as safeguards for previous mitzvot. A clear example of this kind would be the mitzvah of *ma’akeh*, or the requirement to build a parapet around the roof of the house (22:8), which Ramban identifies (perhaps rather predictably) as being a safeguard against the prohibition of “standing [idly] by the blood your neighbor” (Lev. 19:16). Similarly, the Torah’s declaration that the product of crossbreeding grape seeds with grain is prohibited to eat (22:9) is clearly a safeguard or punishment for violating the prohibition in Lev. 19:19 of sowing two kinds of seed. Moving a neighbor’s border landmark (19:14) is seen by Ramban as a prohibition protecting the established land divisions that would be made in the times of Joshua (Num. 26:56). Not plowing with an ox and donkey together (22:10) is similarly a safeguard, according to Ramban, meant to prevent interbreeding of species, prohibited by Lev. 19:19.

All of these three types of “explanatory” commandments or extensions appear to act as models for the rabbinic extensions or safeguards for their decrees as well. The rabbis themselves present most of their decrees as being safeguards for biblical ones, such as the prohibition to move unprepared objects on the Sabbath, presented as a guard against carrying on the Sabbath, which would be biblically prohibited. Ramban writes in his gloss to Maimonides’ Book of the Commandments that the reason for listening to the rabbis in cases such as these is because “they are adding on to the mitzvot themselves, as if it were an interpretation of the Torah,” hearkening back to how Deuteronomy extends earlier mitzvot. Even rabbinic decrees that are not safeguards are still often seen as extending the reasoning

or the value of a particular mitzvah in Ramban's understanding. Therefore, the rabbinic enactment which enforces one who wishes to sell a field to first offer it to his neighbors (Bava Metzia 108b) as expressing the values of Deut. 6:18. Ramban even sees in the rabbinic requirement for hand-washing an extension of the biblical command for priests to wash their hands before entering the Tabernacle (in his commentary to Ex. 30:19), just as Ramban sees the book of Deuteronomy extends the prohibition for priests to pull out their hair in mourning to all of Israel.

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