AGAINST THEOLOGY[1]

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That Athens and Jerusalem represent dramatically different ways in the world is hardly a new idea. But there are implications that remain to be explored. Twentieth century thinkers like A. J. Heschel and Max Kaddushin inspire my project. Their voices, though, have been dimmed by current theological orthodoxy--I don't mean denominational Orthodoxy but rather the standard modes of theological thought bequeathed by the medievals. Developments in philosophy—like the work of Wittgenstein—suggest that the time may be ripe for another pass through the terrain.

Philosophy, born in Greece, is one of the supreme achievements of that culture, a reflection of its distinctive greatness. The Hebrew Bible is a parallel reflection, another supreme achievement, but of a very different culture. Eventually, considerably later than Biblical times, the two cultures met; their subsequent marriage issued in another of the world's cultural wonders, medieval theological philosophy, or philosophical theology.

In conventional terms, the match was a great success; its offspring has had an illustrious history. The way we—theists, agnostics, and atheists—think about religious things is a tribute to the philosophical theology of the medievals. And yet….

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[1] Versions of this paper were presented at Brandeis University, Hendrix College, London School of Jewish Studies, and at a conference on Biblical Theology at the University of Maryland in 200x. I'm grateful to David Berger, Brian Copenhaver, Eli Hirsch, Menachem Kellner, Chip Manekin, Josef Stern, and Eleonore Stump for comments on earlier drafts.

The situation has analogies to that of the philosophical tradition itself, when it came upon modern times. So much of the way we—and our post-Cartesian forbears—pursue philosophy is a tribute to Descartes, often honored as the father of Modern Philosophy. And yet some, me included, contend that the Cartesian revolution in philosophy imposed significant costs and in some ways represented a step backward.[2] The liabilities include some of the most well known features of Descartes' thought, like his famous distinction between mind and body—the realm of spirit vs. that of the mechanical. Something funny, one might say, happened in the early 1600's in philosophy that for better and worse changed its subsequent course.

My contention is that something similarly funny happened in early medieval times when the Jewish religious tradition[3] entered into a long-term flirtation with the philosophical tradition. When I say that something funny happened, I don't mean that it was all bad, and I certainly don't mean that we have nothing to learn from the new course. We have much to learn. Still, the substantial change was not without cost, or so I'll be arguing. My central concern in this paper is not the cost. It is rather the idea that we are dealing here with a major transition, a new paradigm in Kuhn's vocabulary.[4]

Previously, mainstream Jewish tradition, having resisted the incursion of philosophic modes of reflection, was more or less philosophically innocent. The Greek-inspired style of thinking would show up here and there—in the relatively early work of Philo, for example. But it never really caught on until considerably later; by the time the Jews found themselves in the world of *Sepharad*, the Muslim

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[2] See for example, Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature*.

[3] My exclusive concern in this paper is Jewish tradition, Rabbinic Judaism. If my approach has merit, there likely will be wider applications. But here I'll be satisfied to navigate local waters, deep as they are.

[4] Kuhn's approach to the history of science is important here. Kuhn sensitized historians of science to the existence of radical differences, discontinuities, between scientific epochs, for example that of Newton and that of Einstein. Previous to Kuhn there was a tendency to see Einstein's work, for example, as simply building on Newton's. Kuhn argued convincingly that the differences needed new emphasis and that it was more correct to see Einstein as a revolutionary, overthrowing the Newtonian approach rather than supplementing it. Einstein's view was indeed not only radically different than what came before, it was in some ways incommensurable with it. *Incommensurability* cries out for clarification, but the idea is certainly highly suggestive, equally so in connection with my topic in this paper.

world in which philosophy played a dominant role in intellectual culture, the philosophical mode had become central, even if still controversial.[5]

A philosophical interpretation of the earlier Jewish religious ways was, however, quite an ambitious undertaking. It was to convert an outlook not fundamentally philosophic into a philosophy. And that was to take a way of thinking and feeling native to one culture and reformulate it in very different cultural terms.

That the philosophic interpretation could be seen (broadly, certainly not universally) as revealing the real meaning of the tradition was a tribute to the stature of its main architects, most importantly Maimonides, whose honorific place in the tradition hardly depends upon his philosophic activity: the *Mishnah Torah,* Maimonides's *halachik magnum opus,* independently renders him a premier figure in post-Talmud times. His *Guide for the Perplexed* became at once *the* Jewish philosophical work both for those inside and outside the tradition as well as a source of great discomfort for those traditionalists who remained suspicious of the incursions of philosophic thought.

In this paper I highlight the enormity of the medieval transformation.[6] My larger aim, in the book from which this paper derives, is twofold. First, I wish to explore the theological implications of the earlier religious ways. Pre-medieval theological reflection has a distinctive character, continuous with literature and the arts more than with philosophy as practiced by the medievals. What, I will be asking in the sequel, is it to take seriously that early theological reflection was not in this way philosophical? How might this change the way we think about religion and religious things?

A second larger aim pursued briefly here and at more length in the sequel is to explore the role of philosophy in illuminating religious phenomena. Philosophy is a matter of thinking hard about fundamentals. But as Wittgenstein

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[5] This is not to say that philosophy first caught on in Jewish tradition in Andalusia/Sefarad. Saddiah Gaon, in ninth century Babylonia, was already there. But with later medieval times, philosophy comes to be intellectually central in an important part of the Jewish world.

[6] That some sort of major transformation occurred is not news. Below I quote Halbertal and Margalit's fine work, *Idolatry* (Harvard university Press, 1992), from which I have learned, and certainly Shapiro's *The Limits of Orthodox Theology* is relevant here. An important contribution is Menachem Kellner's *Must a Jew Believe Anything?* See footnote 25 below for a brief discussion of my differences with Kellner. I expect to explore the matter in more detail in the book to which the present paper is an introduction.

taught, philosophy often tends to a kind of imperialism, recreating in its own image the domains it investigates. A striking example is the philosophical idea that learning one's first language involves something like theory formation. Thus an activity that is quite primitive (and of course also involves breathtaking sophistication) becomes a theoretical business, somehow a matter of intellect. Religion also is less about the head than we have learned to suppose.[7] My point is not to deny philosophy a significant role in the understanding of theological matters. The trick is to illuminate religious phenomena without imperialistic reconception.

I begin my story with the philosophically innocent approaches of the Bible and the oral tradition, the latter codified in the *Talmud* (and other Talmudic era works). I will then turn, for the contrast, to the thought of Maimonides.

I. Literary Theology

A. Biblical Literature

It is a commonplace that the Bible is a work of literary magnificence. Magnificence granted and aside, I want to focus on its literary character. The Bible, in its talk of God and theological matters, generally treats these as a poet might, or a writer of literary prose. The contrast is with philosophy.

Philosophy, though, is a many things to many people. Philosophers, beginning no later than Plato, have been great literary craftsmen. But there is an approach, beginning no later than Aristotle, notable in the middle ages as well as in the analytic philosophy of our times, where the literary gives way to the

[7] This is not to deny that there are aspects that are uncontroversially heady, for example, the halakhic or legal side of Talmudic study, clearly taken by the tradition to constitute a kind of intellectual worship of God.

logical and analytical, even scholastic.[8] For those of us brought up in the latter kind of philosophy, there is a tendency to think of it simply as "philosophy."[9]

Indulging this tendency, let us explore the contrast with a literary treatment of theological matters by asking what would one expect from a philosophical treatment.

- To begin with, one might expect definitions—at least clarification—of key terms, for example 'God': is "God" a proper name? Is it simply a tag or pointer to its putative referent, or is the term associated with a descriptive concept like "Creator of the universe"? And so for the other names of God.[10,11]
- One might also expect to hear from the theory of knowledge. Is it possible, for example, to *know* that there is a God? Are there proofs? If not, what makes "God exists" acceptable, intellectually respectable. And even if this can be handled, how does one establish the superiority of one religion over another? Another arena of epistemological inquiry concerns eschatology. What can we know, and how can we know, about the afterlife, about messianic times, and the like?
- Then there are notorious theological puzzles, the problem of evil for example: Given God's perfections, specifically his goodness,

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[8] To see something importantly common to those who emphasize the logical and anylytical is not to see that they look at things in quite the same way. One modern variant sees a philosopher simply as an intellectual worker in a certain domain; an ancient variant sees a commitment to a certain way of life as definitive.

[9] This is not always honorific, as in Wittgenstein's deep ambivalence about what he calls philosophy. In what follows, it is this genre of philosophy—the logical, analytical—of which I speak.

[10] My aim in this bulleted list is to engender a sense of difference between theological genres. In this first item I speak of a contemporary issue (in this case, to philosophers of language). The other items express concerns of the medievals as well.

[11] I couch the issue here in terms of the English word, 'God'. But of course it pertains in the first instance to the relevant Hebrew expressions, some of which seem more or less descriptive—e.g. *Elohim*, often translated as "God," and some of which seem quite clearly to be names, e.g. the Tetragrammaton, often (badly) transliterated as "Jahweh" and often translated as "The Lord." The situation with translation, especially of the Tetragrammaton, is delightfully confusing. The Hebrew word is a proper name but it is not intelligibly vocalized (voweled, as it were). Traditionally it's pronounced as if it were quite another word, the formal "Lord." So the situation is this: We have a real proper name, read as if it were quite another sort of word. Imagine the havoc this wreaks.

knowledge, and power, how can there be any evil at all in the world, not to speak of the unspeakable horrors visited upon so many whether righteous, religious, or not.

- Another sort of theological puzzle—although not often formulated as a puzzle—is the matter of how we manage to speak of God. The philosophical tradition beginning with the medievals has taken such talk to be problematic. For Maimonides, for example, one cannot speak significantly of God using concepts whose primary application is to us and our world. That is, anthropomorphic vocabulary cannot signify in its usual way, with its usual meanings. So philosophy needs to address the possibility of meaningful discourse about God.

I could go on, but the general idea should be clear. The Bible steers clear of such issues. Theological matters are addressed of course, but in the manner of poetry or literary prose.

Having said a bit about the philosophical let me say something about the literary, the Bible's literary mode. In addition to large bodies of explicit poetry—Psalms, for example, and poetic sections of other works, for example the Book of Job—the Bible abounds with imagery, poetic prose. Think of the characterization of people as reflecting God's image, a turn of phrase that eludes literal rendering.

We often speak of the biblical *narrative*, and narrative is another aspect of the Bible's literary character. The Bible's characteristic mode of "theology" is story telling, the stories overlaid with poetic language. Never does one find the sort of conceptually refined doctrinal propositions characteristic of a philosophical approach.

When the divine protagonist comes into view, we are not told much about His *properties*. Think about the divine perfections, the highly abstract *omni*-properties (omnipotence, omniscience, and the like), so dominant in medieval and post-medieval theology. One has to work very hard—too hard—to find even hints of these in the Biblical text.

Instead of properties, perfections, and the like the Bible speaks of God's *roles*—father, king, friend, lover, judge, creator, and the like.[12] Roles, as opposed

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[12] As Halbertal and Margalit emphasize in *Idolatry*.

to properties; this should give one pause. And even when there is mention of God's properties, they are not philosophically central *omni* properties but ethical ones, anthropomorphically characterized—slow to anger, quick to forgive, and the like.

To further emphasize the literary side of all of this—and the distance from philosophical theorizing—it's important that God's multiple roles don't cohere all that well.[12] God is, or plays the role of, parent, ruler, friend, lover, judge, and so on. This is fine in the right sort of literary context.[13] Love poetry, for example, is not diminished by sundry characterizations of one's love. Indeed highly varied depictions often facilitate literary richness, as does the inevitable imagistic language.

If the Bible's portrayal of God, His thoughts, feelings, plans, His role in history, and the like is to count as theology—and why not call it theology?—it is of a very different sort than what, under the influence of the medievals, usually goes by that name. When I suggest in the title of this paper that I am "against theology," I mean of course theology of the medieval sort.

Attention to the concept of *religious belief* may help to sharpen the distinction between theological modes. When we think about religion and religious commitment, the idea of *belief* is never far from view. It's striking, though, that *religious belief* is not a topic that gets any discussion in the Hebrew Bible. The Bible does speak of trusting in God, of fidelity to God, of fearing (or standing in awe)[14] of God, of believing *in* God (which concerns trust rather than belief in a thesis, doctrine, or proposition), of knowing God (where the Hebrew verb *la'da'at* suggests intimacy). But of belief that God exists we hear nothing.[15] Indeed, try to say of someone in Biblical Hebrew that she is or is not a "believer"

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[13] It is also theologically important. Our experience of God, and derivatively our ways of thinking about God, reflect not a consistent, single-track sort of experience but rather an experience of, as it were, someone who fills these quite different roles. There is a certain inchoate quality both to religious experience and conception.

[14] The Hebrew *yirah* means both fear and awe. In many of the relevant Biblical concepts, though, it would seem that awe dominates, even if the relevant sort of awe involves fear.

[15] The only exception that comes to mind is Psalm 14—The fool saith in his heart, "There is no God." Even putting aside how exceptional this language is, in context this too seems not about theoretical atheism but about those who ignore, turn their back upon, God.

in our sense.[16] It's not hard to see how the available biblical language might be stretched to this end. But we should not forget that it would be an extension of the linguistic apparatus.

Still, something like our concept of belief seems implicated in the Bible.[17] After all, the Bible puts forth various truths about God, history, the future.[18] And while it does not speak of believing these things, it certainly seems to take the putative facts for granted. Accordingly one who adheres to the Bible, one who takes it to be *his Bible,* would presumably take these things to be true, that is, to believe them.

Even if, as we would put it, material about what one ought to think (about God, history, etc.) is all over the Bible, it remains important that the Bible, with all its instructions and commandments, does not command us to have the right thoughts.[19] When God is upset with mankind—in early Genesis for example—or later, say in Exodus with the Israelites, or still later in the prophets with the people Israel, his gripe is not about their doctrinal irregularities but about how they live, about their betrayal of His trust, and the like.

Moreover, and of utmost importance for my project of distinguishing Biblical from medieval theology, there is belief and there is belief. Eloquently put by Max Kaddushin in his classic work, *The Rabbinic Mind*, the Bible's theological concepts and implicit beliefs remain *uncrystallized*. That is to say they are formulated by way of literary tropes, perfectly appropriate in context, but

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[16] A. J. Heschel, in *God In Search of Man*, emphasizes that there is no natural way in Biblical Hebrew to characterize one as a believer, as opposed say to a *y're shamayim*, one who stands in awe of heaven.

[17] Perhaps it would be better to say that we can apply our concept of belief to the Bible in the way I go on to indicate.

[18] The extent of this is easy to exaggerate. For one thing, the text does not tell us which of its narratives depict historical events and which are, as it were, parables. And such things are sometimes controversial within the tradition, e.g. the story of Job, the story of the flood. Second, perhaps due to our tendency to see implicit theory in the text, there is a tendency to smooth out differences between Biblical texts. Thus the ways of thinking about God's providence in Deuteronomy and, say, in Job make claims about the Biblical view of providence quite risky. Nor in many of these cases does the Rabbinic understanding in the Talmud rescue the situation.

[19] Not according to the medievals. Maimonides maintains, for example, that the first of the so-called ten commandments ("commandment" is not a Biblical designation; "sayings" is closer), which appears to be a kind of introduction, a preamble, Maimonides interprets as a commandment to believe in God. Similarly the second commandment (about not putting any other gods before God) appears to be quite personal. Maimonides interprets it as command to believe in God's unity. See Chap. Xxx of the *Guide*.

resistant to anything like definition. Biblical theology is poetically infused, not propositionally articulated.

While the Bible's poetic character distinguishes it from much ordinary talk, its lack of strictly defined terms does not. Ordinary concepts, as Wittgenstein emphasizes, typically lack precise definition; this is one source of their great utility, their smooth and flexible functioning in actual (including intellectual) practice. One can always choose to impose strict definitions on what was a coherent (in practical terms) if theoretically ill-defined practice. But this is not, says Wittgenstein, a matter of discovering what the real definitions are; there are none. It's rather a matter of imposing a more precise set of rules on the use of the term than were present before. Needless to say, there are all sorts of considerations that might motivate us to do this, that might recommend one definition over others. Still, the new definition is new; it's not built into the original practice with the terms, even implicitly.

The analogy of boundaries may be of use here. Imagine that two parties live separated by several miles of forest and that such has been the case for many generations. Never has the question arisen of where the property of one ends and where the other's begins. In some sense there is no fact of the matter; perhaps both families descend from original settlers and the question never arose. Now a feud arises and the question is raised, where exactly is the boundary? What has happened is this: certain practical considerations have emerged that make it important that there be a boundary. And the choice of boundaries may not be altogether arbitrary; there may be reasons that motivate a choice or that exclude certain choices. But still, there is no pre-existent fact of the matter.

Viewed in this light, one important thrust of the medieval theological tradition—trying to find conceptually refined formulations for the Bible's literary-theological tropes—is arguably not a mission of pure discovery. Doubly so: first, the poetic character of Biblical theology renders at least problematic the quest for the "straight" theological, i.e. propositional, material lurking behind the imagery. And Wittgenstein adds another layer: never mind the poetry; ordinary vocabulary suffers from a lack of (or flourishes without) definition. Perhaps the Bible's literary theological ideas were fine as they stood and the medieval philosopher is imposing boundaries, as it were.

I will highlight the contrast between Biblical and philosophical theology by saying—a bit provocatively—that the Bible lacks theological doctrine. Of course, this depends upon what one counts as doctrine. My own predilection is

to use this term for the sort of relatively clear, non-imagistic propositional articulation of theological truths (or candidates for theological truth), the sort of thing we do not find in the Bible. Here's an example: "The universe was created *ex nihilo* by a God who himself exists in a realm that is not part of the natural world."[20] As I use the term 'doctrine' then, the Bible's theological remarks are typically if not virtually always non-doctrinal, formulated in figurative—often anthropomorphic—language, for example, "people reflect God's image."

Of course, the term 'doctrine' is often used more widely than I'm suggesting, subsuming even highly imagistic theological sentences. Although I'll often use terms like 'doctrine' in my preferred manner, this really is just a matter of expressive convenience and nothing hinges upon it. If someone prefers the broader usage, I can put my points in longer winded ways.[21]

B. The Oral Tradition

The Bible's literary way with theological matters might leave one unprepared for Talmudic passages in which theological belief has become an official topic; for example, the famous passage in Tractate Sanhedrin, Chapter 10, in which the World-to-Come is denied to those who fail to accept certain theological claims.[22] Is the Talmud here going philosophical as it were, or at least taking a step towards medieval philosophical theology?

I will return below to the passage just mentioned with its emphasis on belief. But notwithstanding such occasional passages, it is clear that in general the Talmud is not going philosophical; quite the contrary. Consider anthropomorphism. That the Bible portrays God in anthropomorphic imagery is a source of (almost) embarrassment to the medieval theological mind. Maimonides in *The Guide for the Perplexed* works (arguably too) hard to show that such language goes only skin deep. But the Talmud seems to revel in

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[20] Notice, even such refinement would hardly count as non-anthropomorphic. As Maimonides points out, our use of terms, even ones like "create" and "exists," have their home in talk about our world. And thus it's not clear what's going on in using them in connection to God.

[21] For more on the notion of doctrine, see my paper "Doctrine" in *Faith and Philosophy,* Vol 14, 1997: 423-443.

[22]See Kaddushin, Chapter 7 for other examples and an illuminating discussion.

anthropomorphic characterization of God.[23] One might call it hyper-anthropomorphism. I'll illustrate it in the following excursion concerning *Eichah Rabbah,* the Rabbinic *Midrash* on the Book of Lamentations. [24]

I'll turn to *Eichah Rabbah* in a moment; but first an example of Biblical (relatively tame) anthropomorphism: early in Genesis, at the time of the Flood, God is angry at our antics, even regretful that he initiated the human experiment. This is of course unabashedly anthropomorphic, but the context of early Genesis imposes limits. For the God of early Genesis is despite the anthropomorphism wholly other, the awesome and remote Creator of the universe in whose hands was its annihilation.

The contrasting Talmudic-era text that is my focus here has God at considerably less distance. It has been said that the Biblical narrative is the history of God's learning that He cannot do it alone, that His plan crucially requires partnership with His human reflections. By the time of the *Midrash* on Lamentations, and in the perception of its authors, the lesson is well learned. Not only can He not do it alone, the project is not going well. And God's reaction reveals a new level of affective engagement and self-awareness. Indeed, God has become affectively almost one of us. He suffers, weeps, He mourns. "Woe is Me!" He cries in Proem 24, "What have I done?"

Sometimes the *Midrash* sees God in maternal terms—or, more accurately, God, as the *Midrash* has it, sees Him/Herself in such terms (Proem 22):

> "Just as when you take away its young a sparrow is left solitary," so spake the Holy One, blessed by He, "I burnt my house, destroyed My city, exiled My children among the nations of the world, and I sit solitary."

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[23] This is to some extent true of the prophetic literature as well. Thus what is new in Rabbinic works is a matter of degree and sustained emphasis.

[24] My discussion of *Eichah Rabbah* is adapted from my paper, "Coming to Terms with Exile" in *Diasporas and Exiles: Varieties of Jewish Identity,* ed. H. Wettstein (University of California Press, 2002). See that paper for more detail. I am indebted here as I am in that paper to Alan Mintz's discussion in *Hurban: Responses to Catastrophe in Hebrew Literature*, (Syracuse, N.Y., 1996).

Sometimes the imagery is paternal: God is compared with a king who, enraged at his two sons (perhaps symbolically, the people Israel just before the destruction of each of the two Temples), thrashes them and drives them away. The king afterward exclaims, "The fault is with me, since I must have brought them up badly" (Proem 2). In Proem 24 God laments:

> Woe to the King who succeeds in His youth and fails in His old age.
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> …………..
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> The Holy one, blessed be He , said to Jeremiah, "I am now like a man who had an only son, for whom he prepared a marriage canopy, but he dies under it. Feelest thou no anguish for Me and My children? Go summon Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and Moses from their sepulchres, for they know how to weep."

Not only does God mourn. He, it would seem, needs instruction in mourning from us.[25]

One aspect of this humanizing of the divine, interestingly parallel to (roughly simultaneous) Christian developments,[26] is a new emphasis on divine vulnerability. God is, as it were, exposed to the elements to a degree scarcely predictable by what we knew of Him.

Closely related is what we might call divine approachability and emotional responsiveness. God, in Genesis, is available to the patriarchs, and to some extent to the matriarchs. The *Midrash* on Lamentations (in the continuation of Proem 24) imagines the three patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob—and Moses pleading with God for mercy towards Israel. God, however, is unaffected; he cannot or will not comply. Eventually, he does promise to restore Israel to its place, but the promise is made not to the patriarchs or Moses. It is only mother Rachel who can move Him. Rachel tells God that she knew of her father's plan

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[25] As Mintz emphasizes. See p. 60.

[26] Of course, in the Christian context new meaning is given to what I'm calling the humanizing of the divine.

concerning the marriage to Jacob, his plan to substitute Leah for her. Rachel attempted to foil the plan, but when that failed

> I relented, suppressed my desire, and had pity upon my sister that she should not be exposed to shame…I delivered over to my sister all the signs which I had arranged with Jacob so that he should think that she was Rachel. More than that, I went beneath the bed upon which he lay with my sister; and when he spoke to her she remained silent and I made all the replies in order that he should not recognize my sister's voice. I did her a kindness, was not jealous of her, and did not expose her to shame. And if I, a creature of flesh and blood, formed of dust and ashes, was not envious of my rival and did not expose her to shame and contempt, why should You, a King who lives eternally and is merciful, be jealous of idolatry in which there is not reality, and exile my children and let them be slain by the sword…
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> Forthwith, the mercy of the Holy One, blessed be He, was stirred, and He said, "For your sake, Rachel, I will restore Israel to its place."

It is interesting that Rachel does not argue, as did Abraham in Genesis 18:23-33, on the grounds of what divine justice requires. Nor does she appeal on the basis of her own merit, as do (earlier in Proem 24) the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Hers is a more personal appeal, predicated on issues of character, God's character.

These developments are underscored and pushed to still another level with the Talmudic idea that after the Second Temple's destruction, God Himself leads only an exilic existence; that the divine presence resides, as it were, in *galut*. This is no doubt in part a matter of empathy. To say that God's presence is in *galut* is to say that He is with us, He feels for us. But it is equally an expression of divine dislocation and a constricted existence. Here we approach discontinuity

with what we know of God from the Bible, certainly from the Pentateuch, a kind of anthropomorphic quantum leap.[27]

I've been focused on the Rabbinic response to Lamentations in *Midrash Rabbah*. But Rabbinic hyper-anthropomorphism is by no means limited to contexts of mourning. The Talmud speaks in various places about God hurting when we hurt, about God praying that His attribute of mercy/nurture overcomes his demand for strict justice. It speaks of God's wearing *t'fillin* when He prays. The point, I hope, is made. Talmudic theologizing is hardly an intermediate phase, *en route*, as it were, to medieval philosophical theology.

Hyper-anthropomorphism dramatizes the literary character of Talmudic theology. But here's another way to see what I have in mind. The Talmud is renowned for its highly analytical legal (*halakhic)* discussions. But interspersed are passages a very different genre, *aggada,* a literary treatment of theological and ethical issues, narratives, parables, and the like. The almost seamless movement between these radically different styles presumably reflects the *Talmud's* recording of free-flowing discussions in the academies.

The shift from *halakha* to *aggada* can seem stark, from the most acute analysis to the most powerful religious imagery. It can also be bewildering: How can it be the the sages do not use their highly developed conceptual acumen to analytically dissect the *aggada?* Why are these lovers of definition and distinction not tempted to inquire about what lies behind all the impressionistic imagery? Who exactly is the Protagonist? What are his properties? Instead of raising these and other fundamental questions, they tell more stories.

This—and here is my suggestion—makes sense on the following assumption: perhaps there is something particularly appropriate or natural about what I'm calling the literary mode in theological—as opposed to legal—discourse. Perhaps the apparently good questions that are so natural to the philosophical bent of mind are, or anyway seemed to the Rabbis, less appropriate, even irrelevant.

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[27] One might argue that there is no quantum leap here, but that the powerful imagery of divine exile is a mere rhetorically supercharged variation on what we have already seen, God in a state of mourning, weeping bitterly, feeling lost, even at times hopeless. But one has the sense that this is not simply a matter of divine affect, that something more "objective" is at stake here. God's project for humanity, His partnership with Israel for *tikkun olam*, the repair and redemption of the world, has been thwarted. The universe is thus dislocated, thrown off course. Israel's political, social, and national catastrophe is thus transformed into a metaphysical cataclysm, a real cosmic jolt. The universe is shaken to its foundations.

Why should that be so? My suggestion for the present—a more complete discussion is the burden of the book to which this paper is an introduction—is as follows. The Rabbis see themselves as articulating a way of life. What I am calling their literary theology is provides a situating environment for the *mitzvot*. The *aggadic* material specifically provides the edification, comfort, and meaning that together with the practices constitute the religious life. Their aims are thus dramatically different than those of later theologians. The questions and modes of approaching those questions that are natural to the philosopher are not theirs.

I now return to the topic with which I began this section—a possible problem for my conception—the occasional Talmudic emphasis on belief. My picture is as follows: The Bible provides narratives like the splitting of the Red Sea, the revelation on Mt. Sinai, even suggestions about the eschatological future (later in the prophets). The Rabbis remind us of these things, occasionally even add to them, and insist that they be believed. Still, this leaves intact the uncrystallized character of the theological concepts. The imagery, the poetically infused narratives, and the like, remain philosophically undeveloped. A philosopher would find them puzzling; and the puzzles remain unaddressed in the Talmud. So while the Rabbis not only endorse Biblical theology and produce some new theological ideas and emphases and indeed explicitly require certain beliefs, this is not to make the Rabbis into philosophers or anything of the like. Their way in theology remains literary and contrasts dramatically with the later philosophical approach.

Still, we should not suppose that Rabbinic culture was hermetically sealed against the influence of Greece. Perhaps the attention to belief--albeit philosophically undeveloped belief--does represent some philosophical influence. But there is, I'm inclined to think, another and at least in some times and places a more powerful causal factor. I mean the phenomenon of heresy, or rather the social and political conditions that prompt the identification of heresies.[28]

The idea is that when religious authority or the religious identity of the community is internally or externally threatened, one sort of defensive reaction is to draw boundaries; to say, "this is what it takes to be one of us." And so it becomes important to say what otherwise might have remained unsaid. The

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[28] Too late for inclusion in my discussion here, I have come across Daniel Boyarin's *Border Lines*, an extremely valuable discussion of the role of heresy and related matters.

heresy, after all, might consist in a strange reading of the theological imagery or narrative.

In an era of political, social, and religious tranquility, the need for doctrinal articulation may not be felt. The images, stories and the rest do their work of supplementing and enriching religious practice; one is not pressed to sharpen up the ideas, to articulate further the conditions of membership. Even radical, unorthodox, interpretations of the narrative or of the commandments may be tolerated. Alternatively, such outré interpretations may be strongly criticized without the suggestion that their propounders are somehow outside the fold.

But in troubled times, things are different. In the middle ages, for example, the exiled Jews are a minority, living in communities that threaten them sometimes physically, sometimes culturally, and certainly theologically. This should issue in the prediction, or postdiction, that more or less sharp lines will be drawn. Who is in and who is out will be important questions.[29] Similarly in earlier, Talmudic times, we see at least the seed of doctrine and the beginnings of the emphasis on belief. For the Rabbis are worried about the Sadducees, the Karaites, the emerging Christians and so on. This tendency remains restrained for the Rabbis; they are worried about Greek culture and its philosophy, and so we don't see movement towards philosophically refined doctrinal explication. The medievals, by contrast, live in a time and culture in which philosophical theology is the reigning intellectual norm.

The competing religious orientations of medieval times, I'm suggesting, is a factor in the period's doctrinal orgy.[30] Needless to say, this is only part of the

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[29] At the same time, even in medieval times (but arguably less so in our own) one finds the phenomenon of radical critique of unorthodox ideas without hint of personal exclusion. See for example Nachmanides' commentary on Genesis 18:20 where he roundly criticizes Abraham Ibn Ezra for the latter's idea that God knows only the world in general terms, a radical idea then as now.

[30] See T. M. Rudavsky, "The Impact of Scholasticism upon Jewish Philosophy in the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Centuries," in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, ed. D. H. Frank and O. Leaman (Cambridge, 2003), p. 347:

> The subject of dogma and belief is revisited with even greater urgency in the fifteenth century. In large part this is due to the intense Christian persecutions experienced by Iberian Jews between 1391 and 1418. Jewish intellectual leaders were drawn into the debate not only to define who is a Jew, and who merits immortality, but also to articulate the doctrinal content of Judaism in contradistinction to Christianity. Jews were forced to respond

story. Clearly the work of the medieval giants is not driven by the need to exclude heretics; philosophical ideas have their own power; nevertheless the times have their influence.[31]

What I am suggesting militates towards reversing the usual understanding that exclusion of heretics is grounded in their denial of previously well-known and well-articulated doctrine. A related thought concerning Judaism in our times is this: the Reform movement, in posing what was perceived as a grave threat to the tradition, prompts Orthodoxy, a new movement of those committed to the traditional ways, to a renewed and intense focus on theological doctrine and the sharpening of theological boundaries.[32]

II. Philosophical Theology

The literary style of theology—naïve from the vantage point of later philosophy—makes immediate contact with religious life. The narratives, parables, and the like provide the edification, comfort, and meaning that together

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to a Christian challenge rooted in creedal concerns, thus bringing to the fore questions concerning the nature of belief.

[31] As Pierre Keller suggested, the importance of excluding heresy may be a factor in the centrality of doctrine in early Christianity.

[32] Having completed my discussion of literary theology, I can now say more about my differences with Kellner's *Must a Jew Believe Anything?* Kellner appears to go farther than I do in denying Rabbinic theological belief. Along the lines suggested by one of Kellner's critics, David Berger, I'm not at all sure that the theological sounding passage in the Mishnah in *Sanhedrin* 10:1 does not mean what it says about denying the world to come to certain heretics. (Which is not to say that I find it appealing to make God into, as it were, a one-issue candidate. But the interpretation of the Mishnah is another matter.) Moreover, as I argue above, while it's surely significant that required beliefs are never spoken of in the Bible and barely spoken of in Talmudic-era literature (*Sanhedrin* 10 is an exception), still it's clear that there are things one is supposed to think. At the same time, I argue that these key "beliefs" are in Kaddushin's word uncrystallized. It is not only that they are not articulated in a philosophically adequate way by the Rabbis; they are likely not articulable in such terms, at least not without imposition. Accordingly, Rabbinic "dogmas" can be required and yet still fail to count as philosophical doctrine. Kellner asks in the "Afterward" to the new edition of his book, "Had the authors of the Mishnah really held [that the Torah is "from heaven"—*Sanhedrin 10-1*] to be a dogma of Judaism, does it not seem odd that not one of them, or their amoraic successors, or the *ge'onim* who followed them took the trouble the define the term ["heaven"] with any specificity." It is just this question that I have tried to resolve here. Beliefs they had, but they were not philosophers and never saw those beliefs as standing in need of the sort of conceptual clarification characteristic of philosophy.

with religious practice constitute the hallmark of that life. When one turns to the philosophical writings of *the* medieval Jewish philosopher—a philosopher's philosopher I will suggest—Maimonides,[33] one finds a very different and esoteric style of theology, one that is suggestive of a dramatically different religious sensibility.[34] In thinking one's way from one theological style to the other and from one religious sensibility to the other, one finds oneself engaged in a virtual gestalt switch.

Not that such is the common perception. If the contrast is as dramatic as I suggest, how is this missed? First, Maimonides's ideas are developed differently—in some aspects dramatically so—in his philosophical and halakhic texts.[35] It becomes tempting to harmonize the radical philosophic ideas with the more traditional characterizations of practice, a temptation that has a long history. And who is to say exactly how to balance these elements? What is clear is that that over time, certainly in the communal perception of the overall picture, the more radical elements have been reined in. This seems at least in part a function of the fact that the (largely) legal (*Mishnah Torah*) characterizations are exceptionally lucid, written in a beautiful, plain Hebrew, while the *Guide,* originally in Arabic, is relatively tortured stylistically. Indeed, perhaps the

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[33]Maimonides's views are in some ways typical of Jewish medieval theology, in other ways not so. Some of the philosophic ideas and tendencies already mentioned as characteristic of medieval theology are Maimonidean, some not so. Nevertheless, for good reason he is often seen as the central player in medieval Jewish philosophy.

[34] I am grateful here to a remark by David Hartman to the effect that Maimonides' approach reflects a different "religious sensibility" than that of the *Midrash.* I think that the concept of religious sensibility—incorporating both cognitive and affective dimensions—is an important one for further reflection. It is (importantly) not the same idea as religious philosophy or anything of the like.

[35] Josef Stern in conversation points out that that this distinction between the philosophic and legal works is hardly an absolute one; there are, for example, important philosophic developments in *Mishnah Torah.* No doubt this is correct. Indeed high-level theoretical legal texts often have implications for, and sometimes explicit discussions of, pertinent philosophic issues; all the more so if the legal thinker lives, as it were, in philosophic issues. Similarly for halakhically relevant remarks in the *Guide.* Nevertheless, in some plain sense one is a philosophic work, the other a legal one. And as I say, there are significant ideas that get very different developments in the two works.

Stern prefers another way of distinguishing the two texts, a way that I find helpful but not inconsistent with what I just said. The *Mishnah Torah*, he says, aims at articulating a way of life for the community; the *Guide*, on the other hand, is written for the exceptional individual, a manual to supplement the *Mishnah Torah*'s instructions and to give new and different perspective on the religious life.

radical philosophic material was meant to be so reined in. Certainly, as Maimonides notes, it was never meant to be publicized to the community.

In what follows I will highlight aspects of Maimonides' philosophic thought that are particularly relevant to the distinction in styles of theology in which I'm interested. Even if in the end one rejects my thesis of ancient to medieval paradigm change, the exercise of seeing these in gestalt terms may be useful; this since we are so accustomed to the assimilation of the older and medieval views.

Sound bites are for politicians, not philosophers. Yet occasionally there is a turn of phrase that encapsulates something crucial about a philosophic outlook, Descartes dictum, for example, that the mind is better known than the body. Consider in this light Maimonides' idea that the intellect constitutes the bridge between man and God.

To give intellect such pride of place seems striking—even astounding—in the context of Jewish religious life. More consonant with that life is the recognition that in trying to understand God we are, to put it lightly, out of our depth. The Bible suggestively relates that Moses, God's intimate, was allowed to see only God's back.[36] Jewish religious life proceeds in the absence of theoretically adequate theological ideas.

Not that Maimonides, in the end, allows us much in the way of conceptual contact. Indeed, on his view our thinking about God has (more than) severe limitations. First, since God's unity does not allow even for the possession of properties—this quite a difficult idea—our attribution to Him of *any* property must be mistaken. Indeed, God's essence, a property-less unity, is unknowable.[37]

Second, even were we to admit property talk about God, the property terms that we use in connection with God—goodness, unity, power, even existence—cannot mean anything like what they usually mean in the human/this-worldly context. Consider ascriptions of goodness to God. Maimonides insists that if one were careful in one's talk about God, one would

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[36] *Exodus* 33:23.

[37] These ideas are very difficult given our (probably Aristotle-inspired) intuitive thinking about property-possession. But in the Neo-Platonic tradition—one of the important influences in medieval theological thought—it's commonplace to suppose that unity of The One defies any division, even intellectual division.

not say or wish to say that God is good in something like our sense, just much better than we are or could be. That's not it at all. Such a conception of goodness is much too derivative from our own application of ethical vocabulary to people. God and His goodness are altogether other. Indeed, in connection to God we don't get so far as to attach (positive) concepts to our property terms. But this seems to leave talk of God's goodness without cognitive content.

Not quite. There is a kind of content, but not the usual kind. I allude here to Maimonides' famous doctrine of negative attribution. The intuitive idea is that there may be circumstances in which we don't know much about a thing, but in which we can circumscribe the thing by saying what it is not. To use property terms in connection to God, according to Maimonides, can at most be to circumscribe God's nature in that way, by saying what He is not.

It is often supposed, at least in more or less popular discussions, that the *via negativa* restores some measure of cognitive content to talk of God's properties. I'm not sure that this is even Maimonides's view; I'm not sure that it isn't. In any case, the content of discourse about God remains extremely thin. Indeed given how meager it is, it becomes very difficult to wrap one's mind around Maimonides' idea that the intellect constitutes the human-divine meeting ground. If intellect is indeed the meeting ground what sort of religious life might this support?

Let's reconsider the intellect-as-meeting-ground idea. Perhaps I have been too fixed on intellect as a faculty for the intellectual apprehension of God. An alternative is suggested by the famous remark of Einstein—no doubt reflecting the spirit of Spinoza as well as Maimonides—that his interest was in sharing God's thoughts, all the rest being mere commentary. On Maimonides' view the student of physics has special access to God's thoughts about the natural world.

Metaphysics, moreover, is for Maimonides the only tool for thinking effectively about God and God's nature, at least negatively. One can, for example, see that there is no other route to God than intellect, and that all thought about God is (at best) negative. Does this really constitute a bridge to the divine? While it is more like a bridge that ends in mid-air, Maimonides presumably would be quick to add that it takes one as close as one can get to unknowable divine. And as with physics, but concerning the subject matter of God himself, the student of metaphysics shares God's thoughts.

Perhaps, to supplement these last reflections, we ought to focus not on the product, the result, of theological inquiry so much as the process. In Book 3,

Section 51 of the *Guide*,[38] Maimonides waxes poetic about "the intellectual worship of God." He writes, almost in the exhortative style of a work of *mussar*,

> When you are alone by yourself, when you are awake on your couch, be careful to meditate in such precious moments on nothing but the intellectual worship of God, viz. to approach Him and to minister before Him in the true manner which I have described to you—not in hollow emotions. This I consider as the highest perfection wise men can attain…

One is reminded here of the tradition's way of seeing deep involvement in Talmudic study as edifying, almost cleansing. One engages in such study not only, not even mostly, for practical knowledge of *halakha*. Indeed, such practical knowledge requires a very different kind of study.[39] Rather the process itself, albeit a sort of heady, unemotional business, constitutes a refined form of religious worship. With some irony Maimonides, Talmudic giant *per excellence*, elevates philosophic inquiry above Talmudic inquiry.[40] The philosopher on his couch approaches as close to God as is humanly possible and ministers to Him in the true manner, with his mind and not with what Maimonides calls hollow emotions.[41],[42]

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[38] Translation is from the Pines Edition, University of Chicago Press, 1963.

[39] Although unquestionably, study of the theoretical underpinnings can enhance practice and add dimensions of meaning.

[40] At the beginning of Book 3, Chapter 51, Maimonides presents a highly suggestive parable of the palace in which various categories of people are thought of as occupying various stages of proximity to the Ruler in his palace. Talmudists are thought of as having "come up to the habitation and walked around it," but having never even entered the antechamber, the latter requiring that one explore the fundamental principles of religion. Sarah Pessin suggested to me that for Maimonides the philosopher's study *becomes*—replaces—the traditional study hall, the *beit ha'midrash*, as the primary locus of the intellectual worship of God.

[41] However especially in *Mishah Torah* he sometimes speaks in a very different religious voice. In *Mishnah Torah,* "Hilchot T'shuvah," Chapter 10, he sings the praises of a passionate, boundless love of God, one he compares to a man's lovesickness for a woman—the latter being apparently less passionate in his view than what one might feel for God. It is striking that Maimonides takes as a kind of model for our love of God such passionate, first-moments-of-love episodes, rather than the sustained love of a long-term relationship. If one is thinking about the love between God and Israel—their extended relationship--one would presumably emphasize the latter. It's also worth noting the Maimonides' individualistic emphasis in his Chapter 10 discussion of love, a topic to which I return below.

Another corollary of the Maimonidean elevation of intellect is the role given to philosophy. Just imagine announcing in one of the *amoraic* academies—or indeed nowadays in a *yeshiva*—that philosophy is the *sine qua non* for understanding the Bible. Yet this is Maimonides' thesis. Only philosophy equips us to know which of the things the Bible says about God are literally true, which are metaphorical, and the like. It is only on the basis of philosophy that we know that, for example, the Bible's talk of God's right arm must be figurative. We know this because divine corporeality is incompatible with established philosophic truth.

The demonstrations of philosophy are, moreover, final; they need no sanction from religion. Indeed, if—contrary to fact according to Maimonides—the Aristotelian attempts succeeded in demonstrating the eternity of the world, we would be forced to read the Genesis creation story in a figurative way.[43]

Maimonides position that philosophy is essential to the proper reading of the Bible and in effect the final arbiter of the facts is quite extreme even among medieval philosophers. He is, one might say, a philosopher's philosopher. But this makes him a perfect example for my purposes, perfect in representing the philosophical tendency in a particularly pure form.

The idea that the intellectual realm is the meeting place of man and God has not become commonplace, the accepted wisdom. But along with that idea came something that did become commonplace, something that seems to us to go without saying: the centrality of belief and doctrine.[44] We speak of religious

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[42] I've been struggling with Maimonides' conception of the intellect as meeting ground. Additional to the considerations I mentioned, his view may reflect his very different philosophical framework from our own, specifically Aristotelian ideas about Active Intellect and the like, material beyond the scope of this paper.

[43] The implications of this are radical. I spoke above about the fact that there are beliefs that are crucial to the tradition, even if in Kaddushin's expression they remain uncrystallized. Maimonides' remark about the failed Aristotelian attempt to demonstrate eternity of matter in effect tells us that if one of these *prima facie* crucial religious beliefs conflicts with the dictates of the highest standards of human knowledge—philosophy, science, etc.—then one should reinterpret the traditional idea. Maimonides here anticipates a nont uncommon liberal religious idea from that there cannot be a conflict between science/philosophy and religion for the former is authoritative in the realm of the factual.

[44] Strictly speaking, Maimonides in the *Guide* is concerned with knowledge of God rather than belief. Not only that but he in effect denies that we can have knowledge of God. Still, it is the elevation of the epistemic dimension by him and other medieval philosophers that is responsible for the tendency in question.

people as believers; of irreligious as non-believers.[45] And this despite the oddness of this characterization given the way the bible and the Rabbis address the religious stance.

The Maimonidean elevation of belief to a pivotal position is occasionally evident even in the *halakhic* realm. Consider religious conversion. When one wants to convert to Judaism, one is told what he is, as it were, getting into. Maimonides's elaboration gives pride of place in the conversion process to articulating for the convert the "fundamentals of the faith, i.e. the unity of God…."[46] The Talmudic discussion mentions no such thing![47] For the Rabbis of the Talmud it was a matter of the person's sincere commitment to the Jewish people and the difficult life of Jewish religious observance.

Let's turn to the implications for religious practice. When Maimonides reflects (still in Book 3, Chapter 51) on the point of religious ritual, he gives it relatively short shrift. One of its central purposes is to separate people from the everyday worldly encounters that divert a person from deep thought about God. The practices—his examples are reading the *Torah*, prayer, performing the other commandments—constitute training to be involved with God's commandments rather than with, say, your checkbook, this towards the ultimate end of freedom from worldly things so important for philosophic contemplation. And it's the latter that constitutes the real religious encounter. Prayer then—like the other practices—is of instrumental value, not the religious moment, as it were.

It would be one thing to complain that much of ordinary religious practice is insufficiently focused, and Maimonides also comments upon that in Chapter 51. But our limited success aside, prayer, for us and the Rabbis of the Talmud, is all about communication with God. This is no stretching exercise, as it were, in

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[45]This tendency to put belief at the center is restrained in the context of Judaism, as opposed say to certain strains in Christianity, by the tremendous role of practice. It's difficult to even imagine one who wholeheartedly believes but does not at least minimally observe the practices. Nevertheless, the idiom of "believer" is one that has caught on, and this testifies to the centrality of belief. If one claims to be Orthodox but does not adhere to the Maimonidean thirteen principles of faith, one's claim will in many, most, circles be thought to be tenuous at best. But see Marc B. Shapiro, *The Limits of Orthodox Theology: Maimonides Thirteen Principles Reappraised* (Littman Library of Jewish Civilization, 2003), for a scholarly argument that these principles are, every one of them, controversial from a traditional point of view, that is, in traditional Jewish sources.

[46] In *Mishnah Torah, Hilchot Issurei Bi'ah*, Chapter 14, tr. Rabbi Eilyahu Touger, Moznaim Publishing Company, New York, 2002.

[47] *Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Yevamot* 47a

the service of detached philosophic contemplation. It is an important religious moment, one of the central ones. And when it works, when we are able to focus, to succeed in overcoming distraction, prayer can represent a religious intimacy that stands at great distance from detached contemplation.[48] Not that there is only one way that prayer works, or indeed one sort of religious moment. Perhaps there are times that prayer succeeds just because one is contemplative, even detached. Nevertheless, all of this remains a far cry from the religious sensibility of Chapter 51.

Another thing that's striking about this side of Maimonides' thought is its stark individualism. The Maimonidean philosophic/religious moment is a solitary one. Of course there are genuinely solitary religious experiences. But it seems hasty to suppose, in the context of Jewish religious life, that the essential moment is either solitary or communal. Surely there is a place for each. Think about the encounter at Sinai, which has aspects of both the individual and the communal. And in the *amidah,* the heart of every prayer service, one speaks in the midst of a sometimes very personal encounter not of "I," but of "we."

Let me turn to the conception of the religious giant,[49] of religious greatness. When we think of people who exhibit such greatness, they may or may not be philosophers. They are typically Talmudic masters whose intellectual mastery is integrated with, and perhaps partly responsible for a kind of heightened ethical and spiritual sense. To put it as Heschel might have, such a person lives with one eye on God, in a kind of intimacy with God. While awe and love towards God are for us sometime affairs, the *gadol* lives in God's presence.

Maimonides, again by stark contrast, sees religious greatness in terms of philosophic profundity. I don't mean that he would grant such greatness to a

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[48] There are Talmudic stories of Rabbi Akiva's praying, beginning the *amidah*—a standing prayer during which one does not move one's feet—in one location and somehow ending up across the room. Or think of our sometimes profound sense of God's presence at the end of the *N'eilah* prayer at the end of a 25 hour fast on *Yom Kippur.*

One thing that makes all of this quite confusing is the thought that surely Maimonides not only knew stories like that of Rabbi Akiva, but he must have, one supposes, himself known the intimacy of prayer.

[49] The word "giant" seems not quite apt here. But it translates a wonderful expression in Hebrew. We speak of a *gadol,* of a *gadol b'dor* – a giant (or great person), a giant (great person) of a particular generation. One could use the word "leader," but even if a giant is almost necessarily a leader, the term *gadol* means "giant," not leader.

philosophically profound scoundrel, if on his view this were possible. But there cannot be religious greatness—dwelling with the King in the inner courtyard—in the absence of philosophic profundity. The prophets, according to Maimonides, were philosophers, from Abraham on.

III. Conclusion

Since medieval times—and this is a tribute to the power of medieval theological philosophy—it has seemed natural to suppose that religion and philosophy are natural bedfellows. Indeed, the word "theology"—not unlike "doctrine"—rings with the marriage of religion and philosophy. Still, "theology," as I've noted, can have a more neutral resonance, as it does when we consider pre-medieval Jewish theological reflection.

My larger project is to shift focus back to the literary expression of theological themes. Indeed the arts more generally deserve attention here, as a glance at the history of western religion suggests. The role of music, for example, in the ancient Temple service, or in the Christian liturgical tradition. Or in the liturgical practice of certain sects of Hasidism, as well as in much contemporary synagogue practice that derives from Hasidism. Or the role of art in Christianity. Or the role of dance and bodily movement in certain traditional rituals (prostration, for example) or again in Hasidic dance.

But medieval philosophical theology is formidable. And this is so even where the philosophical approach has failed to win the hearts and minds of religious practitioners. In the context of contemporary traditional Jewish religious life, other approaches dominate: various strains and forms of mysticism—*kabbalah*, including the powerful C*hassidic* tradition—as well as *mussar*, a 19th century ethical revival. These have considerably more influence on actual religious life and thought than medieval inspired Jewish philosophy. And yet the power of the latter somehow remains.

Example: *anthropomorphism*. Notwithstanding the inestimable power of anthropomorphic ways of thinking of God in actual religious life--as loving, caring, and so on--still one constantly hears the comment that of course as Maimonides taught, such anthropomorphic characterizations are literally

incorrect.[50] Second example: *God's perfections.* Ask almost anyone—theist, agnostic, or atheist—about her concept of God and typically you will receive the same (medieval-inspired) answer: God as a constellation of perfections, omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, etc.

These examples of the power of medieval theological thought are striking in part because neither one is in any obvious way true of the tradition in its pre-medieval incarnation. To begin with anthropomorphism, one does find among the Rabbis considerable discomfort with anthropomorphism. But as Kaddushin points out this is not the medieval philosophers' theoretical discomfort with the very idea of anthropomorphic characterization of God. The Rabbis' hesitation has, one might say, religious rather than philosophical/theoretical motivation. God, in the rabbinic experience and imagination, is both like us (thus anthropomorphic talk) and wholly other. One has two sorts of intuitions and is not prepared to deny either, on pain of falsifying the experience. The problem for the Rabbis is that anthropomorphic talk, crucial as it is, brings us to the edge of presumption, of reducing God to our terms. And this is something about which the Rabbis are especially sensitive. A second and related reason for Rabbinic anxiety about such talk concerns the religious intuition that when we speak of God we are in deep water, over our heads. In some quite strong sense, we don't know what we are talking about. Anthropomorphic talk, true as it is to our experience, threatens on this front as well.

The second example I gave of the power of medieval thought, the persistence of the idea that God is a constellation of perfections, requires much more discussion than I can give it here. Certainly the perfections picture, even if it awaits medieval times to become the received view, has early antecedents. Still, it is very striking how much of Bible is, in its plain meaning, at odds with the perfections picture. There are countless Biblical texts, passages in which God fails to know something, in which he changes his mind, regrets what he has done,

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50 When we characterize God in terms of such imagery, so the comment will often continue, we adopt the Torah's practice of "speaking in the common language," *lashon b'nei adam* (literally, the language or vocabulary of people, "human talk," as it were). This is a medieval analog to Bishop Berkeley's remark (on another topic) that the philosopher should speak with the vulgar, but think with the learned. The thought that in all these contexts the Bible and the Rabbis are speaking "with the vulgar" is itself a medieval idea, as Halbertal and Margalit point out in Chapter 2 , "Idolatry and Representation" of *Idolatry*. While we do find in the Talmud the idea that the Torah "speaks in the common language, *lashon b'nei adam*," the Talmudic context is, as Halbertal and Margalit emphasize, very different and has nothing to do with anthropomorphism.

suffers from rage, frustration, and the like. Think of the Garden of Eden and God's question to Adam, "Where are you?" Or God's taking moral instruction from Abraham in Chapter 17 of Genesis. Of course, we know how to read those passages to preserve the medieval perfections picture; we have indeed learned our lessons quite well. But the plain meaning of the Biblical text is so often otherwise.

Not that the Bible always talks in ways that are at odds with the perfections picture: the Bible sings God's praises as, for example, flawless. But this is poetry, a profound expression of love, awe, gratitude, and the like, hardly a theoretical pronouncement. No more than in love poetry in which the poet declares that his lover is flawless. Clearly, according to the Biblical text God is amazingly—supremely if you like—powerful, similarly outstanding in His knowledge, character, and the rest. But this is hardly to endorse the philosophers' conception of absolute perfection. To be supreme in power is not necessarily to be theoretically unlimited in power; similarly for knowledge, character and the rest.

I have emphasized the lingering power of medieval philosophical theology. Indeed one sees its influence not only in popular religious thinking, but even in *Hasidism* and *mussar* that can hardly be accused of rationalism. We are dealing here, or so I want to suggest, with a phenomenon highlighted by Alasdair MacIntyre in his seminal work, *After Virtue*. MacIntyre advances his idea in connection with ethics but I believe it to have widespread application. Our ethical thinking, he points out, is influenced by the diverse ethical approaches of our ancestors, representing many different epochs and cultures. Greek philosophy and the culture from which it emerged emphasized the social dimension of the ethical life and the virtues. A very different and more individualistic direction was pursued by Kant, who gave less play to character and virtue and more to the individual's moral duty. Later utilitarianism emphasized not the intrinsically obligatory character of an act, a la Kant, but the desirability of its consequences. And so on. Our own ethical thought, maintains MacIntyre, is often is a kind of admixture of considerations, each having its home in some one of these approaches. An important consequence is that our thinking shows signs of incoherence bred of its sundry antecedents.

MacIntyre's remarks are suggestive with regard to many areas of philosophy, indeed many arenas of reflective life.[51] In the present context the idea is that medieval Jewish philosophy figures as a key ingredient—admixed with others—in a not necessarily coherent overall approach. Observe our religious lives, the things we find religiously moving, comforting, and the like, the sorts of things we turn to in dark or happy times, and one finds the religious world of the Bible, *midrash, aggadah.* The God that is, as it were, relevant is the anthropomorphic God who feels for us, who is with us in troubled and wonderful times, with whom we share our sorrows and joys and wishes. But then ask us about our conception of God and one hears the echoes of medieval philosophy.

Perhaps it will seem as if my aim in this paper has been anti-philosophical, a plea for a return to pre-philosophical theological innocence. Compare: Wittgenstein himself is often accused of being anti-philosophical. But Wittgenstein, in his critique of philosophical theorizing, evinces great respect for the illumination that philosophic reflection can provide. The problem is that philosophy is just so hard to get right; in an all-too-human way philosophers fall into characteristic traps.[52] They tend, for example, to recreate the subject matter under scrutiny in their own image, to over-intellectualize the object of study. "Don't think; look" is one of Wittgenstein's characteristic exhortations. Don't think about what our practices must be like if they are to make sense (by one's philosophical lights). Instead observe; for it is actual practice that is our intellectual quarry. And this is so whether one is exploring the character of linguistic practice, or the character of religious practice and religious life.

My gripe has not been that philosophers have subjected Jewish religious life—its practices and the integrated structure of meanings —to philosophic scrutiny. Perhaps one could lodge such a complaint. One could begin as I did with the dramatic differences between Israelite and Athenian cultures. My own complaint was different. It concerned a certain indelicacy in thinking about one

[51] In recent work of mine in the philosophy of language (*The Magic Prism: An Essay in the Philosophy of Langauge*, Oxford University Press, 2004) I saw the MacIntyre phenomenon at work in philosophers' treatments of Frege's famous puzzle concerning the informativeness of identity statements.

[52] I hear Larry Wright's voice here.

culture from the point of view of the other, an indelicacy that issued in a denial of the relevant differences. Maimonides' view that the prophets and even the Patriarchs were philosophers is more than a perfect example.

It would be one thing to self-consciously explore/explicate the "uncrystallized" theological ideas that are so integral to Jewish religious life, bringing to bear one's favored philosophical outlook. One could appeal to aid from the neo-Kantians, or Wittgenstein, or Levinas, or for that matter Aristotle. One would then need to face a crucial question: how much and in what ways one's favored way of thinking maps on to that of the Rabbis. It's quite another to claim, as is the thrust of much medieval philosophical theology, that Biblical and Rabbinic theological ideas are captured, virtually without remainder, by some favored philosophical explication. If one sympathetic to the medieval project were to forego this latter claim, there would remain the other problem to which I've directed attention: the Maimonidean philosophical theology substantially alters the religious sensibility of Biblical/Rabbinic tradition.

Here I am of two minds. On one side is the methodological idea that philosophy would do better to give up its imperialism. On my preferred picture it is the tradition itself and not philosophic criticism that dictates the character of religious life, of the religious moment. To substantially alter the traditional religious sensibility is to thus violate what might well be considered to be a condition of adequacy for a non-imperialistic philosophic account.

On the other side is the thought that drawing lines between us and them, particularly when the them are giants of Talmudic scholarship (and of course full participants in the practices of the community), needs to be tempered by a welcoming of differences and new ideas. It is plausible that one of the factors in the survival of the tradition is the extreme flexibility at the interpretive level, this against the background of shared practice.[53] Not that this flexibility always comes easy, as with the case of the difficult beginnings of early *Hasidism*. In this

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[53] It is not bare practice that we share but some sort of basic understanding. What I have in mind is the sense in which right-thinking Americans agree that "all men are created equal," without any agreement about what this comes to. Similarly, it is not only bare practice that different interpretive approaches to Jewish tradition share, it is also basic (and uncrystallized) thoughts about God and Torah.

spirit it is better to welcome our interpretive opponents, Maimonidean or other, as sharing an interpretive *Beit HaMidrash*.[54]

[54] Thanks to Avi Ravitsky for pointing out the "with us or against us" exclusivity of an earlier draft.