

CHAPTER 2

The Bible as a source for philosophical reflection

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INTRODUCTION: ISSUES OF METHODOLOGY

Is the Bible a source for Jewish philosophical reflection? A natural reaction is that it is. The Bible depicts the character of God, presents an account of creation, posits a metaphysics of divine providence and divine interventions, suggests a basis for morality, discusses many features of human nature, and frequently poses the notorious conundrum of how God can allow evil. Surely, then, it engages questions that lie at the very heart of Jewish philosophy, indeed of religious philosophy generally.

Yet this categorization of the Bible as philosophy must be qualified. For the Bible obviously deviates, in many features, from what philosophers (especially those trained in the analytic tradition) have come to regard as philosophy.

First, the Bible contains, at its very core, a great deal of material that is not necessarily philosophical: law, poetry, and narrative.

Second, we expect philosophical truth to be formulated in declarative sentences. The Bible yields few propositional nuggets of this kind.¹

Third, philosophical works try to reach conclusions by means of logical argumentation. The Bible contains little sustained argument of a deductive, inductive, or practical nature, and attempts to impose the structure of rational argument on the biblical text yield meager profit.

Fourth, philosophers try to avoid contradicting themselves. When contradictions appear, they are either a source of embarrassment or a spur to developing a higher order dialectic to accommodate the tension between the theses. The Bible, by contrast, often juxtaposes contradictory ideas, without explanation or apology: Ecclesiastes is entirely

constructed on this principle. The philosophically more sophisticated work of harmonizing the contradictions in the biblical text is left to the exegetical literature.²

Fifth, much of what the Bible has to say about subjects of manifest philosophical importance seems primitive to later philosophical sensibilities. For example, the biblical God ostensibly has human form and human emotions; he regrets his actions and changes his mind (e.g. Genesis 6:6; 1 Samuel 15:11). Miracles are commonplace, and natural events like earthquakes and winds are often identified as direct divine acts. If Jewish philosophy begins with the Bible, cynics might suggest, it can advance only by casting it behind.

This last problem is at the core of the concerns that Jewish philosophers have often felt about biblical material. Indeed, an acute awareness of the gap between the centrality of biblical teaching in Jewish thought and its apparent philosophical deficiency precipitated much of the subsequent history of Jewish philosophy. Many will derive from that history a pessimism about finding philosophy in the Bible. In particular, the most strenuous attempt ever to wed the Bible to philosophy – that of medieval thinkers – was of mixed value to biblical theology, as in many cases it arguably forced biblical texts into an artificial model.

Beginning with Philo and continuing on through medieval thinkers like Saadia Gaon and Maimonides, biblical hermeneutics often rested on the principle that the Bible conveys major philosophical and scientific truths. Biblical discourse, insist medieval rationalists, is not always to be taken literally. Although biblical portrayals of God and of events introduce the masses to basic truths – educating and elevating them – the proper understanding of these texts is available only to those who enter the realm of philosophy and science. Interpreting the text through the prism of reason reveals a philosophically impressive and compelling core. The books of the prophets thus reflect the philosophical acumen of their authors, though these individuals are philosophers of a special kind: not only do they perceive intellectual truths, but their faculty of “imagination” presents these truths in figurative terms and concrete images (Maimonides 1963, 1.36–7). The showcase example of prophet-as-philosopher is Ezekiel’s detailed vision of the chariot (Ezekiel 1; 10), which Maimonides treats as a repository of Aristotelian metaphysics (*Guide of the Perplexed*, 3.1–3.8). Other examples abound. In their analyses of the book of Job, medieval philosophers sometimes take each character to be espousing a different philosophical position on the basis and scope of divine providence.³ In the Garden of Eden story, man represents form, that is, intellect, the essence of a human; woman represents matter. Man sinned as a result of woman’s promptings. Hence the story of Eden captures the human predicament – matter

interferes with the proper exercise of intellect and with the realization of the human telos.⁴

A telling indicator of the close connection between philosophy and Bible in medieval times is that Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*, the greatest of Jewish philosophical works, is in significant measure an exegesis of the Bible. Gersonides, renowned for his philosophical and scientific achievements, authored a biblical commentary, as did Saadia Gaon and Abraham ibn Ezra. An entire exegetical tradition, down to the end of Jewish life in Spain (Isaac Abravanel) and even beyond, resorted to medieval philosophy – or rebelled against it.

Opposition to the rationalist biblical interpretation came from two directions.⁵ Some medieval Jews thought that the Bible must be read with absolute literalness and then taken on faith. If its doctrines, so understood, conflicted with those of philosophy, so much the worse for philosophy: philosophy would then have been exposed as heresy and falsehood. In early modern times, a different critical response emerged, one which in effect accused Maimonides and other medievals of a colossal anachronism. Spinoza put the charge especially sharply, proclaiming that any and all attributions of philosophical sophistication and truth to the Bible and the prophets were fictions (Spinoza 1951); his subversion of Maimonides’ doctrines, however overstated, marked the eclipse of the medieval enterprise. Later efforts to read the Bible through the prism of Kantian or Romantic philosophy, whether of rabbinic or academic provenance (such as the commentaries of Rabbi Samson Raphael Hirsch or Yechezkel Kaufmann’s theory of Israelite monotheism), could be and were subjected to a hermeneutic of suspicion.⁶

In light of the clear differences we have outlined between the Bible and works of philosophy – in style, method, and purpose – and in light of the checkered history of attempts to read good philosophy into the Bible, anyone proposing to portray the Bible as a source of philosophical reflection has to tread very carefully. And yet to claim that the religious and moral wisdom of the Bible is philosophically naive is grossly unfair – and not only to believers in divine revelation. An analogy to ancient philosophy is helpful. Recent work in ancient philosophy, including Presocratic philosophy, shows a remarkable alertness to contemporary problems along with perspicuous avenues for solution (see, for example, Barnes 1982); differences in terminology ought not blind us to the philosophical character of our predecessors’ insights. Philosophy in general has been rediscovering its roots of late, leading to a greater appreciation of centuries past. Although the Bible serves first and foremost as a record of primary religious experience, study of the Bible, in its original context and trailing clouds of exegesis,

evokes fruitful lines of theological reflection that repay philosophical attention even today.

In the remainder of this chapter we hope to illustrate the possibilities for a meaningful encounter between Bible and philosophy, one that will accord the Bible its place among the important sources of Jewish philosophy without exaggerating its analytical character and without blurring the lines between its formulations of certain problems or approaches and the formulations utilized by later philosophers. Needless to say, someone mining for philosophical ore is not likely to treat biblical texts in the same way that scholars in other fields would. Consequently, we have to gloss over and bracket a variety of linguistic, historical, and literary issues that could either complement or undermine our suggestions. "The Torah has seventy faces," but no one can display all of them at once.⁷

The purposes and scope of this volume dictate a focus on familiar biblical sources, texts whose place in the treatment of theological issues has been hallowed by time: the story of Job, the binding of Isaac, the Garden of Eden, and others. We do not seek to uncover neglected corners of the biblical canon with unexpected or oblique implications for Jewish philosophy.⁸ We are forced to omit some significant matters that can, and often do, attract reflective philosophical attention, and we devote little room to philosophical issues implicit in the legal material that is so central to the Bible. All that having been said, our selection should amply demonstrate that narrative and poetry and law, no less than discursive writing, can express and stimulate philosophical thinking, a point that is surely abundantly evident to students of literature and Jewish law respectively.

~ DIVINE COMMANDS AND ~ HUMAN MORAL STANDARDS

"Is an action right because God commands it, or does God command it because it is right? Is an action wrong because God prohibits it, or does God prohibit it because it is wrong?"

These questions, modeled after one posed in Plato's *Euthyphro*, have long stood at the heart of religious reflections on morality. Like their Muslim and Christian counterparts, Jewish philosophers have differed sharply over whether there can be a valid morality independent of God's law.⁹

Biblical teaching on the subject confronts us with contradictions. When patriarchs and prophets ask how God could allow evil, they are judging God's conduct by human moral standards. In Genesis 18, Abraham remonstrates with God not to destroy the innocent of Sodom

together with the guilty: "Will you destroy the righteous with the wicked. . . . Far be it from you! Will the judge of all the earth not exercise justice?" (Genesis 18:25). If God's will alone determined right and wrong, Abraham's plea and God's favorable response to it would be senseless. God is expected to be moral by human standards. Yet in chapter 22 the very same Abraham rises early in the morning to carry out God's command to sacrifice his beloved Isaac. No moral scruples are raised either about the seeming command to commit murder or about God's having reneged on his promise to Abraham, "through Isaac you will have seed" (Genesis 21:12). God later commands King Saul to kill all the Amalekites, "man and woman, infant and suckling, ox and sheep, camel and ass" (1 Samuel 15:3), and wrenches the kingship from Saul when he does not comply.¹⁰ Midrashic and talmudic interpretations of this episode see Saul as questioning God on moral grounds and trying to be "more righteous than your creator" (*Ecclesiastes Rabbah* 7:16; B. *Yoma* 22b). The biblical evidence, then, is confusing and contradictory as to whether there is a standard of ethics outside God's will and command.¹¹

One episode that none the less has assumed a pre-eminent place in explorations of this issue is the binding of Isaac (*Aqedah*). In Genesis 22:2 Abraham is commanded by God to "take your son, your only son, whom you love – Isaac – and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him up there as a burnt offering". In his brilliant "dialectical lyric" *Fear and Trembling*, the nineteenth-century Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard advanced a reading of the *Aqedah* that has dominated interpretations of the episode ever since. Abraham is the "knight of faith," whose greatness consists in obeying God even while he remains conscious of the moral imperative in its full Kantian force and majesty. Abraham was prepared to commit an act whose religious description is "sacrifice," though its ethical description is "murder". This paradoxical "teleological suspension of the ethical" characterizes the religious stage. Note that Kierkegaard's is not a "divine command" theory of morality in the pure sense; for Kierkegaard does not reduce moral prescriptions to divine commands (Seeskin 1990, chapter 5). However, Kierkegaard recognizes the possibility of conflict between divine commands and morality, and asserts the supremacy of religious faith in all such situations.¹²

The Kierkegaardian image of Abraham has affected not only depictions of religious morality but depictions of cognitive faith as well.¹³ His interpretation has become so influential that some modern readers may be surprised to learn that in its time the reading was novel; until Kierkegaard the *Aqedah* was not explained in the manner he suggests (Green 1988, chapters 4, 5). Abraham's potential conflict need not be understood as one between obedience to God and adherence to

morality. It could be – and was – readily analyzed as a potential conflict between morality, identified with obedience to God, and natural paternal love. The Rosh Hashanah musaf liturgy asks God to let his compassion conquer his anger, just as “[Abraham] conquered his compassion to do your will wholeheartedly.” Natural feeling for his son, not rational morality, is what made the *Aqedah* difficult. Other readers had identified the challenge to Abraham as that of keeping faith that “through Isaac you will have seed,” despite what God commanded. Some have rejected the very premise that obedience to God overrides conventional morality, in the *Aqedah*, on the grounds that God finally commands Abraham to refrain from the sacrifice (Steinberg 1960, p. 147; cf. Jacobs 1978, pp. 53–4). At the same time Rabbi Joseph B. Soloveitchik has pointed to kindred situations in the Bible where no angel appears to stay the upraised slaughtering knife (Soloveitchik 1994).

The problems raised by our brief discussion of *Fear and Trembling* illustrate the pitfalls in extrapolating a modern philosophical doctrine from an ancient and not explicitly philosophical text. One question is whether the modern philosophical theory indeed conforms to what the Bible would have said had it only employed modern formulations: in other words, would Abraham, or the narrator, have chosen the terminology “teleological suspension of the ethical” over the alternatives? Second, assuming that the philosophical theory is congenial to the spirit of the text, is it actually implied by the words of the narrative? Some contemporary approaches deny in toto the pertinence of these questions; we do not.¹⁴

Another well-known, though perhaps overshadowed, text for illuminating the problem of religion and morality is the Garden of Eden story. The first instance of a divine command to human beings is: “And from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, do not eat” (Genesis 2:17). Why did God enjoin Adam and Eve from partaking of this tree?

The serpent explains: “For God knows that on the day you eat from [the tree] your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, knowing the difference between good and evil” (3:5). God, insinuates the serpent, is jealously guarding his own prerogatives of knowing the difference between good and evil. We may regard the serpent as an unreliable source of information, and therefore assume that his rationale is contrived and duplicitous. But the serpent’s claim is partially confirmed later in the story: “and the Lord God said, now that man has become like one of us knowing the difference between good and evil, perhaps now he will stretch out his hand, eat also from the tree of life, and will live forever” (3:22).

Thus the serpent’s words contain a large measure of truth. God prohibited the fruit so that humans will not become knowers of good

and evil. What does this mean? If “knowledge of good and evil” is the capacity to make moral discriminations, why would God begrudge this to human beings? And in any case, if human beings would become “knowers of good and evil” only after eating the forbidden fruit, how could they sensibly have been issued a command to begin with? If “ought” implies “can,” then by commanding humans to refrain from eating, was not God implying that they already had an understanding of good and evil (right and wrong)?

Most classical construals of “knowers of good and evil” – knowers of sexual passion, knowers of sensual temptation, knowers of conventional moral judgments as distinct from knowers of theoretical truths – face a challenge from Genesis 3:22.¹⁵ The contemporary philosopher Michael Wyschogrod has offered a proposal that accounts for 3:22 and also sheds light on the issue of divine command morality. According to Wyschogrod, “knowers of good and evil” means: beings who make autonomous judgments of good and evil grounded in their own criteria of right and wrong (Wyschogrod 1986).¹⁶ The turning point in human history was “and the woman saw that the tree was good for eating and that it was attractive to the eyes and desirable as a source of wisdom. She took from its fruit and ate; and she also gave it to her man with her and he ate” (Genesis 3:6). The words “and the woman saw that [it] was good” mark the first time that anyone other than God “saw that [it] was good,” that is, made value judgments. That God had prohibited the fruit has no motivational impact on the woman; her decision to eat or not to eat was based upon her own criteria and standards. While the introduction of sensuality into her thinking is also a critical part of the verse, and has been duly stressed by classical exegetes, the main point for our purposes is that the woman has become an autonomous judge. Suppose Eve had decided to refrain from eating but did so because she found the fruit unattractive. This too would have been wrong, for she would have been just as unresponsive to God’s command as she is when she decides to eat. The complete lack of rationalization in God’s original directive alerts us to the heteronomous character of the command. God gives a command for which he supplies no reason. Humans should not question it but should obey without understanding why.

No wonder that later, when Adam and Eve cover themselves because their nakedness now embarrasses them, and Adam then explains to God that he hid because he was naked, God scolds Adam: “Who told you that you are naked? Did you eat from the tree from which I commanded you not to eat?” (Genesis 3:11). Eating from the tree means becoming an autonomous judge. If Adam judged that nakedness is shameful, he must have eaten the forbidden food.¹⁷

With this insight we can understand how a command could have

been issued to beings who supposedly could not differentiate right from wrong. Adam and Eve always had the capacity to obey or disobey God's commands. Free choice was theirs, along with recognition of what was right (obedience) and what was wrong (disobedience). And it is the wrong exercise of freedom that constitutes their sin. Yet, in another sense, namely, appraising autonomously the content of God's commands, they still did not "know good and evil." Eating from the tree did not cause them to become knowers; rather it *represented* their becoming knowers, that is, judges of good and evil.

Wyschogrod's explanation of the sin dovetails with a general motif in Genesis: the drawing and preserving of boundaries (Sykes 1985). In the ordered sequence of chapter 1, where, until the sixth day, God is alone in the world, as it were, the boundaries between created things are clear and distinct. In chapter 2, where the human world and not the natural cosmos becomes the focus, the lines between the days and between parts of creation are obliterated in the narration, anticipating the crossing of lines that will take place in the next chapter. Before sin, only God categorizes the created universe and only God originates value judgments of a non-heteronomous nature. When humans sin by producing their own judgments, God fears that they will now strive to become immortal as well, usurping another prerogative of the divine. The human being is therefore banished from Eden.

If we were to stop here, we would leave with the impression that Genesis does not want humans to make autonomous judgments. But the continuation of the Adam narrative complicates our response and suggests an addendum to Wyschogrod's analysis. In chapter 4, Cain kills Abel. As in the case of Adam and Eve, God seeks out the sinner. This time, too, he holds the sinner accountable (Genesis 4:10 ff.). But this time the sinner is not accused of disobeying a command – the text mentions no explicit prohibition of murder.¹⁸ Rather, he is held accountable for *not* "knowing," for evading the responsibility of applying his judgment correctly. Cain tries to disclaim responsibility: "I do not know! Am I my brother's keeper?" To which God retorts, "What have you done? Your brother's blood cries out to me from the earth!" (Genesis 4:10). In the post-expulsion world, God expects humans to make moral judgments of their own; concomitantly, they cannot avoid accountability for the judgments they make. Within several generations the world is destroyed because of human oppression: as Nachmanides observes, the sinfulness of social corruption can be grasped independent of revealed divine injunction.¹⁹ The transfer of power to human beings continues in augmented form after the deluge. When the world is recreated by the family of Noah after the flood,²⁰ human beings are given even more prerogatives than before. They may now eat animals and may now institute capital punishment for the sin of murder

(Genesis 9:6). Steadily, their moral prerogatives grow. (For further development, see Steinmetz 1994.)

True to this expanding autonomy and responsibility, characters in Genesis who evaluate their own or others' actions apply their independent moral reflection. The sons of Jacob kill the Shechemites because they had treated as a harlot their sister Dinah (Genesis 34:31); the same brothers blame themselves for their callous disregard of Joseph's pain when they cast him into a pit (42:41); covenants are made and kept, reflecting the judgment that they are binding. Societies in Genesis are built not on prescriptions imposed from without but on moral thinking. Only at Sinai does God issue a lengthy set of commands (Exodus 19), and questions about how to act will no longer be typically answered by giving human beings autonomy to judge. Yet even after Sinai, God responds to moral give-and-take. For example, when the daughters of Tzelofechad argue that their father's estate ought not to pass from the family simply because he left no sons, God ratifies their claim and permits daughters to inherit in such circumstances (Numbers 27:1–11).

Is there then a final biblical position on the basis of morality? No single position is reflected in every portion. Before the sin, human beings are expected to hearken to God's command and not initiate autonomous moral reflection. That expectation is altered after the sin and as a result of the sin. Sinai represents the heteronomous imposition of conduct. But even after Sinai, God is responsive to moral dialectic.

~ THEODICY ~

"Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he able and willing, but ignorant of evil's existence? Then he is not omniscient." The Bible does not enunciate the problem of evil with the analytical precision familiar to readers of Hume (*Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* 10), but it does not shrink from seeking to understand and even challenge the ways of God in the face of apparent injustice. Consternation over evil is a familiar theme in Psalms (13:2; 37; 73), in the prophetic books of Jeremiah (12:1–2), Isaiah (62–3), and Habakkuk, in Lamentations, in Ecclesiastes, and of course in the book of Job.

That the prophets frequently raise the problem of evil has important ramifications. First, it is evident that challenging the justice of God's ways is not blasphemous – if it were, the prophets would not have allowed themselves to engage in it. Abraham even elicits a positive response from God when he argues that to destroy the innocent of Sodom with its wicked, as God seemed ready to do, would be unjust ("Will the judge of all the earth not do justice?", Genesis 18). Second,

despite Isaiah's famous dictum, "My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor my ways your ways" (Isaiah 55:8) (which played an important role in Maimonides' doctrine of attributes, *Guide* 3.20), the problem of evil is not dismissed with the glib assertion that "good" as applied to God does not mean the same as "good" when applied to humans. If such a resolution were valid, authoritative figures in the Bible would not persist in raising the question and leaving it unanswered (see Gellman 1977). Finally, the repeated discussions of the problem throughout the Bible invite another insight, namely, that the biblical writers did not consider the problem of evil as an analytic conundrum, to be solved once and for all, but rather as a mystery perennially tugging at the sensitive theological conscience.²¹

Because the Bible's "problem of evil" is situated within a set of theological presuppositions and a fund of experience, it diverges from articulations of the problem that are promulgated by philosophers. In philosophy, the question of evil is usually posed as, "why is there evil?" The biblical formulation, however, starts with certain background beliefs: that suffering is usually punishment for sin; that God loves Israel. In the Bible, therefore, the problem's formulation is usually narrower: Why do the righteous suffer while the wicked prosper? or: How could God allow Israel to suffer and the Temple be destroyed? In short, why do such-and-such evils befall these people or groups? Another difference between biblical and philosophical formulations is that in the philosophical literature evil is often thought to disconfirm the *existence* of God, while the Bible does not come remotely near considering that position. The biblical writers are instead concerned about the threat that evil poses to belief in God's *goodness* or *steadfastness*.

The most elaborate biblical treatment of evil is, of course, the book of Job. A common approach to biblical theodicy attempts to derive a conclusion from this book as a whole. Leaving aside some stubborn obstacles – most notably that God's wager with the Satan in the narrative prologue (chapters 1–2) is not alluded to in the denouement, and the sudden appearance, and disappearance, of Elihu – let us focus on some key points.

The first is negative. At the end of the work, God chastises the friends "because you did not speak properly to me as did my servant Job" (42:7). In other words, God rejects, in whole or in part, their position. Whatever the differences among the three friends, and whatever development occurs in their respective positions in the course of the dialogue, they are finally united in the conviction that Job deserves his bad fortune. Whatever the fine points of temperament and argument, they were determined to uphold the traditional theodicy of justified retribution at all cost. Job, by contrast, had stridently and consistently

complained that he was a good man, and that his actions do not warrant his fate. He had come close to blasphemy. Yet it is Job who must pray on behalf of his friends before *they* can be forgiven. A stronger indictment of the retributivist theodicy could hardly be imagined.

Rabbinic literature was to go beyond the denial of the simple formula that all suffering is punishment for sin by offering a range of explicit alternative explanations of evil.²² But does the book of Job provide us with any such alternative? Or is its sole conclusion the negative one we have outlined?

If Job contains a positive theodicy, it is presumably to be found in God's two speeches (38–41) which lead Job to humility and reconciliation. Alas, the precise philosophical point of these speeches is elusive. Do they contain an argument from the perfect design of the universe as proposed by Gersonides in his commentary to these chapters? Or is it the dysteleological features of creation that enable us to perceive the numinousness of the divine other, as was influentially asserted by Rudolf Otto (Otto 1950, pp. 77–81)? Are we intended to identify a discursive solution, or is the resolution the theophany itself ("I had heard of you by ear, now my eye has seen you") (42:5), when God accedes to Job's existential plea for his tormentor not to hide his face but to respond to his creature's anguish (see, for example, Glatzer 1969)?

The idea that Job's *experience* of God is the key to his reconciliation suggests the primacy of the human drama in Job, and this insight leads us to a distinct philosophical appropriation of the book; we discover in Job's ordeal a "theodicy of soulmaking". Take the problem of God's wager with the Satan. God's rationale is theologically problematic, to say the least. Can God justifiably make Job a pawn in order to prove a point? If Job is, at bottom, an exploration of what people make of suffering, then the dispute between God and the Satan becomes less capricious. The Satan holds that suffering inexorably corrupts; faithfulness is a luxury only the prosperous can afford. God says that suffering can ennoble; faithfulness can be forged in the crucible of anguish.

Who is right? Ultimately God's prediction – and Job himself – will be vindicated by the process of suffering. For the voice of God and its aftermath are signs of two things: Job's heightened spiritual perception and his heightened sense of interpersonal responsibility. Perceiving God out of the whirlwind is a climactic achievement; "and *now* my eye has seen you" (note however 5:17). The end result of Job's suffering is that he has the ability to perceive that which previously he could not perceive. And whereas in the prologue Job brought sacrifices for his family alone, he has now broadened his concern to include others – he brings sacrifices for the friends as well (Soloveitchik 1965,

pp. 37–8). Job has grown through crisis. Hence God was right, the Satan was wrong.²³

The philosophically reflective student of Job, like the reader of other biblical texts, would be remiss in abandoning the rich detail of the text to philologists and literary scholars. We must not create a false dichotomy between philosophical and literary or psychological readings. Although, as we noted earlier, exegetes such as Maimonides and Gersonides assign specific philosophical positions to the participants in the dialogue, it is surely in keeping with the atmosphere of the debate to emphasize the psychological stance of Job and the other characters. The book of Job is a veritable phenomenology of faith in a state of challenge. It spans moments of commitment (13:15), doubt (23:5), self-pity (19:21), self-confidence (13:18?), and defiance (9:22–3) (Seeskin 1990, p. 173). The friends' rhetoric may evolve – and their temper may degenerate – but their faith, in contrast to Job's, is throughout simple and simplistic.

By selecting a single passage we can highlight the lively interaction between philosophical and psychological issues and the suggestiveness of the exegetical tradition, even when the commentators respond to the text in categories alien to its original intellectual setting.

In Job's first answer to Bildad, he addresses God, crying out: "Is it good that you oppress, that you despise the work of your hands, and shine upon wicked thoughts? Are your eyes of flesh? Do you see like man?" (10:3–4). For Nachmanides, Job is accusing God of an obsessive concern with man's inner thoughts: Is God like a jealous lover who must constantly probe the recesses of the creature's mind and provoke his potential for rebellion? Gersonides, who denied divine foreknowledge of contingents, ascribes his own doctrine to Job: God does not know as man does, that is, he does not know particulars, hence he cannot be held responsible for Job's troubles. The Gersonidean Job proclaims his innocence without expressing resentment: the angry tone is not Job's, but rather describes the foul mood which the friends, who have not understood Gersonides, mistakenly attribute to him. Rabbi Meir Leibush Malbim, the nineteenth-century exegete, adopts the more conventional teaching on foreknowledge. On his reading Job here advances the classic medieval problem of foreknowledge and freedom: because God is omniscient, and not limited as man's knowledge is, his knowledge determines man's actions, and Job cannot be held responsible for the sins he may have committed.

The philosophical interpretations of Gersonides and Malbim violate our expectations not only because they are based on anachronistic theories but also because they presume a pursuit of metaphysical argument at odds with the existential situation of Job on his dung heap. What happens, however, when we take Job's psychological state in full

seriousness? Remember the context: at the point where we join Job's meditation, his view of the situation has undergone several changes. From the "patient Job" of the prologue, he has moved to the initial curse of chapter 3, a curse that avoids addressing God by focusing instead on his unlucky birthday. In the response to Eliphaz (6–7) Job saw himself as a persecuted figure, misunderstood by his friends and hounded by God. By chapter 9, the logic of the discourse has led Job to see himself as a self divided against itself. His very attempt to exculpate himself becomes a gesture of rebellion that makes him appear all the more guilty: "If I wash with snow water, and purify my hands with lye, then shall you immerse me in the muddy pit, and my very clothes shall detest me" (9:30–1). In short, he is helpless not only because his adversary is powerful but because his adversary condemns him from within, as it were.

Against this background, the argument at the beginning of chapter 10 reflects precisely Job's psychological situation. It is not only that Job's insistence on his innocence does not belong to him, fueling instead the fires of his antagonists who undermine his claim to innocence. Now, he realizes, his very being is not his: he is the handiwork of the same God against whom he must strive. And Job goes on to portray eloquently the experience of creatureliness. All this is reminiscent of Malbim's interpretation, but stripped of the formal philosophical theorizing. The nineteenth-century attempt to read a medieval conundrum into an ancient text helps us, paradoxically, to capture the existential import of the original, the moment we learn to avoid being captured by the formal anachronism.

We have proposed taking Job's religious growth as the kernel of a compelling explanation of evil, suggesting a perspective that lives through the various stages of the poetic portion and emerges at the other side after God has spoken. However that might be, the text does not seem preoccupied with preaching this or any other insight as a "solution" to a philosophical problem; God, after all, never tells Job the true genesis of his tribulations.²⁴ Phenomenology more than theodicy occupies center stage.

FREE WILL AND DIVINE PROVIDENCE

Philosophers have devoted enormous energy to resolving the seeming contradiction between divine foreknowledge and human free choice. If God knows at a certain time that persons will later do particular acts, how can those persons be said to act freely? And if they cannot act freely, how can they be morally responsible for their deeds?

As noted in the previous section, this difficulty is not explicitly

encountered in the Bible; indeed the very notion of foreknowledge is sometimes conspicuously missing. Thus the Bible speaks of God "regretting" that he had made man, as if he had not foreseen the corruption that brought about the deluge (Genesis 6:6);²⁵ he tests Abraham and the angel proclaims "now I know that you are God-fearing" (Genesis 22:12; emphasis added), as if his heart would otherwise have been hidden from its creator.²⁶ Obvious conflicts between divine providence and human free choice are left unarticulated. God hardens the heart of Pharaoh and of the Amorite king Sihon (Exodus 9:12; 10:20; 11:10; 14: 4, 8, 17; Deuteronomy 2:30), without concern that owing to this divine interference these individuals ought not to be held responsible for their acts of rebellion. Again, God declares that he will harden Pharaoh's heart "in order to multiply my signs and wonders in the land of Egypt" (Exodus 10:1; 12:9; see also 7:3). Anyone who deems free will a value might well be struck by the invocation of God's greater glory as a reason for depriving someone of free choice. And we must not ignore the implications of legal texts. Thus God is assigned causal agency in cases of unintentional homicide (Exodus 21:13);²⁷ the commandment to build a guard rail around one's rooftop "lest someone fall" (Deuteronomy 22:8) implies that, despite divine foreknowledge, the victim would not have fallen had proper caution been exercised.²⁸ Exegetes grapple with the implications of these texts, and their proposals may be judged plausible or strained. What is important for us, however, is that the Bible itself does not address the issues.

At the same time, there is a particular type of tension between divine providence and human choice, carrying broad implications for the theology of history, that is often aroused by common reflection on biblical texts and articulates dilemmas that are often more momentous existentially than the classical ones.²⁹ God determines the course of history. He elects certain outcomes. Hence he stage-manages history so as to bring about these results. What responsibility do human beings bear for their actions if the outcome is inevitable? What freedom do they exercise if they are instruments in a divine plan? And does the fact that God wants the result justify the means chosen by humans to achieve it?

These questions come to the surface in the Joseph stories (Genesis 37-50). The brothers of Joseph, jealous of the special treatment he receives from his father Jacob, conspire to throw him into a pit. He is then taken by merchants, who sell him as a slave to Egyptians. Soon he is thrown into an Egyptian dungeon and incarcerated for two years on a trumped-up charge. By a remarkable sequence of events, Joseph eventually becomes the viceroy of Egypt. His brothers come to Egypt to procure food during a famine. Joseph recognizes them, they do not

recognize him; Joseph proceeds to perpetrate a hoax on them. At last he reveals his identity.

Interestingly, of all the characters in the story, only one seeks to absolve the brothers of guilt – Joseph himself. He does so three times. "And now, be not saddened or angry that you sold me here [or: caused me to be sold]. For God sent me before you for sustenance" (Genesis 45:5). "You did not send me here; rather God did" (Genesis 45:8). "You thought ill for me; God thought it for good" (Genesis 50:20). Is Joseph's orientation as correct as it is generous?

It is hard to tell; the text plants the question in our minds, but leaves us to our own conclusions. To be sure, a quiet critique of Joseph inheres in the narrative. When Joseph asserts that the purpose of his being brought to Egypt was to save his brothers from the famine, he is being short-sighted and somewhat self-involved. Actually, he has been sent there because Jacob's descendants are destined to be enslaved "in a land not theirs" (Genesis 15:13). Joseph, the great prognosticator, sees into the future, but his lens does not reach far enough. Absorbed with his own place in the here-and-now, he seems oblivious to the persecution that awaits his family. His father Jacob realizes the bitter truth, and does not want to join Joseph in Egypt until God reassures him that he will return to Canaan with Jacob, that is, with his descendants (Genesis 46:3-4).³⁰ So the text at least mildly suggests the shortcoming of Joseph's reasoning concerning his brother's actions (by suggesting that he misperceives his place in history). But would Joseph's reasoning have been correct had he focused on the impending enslavement rather than on famine relief? Since the texts we have cited do not resolve *that* query, our original question returns: if the sequence of events in the Joseph narrative is necessary for the realization of God's plan and God *desires* the Jews to wind up in Egypt, would *this* mitigate the brothers' culpability, in spite of their keenly experienced and painfully expressed sense of guilt (42:21; 50:15)?

Joseph's exoneration of his brothers is indeed logically strained.³¹ First, their *motive* was plainly nefarious. Second, as commentators note, even if their motivation were to fulfill a divine plan for history, "God has many agents." A divine plan can be realized in several different ways.³² Hence the ends justify the means only if the means too are the direct act of God. These considerations render Joseph's assessment open to question.

Nevertheless, Nachmanides, contrary to the position just cited, affirms that if God has foreordained a certain end, then human beings who act to realize this divine end act rightly. So, for example, Nachmanides explains why Joseph prolonged his father's grief for over twenty years by failing to communicate with him: the fulfillment of his dreams required that *all* the brothers should bow down to him, and this could

not be accomplished until Benjamin would be brought to Egypt through Joseph's subterfuge (commentary to 42:6). Likewise Nachmanides maintains that the nations that oppressed Israel in the Bible (such as Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia) would have been without culpability – even commended – had they sought thereby to implement divine prophecies and had they not persecuted the Jews more than the prophecies required.³³ Nachmanides' view would of course not vindicate Joseph for exonerating his brothers – Nachmanides requires an agent to be conscious of the divine plan and be motivated by this knowledge. Nevertheless, his thesis is intriguing, even if unconfirmed by biblical material.

The phenomenon of events that are integral to the divine plan but are dependent on human initiative – and sometimes on acts that leave room for moral questioning – appears frequently in the Bible. Rebekah and Jacob deceive Isaac by dressing Jacob as Esau and tricking Isaac into bestowing Esau's apparent blessing upon Jacob. What justified Rebekah in devising the hoax? Perhaps it was the oracle she heard before her twin sons were born: "And the elder [Esau] shall serve the younger [Jacob]" (Genesis 29:29).³⁴ Her actions sought to bring the prediction to fulfillment. Let us assume this interpretation and inquire how hers and Jacob's behavior is viewed by the narrative.

Often the Bible neither condones nor approves behavior explicitly. It lets the reader draw his or her own conclusions by subtle literary suggestions. We have already seen how the text imparts a partial censure of Joseph. The Bible also suggests that Jacob suffered in later life measure-for-measure. His uncle Laban substitutes an older sister (Leah) for the younger sister whom Jacob planned to marry (Rachel), defending his behavior with the cutting words, "in our place, such is not done, to give the younger before the elder" (Genesis 29:26). And the deception perpetrated on him by his sons, including both that of Joseph's brothers and that of Joseph himself, leads him to sum up his years as "few and bad" (Genesis 47:9). As for Rebekah, she sends Jacob away to live with her brother Laban "for a few days," while Esau's fury over the theft cools (Genesis 27:44), but Jacob is forced to remain with Laban for over twenty years and Rebekah never sees her son again.³⁵ Divine plan or no divine plan, deception is spiritually costly.³⁶

In these episodes, the Jacob and Joseph stories, God is rarely acknowledged as the cause of events. From the time that Joseph is incarcerated by Potiphar, the Tetragrammaton, which generally signifies direct divine intervention, is absent; only *Elohim*, indicating God's general providence, appears. Furthermore, *Elohim* is depicted as the initiator of events only by the characters, not by the biblical narration itself. In the book of Esther, which takes place in exile and during a period when the light of prophecy has become obscured, God absconds

completely from the narrative.³⁷ And yet the light of the events' author shines through the cracks and crevices of the naturalistic causal network.³⁸

Traditional philosophical theories have sought to impose on the Bible a unified theological doctrine, true for all books and circumstances. Our approach recognizes that the biblical metaphysic is as complex as it is enigmatic. Such concepts as providence, history, and responsibility are grasped by human beings in a variety of contexts. Sometimes God is depicted in total control of events; sometimes he appears to relinquish the initiative.

❧ THE ORIGINS OF THE UNIVERSE ❧

We began by asking whether, and in what ways, the Bible can be fruitfully studied as a source of philosophical reflection. Some treatments of the creation story confront us in especially sharp form with the methodological pitfall of taking a book to be something it isn't intended to be; at the same time they enable us to see why the Bible's *philosophical* trajectory might be of special importance.

Traditionally Jewish schoolchildren have gained their first insight into the purpose of the Bible (or more specifically the Torah) from the very first comment of Rabbi Shlomo Yitzhaki (Rashi):

R. Yitzhak said: the Torah should have begun from "this month is for you the first of the months" [Exodus 12:2], for that³⁹ is the first precept commanded to Israel. And why did it begin with "In the beginning"? Because "he has related the power of his deeds to his people, to give them the inheritance of the nations" [Psalms 111:5]. For if the nations of the worlds say to Israel, "you are thieves for having conquered the land of the seven [Canaanite nations]", Israel will say: all the earth is God's – he created it and gave it to whomever he saw fit.

A striking assumption underlies Rabbi Yitzhak's question in the quoted midrash, namely, that cosmogonical and historical narratives are altogether irrelevant to the Torah's purposes; only the laws are pertinent.⁴⁰ Although the answer attributed to Rabbi Yitzhak shows that he later modifies this startling assumption⁴¹ – the Torah does more than inculcate laws, it also validates Israel's claim to the land of Israel – Rashi's approach none the less tends to minimize the value of any hermeneutic of the Bible that is not centered on its laws. It thereby broaches the possibility that the Bible is not terribly interested in providing accurate cosmogony for its own sake.⁴²

Consider next the comment of Nachmanides:

One may question [Rabbi Yitzhak's view as cited by Rashi]. For there is a great necessity to begin the Torah with "In the beginning God created." It is the root of faith; and one who does not believe in it [creation ex nihilo] and thinks the world is eternal denies the essential principle [of Judaism] and has no Torah! The answer is that the story of creation is a deep mystery not to be understood from the verses. . . . It is for this reason that Rabbi Yitzhak said that it was not necessary for the Torah to begin with the chapter of "In the beginning God created" – what was created on the first day, what was done on the second and other days, as well as an extended account of the creation of Adam and Eve, their sin and punishment, and the story of the Garden of Eden and the expulsion of Adam from it – because all this cannot be understood completely from the verses. All the more, it was not necessary for the story of the generations of the flood and of the dispersion to be written, for there is no great need of these narratives, and for people who believe in the Torah, it would suffice without these verses.⁴³

For Nachmanides, unlike Rashi, the inclusion of cosmogony is not puzzling per se, as the Bible aims to convey 'iqqarei emunah, fundamentals of faith. Still, the extensive elaboration of these fundamentals – what was created on each day – is seemingly otiose, and the Torah's narrative is in any case too meager to furnish genuine understanding.⁴⁴ Nor is there need for the detailed history of the patriarchs that follows. Nachmanides explains the necessity for the ostensibly otiose narrative sections by pointing out the moral lesson they convey to Israel. The stories of Eden, the flood, and the dispersion teach that "it is proper that when a people continues to sin it should lose its place and another people should come and inherit the land" (Nachmanides 1971, p. 19). Like Rashi, Nachmanides adopts a restricted view of the aims of the Torah.

Needless to say, neither Rashi nor Nachmanides questions the historicity of the biblical narrative. On the contrary, to infer the lesson each gleans from the Bible's inclusion of the narrative – the absolute right of the Jews to the land of Israel (Rashi), the dependence of the Jews' right to the land upon their deeds (Nachmanides) – the narratives must be *true*. For Rashi's lesson to be learned, God must have created the world and granted Israel a particular land; for Nachmanides' to be inferred, there must have been a previous *factual* pattern of sin and expulsion. Nevertheless, approaches like those of Rashi and Nachmanides tend to deter the kind of emphasis on historical and scientific accuracy that would obscure the Torah's larger purposes.

This issue has become particularly acute and sensitive with the

emergence of modern cosmology, anthropology, biology, and history. In the twentieth century, Rabbi Abraham Isaac Kook, the first Ashkenazic chief rabbi of Palestine and a major theologian of the century, addressed the clash between evolution and creation along with the contradiction between the scientific assessments of the age of the earth and the biblical chronology which makes the universe less than six thousand years old. He wrote:

It makes no difference for us if in truth there was in the world an actual Garden of Eden, during which man delighted in an abundance of physical and spiritual good, or if actual existence began from the bottom upward, from the lowest level of being toward its highest. . . . We only have to know that there is a real possibility that even if man has risen to a high level, and has been deserving of all honors and pleasures, if he corrupts his ways, he can lose all that he has, and bring harm to himself and to his descendants for many generations.⁴⁵

Surely this is not meant to imply that biblical religion, or a theology sensitive to it, is indifferent to matters of historical and scientific fact. The centrality of the creation motif and the history of the Jewish people in the Bible are enough to belie any such notion. Of course not everyone will draw the line in the same place: thus, for example, there are those who insist that observance of the Sabbath makes sense only on the basis of a literal six-day creation. It should not be difficult, however, to agree on the significance of the Bible's perspective on the fundamental questions of the examined life. Our own attempt in these pages to map a coherent biblical view of morality, of evil, and of human responsibility points to some of the possibilities.

CONCLUSION

Judaism is of course not identical with the Bible. Jewish philosophy must carry on a conversation with Talmud and Midrash, kabbalah, and Jewish philosophy from all ages. This quest for integration is often based on the assumption that there is an underlying continuity to Judaism; it also recognizes that unmediated access to the Bible, abstracted from its canonical form and exegetical history, is an unattainable chimera (see Carmy 1996). The examination of biblical ideas requires the thinker to perceive the continuities between the various biblical statements and the other chambers in the mansion of Torah, even while taking careful note of the ruptures.

The Bible is the primary source for Jewish philosophical reflection. It indeed warrants philosophical attention, as it supplies rich resources

for philosophical analysis and exegesis. Paradoxically, however, the Bible can be appreciated properly by the philosopher only when he or she liberates the Bible from the vocabulary and preoccupations of some subsequent philosophical school – escaping a relentless rationalism and avoiding the anachronistic identification of a particular theory with the living data it seeks to capture. As we have seen, “literary” and “philosophical” dimensions of the text are not hermetically sealed off from each other. All ventures at exegesis are condemned to the endless process of trial and error in the effort to situate the work in its own context and grasp it in its own terms. Only by meeting the Bible on its own ground, in terms of its actual contents – as a compendium of divine law, as a narrative of God’s rendezvous with humankind and with a singular people, as the drama of humanity’s yearning for the creator and God’s revelation to humanity – can we acquire the power to interpret the text in the light of later generations’ intellectual framework and existential concerns.⁴⁶

NOTES

- 1 A single example demonstrates the impossibility of limiting philosophy to conventionally formulated sentences. The book of Jonah concludes on a long rhetorical question: “You were concerned for the gourd on which you did not labor. . . . Shall I not be concerned for Nineveh . . . ?” There is no way of turning this interrogation into the indicative mood; yet if this verse is not philosophy, then nothing in the Bible is philosophy!
- 2 Even those modern scholars who would account for contradictions by assigning the conflicting materials to distinct traditions and sources are not blind to the fact that the Bible has generally been understood as a unified document in Jewish tradition.
- 3 See Maimonides (1963, 3.22–3) and Gersonides’ commentary to the book.
- 4 See *Guide* 1.1 – 1.2; Berman 1980; Klein-Braslavy 1986.
- 5 We also should mention a third negative reaction, that of kabbalists. Like the philosophers, and unlike either of the two views we will describe, kabbalists posited a deeper, esoteric level of meaning to the biblical text. However, they rejected the particular contents that rationalists claimed were found in those esoteric layers and replaced them with a different set of meanings.
- 6 See Hirsch 1982; Kaufmann 1960; cf. Halbertal and Margalit 1992, pp. 68–73.
- 7 Our failure to address diachronic questions within the Bible should not be taken to gainsay or even downplay their importance for theology and for elucidating the intellectual history of many concepts in biblical literature.
- 8 For example, David’s consecutive inquiries about Saul’s intentions and about the subsequent behavior of the men of Keilah in the event that Saul goes there (1 Samuel 23:10–12) suggested to later philosophers the problem of whether middle knowledge is possible (that is, knowledge of how a free creature would

- act in all possible situations, including purely hypothetical ones). (See Adams 1987.) But such questions are distant from the Bible’s agenda.
- 9 For Christian responses, see Idziak 1979.
 - 10 Biblical interpreters have sometimes defined the episode differently, seeing it as a clash between king and prophet over whether the prophet is the sole arbiter of the divine intent.
 - 11 See Jacobs 1978, Leiman 1978, and Lichtenstein 1978 for further analysis of the sources.
 - 12 Kierkegaard is generally taken to define the ethical stage in a Kantian manner. (See most recently Green 1992). Gellman 1994 opts for a Hegelian provenance of the ethical. More radically, he construes obedience to God as a label for authentic individual self-expression. For a creative reading of the story as *favoring* Abraham’s making independent moral judgments, see Bodoff 1993.
 - 13 See for example Leibowitz 1987, p. 16. This despite Leibowitz’s distaste for Kierkegaard’s “Christian bellyaching” (Leibowitz 1987).
 - 14 Compare the discussion of Phyllis Tribble’s analysis of Genesis 22 in Carmy (1996); see also Jacobs 1981.
 - 15 Cf. Maimonides 1963, 1.2; Nachmanides, commentary to Genesis 2:9; other sources quoted in Leibowitz 1981, pp. 17–37.
 - 16 For an assortment of Jewish and Christian discussions of this chapter, including a similar analysis of good and evil by Karl Barth, see Morris and Sawyer 1992.
 - 17 Wyschogrod does not directly explain *why* they were now embarrassed by nakedness; precisely at this point, his approach should be combined with the traditional exegesis that relates the “knowledge of good and evil” to sexual arousal. But we shall not seek to develop such a synthesis here.
 - 18 The rabbis (*Sanhedrin* 56b) derived an Adamic prohibition of murder from Genesis 2:16–17.
 - 19 See his comment to Genesis 6:2.
 - 20 On the theme of recreation, see Fishbane 1979.
 - 21 See Albo 1929–30, 4.14, 15.
 - 22 See Urbach 1987, pp. 420–61; Elman 1990 and 1990–1; Goldenberg 1982.
 - 23 Some also see the soulmaking theodicy in remarks of Elihu (33:16–20).
 - 24 See Saadia Gaon 1988, chapter 38.
 - 25 Rashi, following the rabbis in the Midrash, holds that the divine pathos, like the human, adopts, as it were, the emotions appropriate to the present tense: when a child is born, one rejoices, though knowing too well that the road from birth leads to death. See also R. Chayyim ibn Atar’s *Or ha-Chayyim*.
 - 26 This verse is, in fact, cited by Gersonides to support his limitation of divine foreknowledge; see his commentary to Genesis 22. Also see Albo 1929–30, 5.13; Leibowitz 1981, pp. 188–93; Feldman 1985; Cohen 1985.
 - 27 See Rashi, who takes this to imply that God “arranges” the accident to punish both the victim and the perpetrator for previous offenses.
 - 28 See ibn Ezra, ad loc.
 - 29 See also Alter 1981, pp. 33–5.
 - 30 Joseph’s later request for the Israelites to take his remains with them when they finally leave Egypt (Genesis 50:24) reflects Jacob’s eventual influence upon him (note Jacob’s request at 47:29).

- 31 According to some readings of Amos 2:6, the prophet there condemned the brothers' actions.
- 32 See for example Isaac Abravanel's comment to Genesis 37:1; see also Maimonides, *Mishneh Torah*, Laws of Repentance, 6.5; Rabinovitch 1977.
- 33 See commentary to Genesis 15:14 and *Or ha-Chayyim* ad loc. Note Nachmanides' exploitation of typology as a tool of exegesis in Genesis (see 12:7, inter alia).
- 34 A different interpretation would highlight the ambiguity of the Hebrew: either "elder" or "younger" could be taken as the subject and the other phrase as the object; see Cassuto 1961, pp. 86–7.
- 35 Kenneth Waxman pointed this out to us.
- 36 See Leibowitz 1981, pp. 264–79, on Jacob's deception. Late medieval thinkers such as R. Isaac Arama (*Aqedat Yitzhak* 1.28) rejected Nachmanides' approach to the Joseph story because they objected to the implication that the divine end justifies unacceptable human means. Wurzburger 1969 developed the view that Joseph subscribed to Nachmanides' thesis, but was wrong to do so.
- 37 Scholars have noted numerous literary parallels between the Joseph and Esther narratives. There may be other explanations of why the divine name is absent from these stories, but finding a common reason seems to us methodologically preferable in light of the other parallels between the stories.
- 38 One other issue that these episodes raise is the contingency of Jewish history. We are accustomed to think that Jewish history would not be Jewish history had, say, the theft of the blessing, or Joseph's sojourn in Egypt, never occurred. But if, pace Nachmanides, we impute blame even to people who try to fulfill the divine plan, this may imply that only certain end results are ordained, not the means; agents are culpable because they did not have to be the ones to bring the ordained result about. Hence Jewish history does carry an element of contingency. Rabbi Joseph Soloveitchik's lectures on the Bible frequently dramatize the question of alternative outcomes: what if certain meritorious acts had not been performed and what if certain temptations had been resisted? (see especially Soloveitchik 1992). He thus combines Nachmanides' consciousness of the large-scale repercussions of acts recorded in the Bible with an existentialist emphasis on the burden of individual choice.
- 39 The rabbis of the Talmud regard Exodus 12:2 as the commandment to sanctify each new moon.
- 40 Levenson 1985 has emphasized that the classic Christian works on Old Testament theology, such as those of Eichrodt and von Rad, are virtually oblivious to the centrality of law in the Bible.
- 41 Rashi's supercommentaries, for example, those of R. Eliyahu Mizrachi and Maharal, offer detailed analysis of the difference between the implied position of the question and that of the conclusion.
- 42 Rashi's grandson, Rashbam, goes even farther. In his view the story of creation is included in order to establish the seven-day week culminating in the Sabbath (see Kamin 1986). Remarkably, the sectarian pseudepigraphic book of Jubilees, dated to the second century BCE, opens with Moses on Sinai, and reviews creation as a backdrop to the revelation of the law, thus providing, as it were, an alternative version of the Torah that comes close to the spirit behind R. Yitzhak's question.

- 43 Commentary to Genesis 1:1. We have followed closely the translation of C. B. Chavel in Nachmanides 1971.
- 44 One way to put Nachmanides' thesis is this: the Bible conveys metaphysical truth, but is not devoted to metaphysical enlightenment. The enlightenment is esoteric, accessible only to kabbalists; for the ordinary reader of the Bible, the fundamentals of faith suffice.
- 45 Kook, letters, 1, no. 134 (in Feldman 1986, p. 12); also Rabbi Kook's additional reference to talmudic remarks on 'confused dates' in prophetic texts (cited in Carmy 1996). A zesty formulation of the point is found in Hertz 1941, 1: 195: "And fully to grasp the eternal power and infinite beauty of these words – 'And God created man in his own image' – we need but compare them with the genealogy of man, condensed from the pages of one of the leading biologists of the age (Haeckel): 'Monera begat Amoeba, Amoeba begat Synamoebae, Synamoebae begat Ciliated Larva. . . .' Let anyone who is disturbed by the fact that Scripture does not include the latest scientific doctrine, try to imagine such information proved in a Biblical chapter." A contemporary philosopher, Peter van Inwagen (1993), a committed Christian, has likewise emphasized in a colorful way the moral and spiritual value of the creation stories and the relative unimportance of its scientific implications.
- 46 We thank David Berger, Devorah Steinmetz, and Kenneth Waxman for their comments and suggestions.

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