Maimonides on Genesis

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MAIMONIDES ON GENESIS*

FROM THE POINT OF VIEW of method and content, this is probably one of the best books in Maimonidean studies to be published in recent years. Unfortunately it has not had the wide reading it deserves.

Part I of this book is devoted to setting the framework for the analysis of the Genesis story later on. Klein-Braslavy deals with Maimonides' basic assumptions in Biblical exegesis (pp. 17-46), his methods for dealing with the exegesis of Rabbinic texts (47-51), and his methods of presenting Biblical exegesis (pp. 52-59). In this part, several crucial theses are developed. First, Scripture expresses in figurative language the same truths that Aristotle (or philosophy) expresses in scientific language; significant sections from the *Guide* are adduced in support. Second, since these two systems of thought are in basic harmony, one can speak of two "semantic axes" for understanding any given problem: the scientific-philosophic axis and the Biblical-Rabbinic axis. Each enlightens the other, and a Biblical-philosophic lexicon can be said to be the goal of the *Guide*. Third, Maimonides practiced two types of esotericism, that required by Rabbinic tradition and that required by the nature of the material. The former compelled him to conceal his teaching, because it was simply not permitted to reveal it. The latter compelled him to practice it because the whole truth was simply not knowable either from science-philosophy or from Scripture. Fourth, Klein-Braslavy points to the various types of multiple-meaning terms, figurative forms of speech, and different levels of readers, with careful attention to the many dispersed texts on these subjects. She then points out that Maimonides very often used Rabbinic texts in a philosophical interpretation to represent the views of the half-educated, that is, to stand for the intellectual position of those who had started their philosophical studies but had not gone far enough to acquire a profound understanding of either Scriptural-Rabbinic texts or philosophy.

The first four chapters of Part II discuss certain general problems in dealing with Maimonides' interpretation of the Genesis story: What is *maʿaśeh bereshit* (pp. 63-69)? What does the term *ʾElohim* mean (pp. 70-78)? What is the meaning of the main verbs used in Genesis, *baraʾ*, *ʿadam* / *heʿder*, *khalaqa*, *ʾamar*, *ʿaśah*, *raʾah*, *hibdil*, and *qaraʾ* (pp. 79-103)? And what is the meaning of the recurring phrase, *wa-yoʾmer* . . . *wa-yarʾ* . . . *ki ṭob* (pp. 104-13)? Here, too, several crucial theses are developed. First, although many commentators on Maimonides (and perhaps some modern theologians) wanted to see in the exegesis of Genesis a clear reference to the spiritual world emanated from God, (a) Maimonides clearly

*. פירוש הרמב"ם לסיפור בריאת העולם, *by Sara Klein-Braslavy*. Jerusalem: Ha-Ḥebrah le-Ḥeqer ha-Miqraʾ, 1978. Pp. 278.

stated that Genesis is *maʿaśeh bereshit*, i.e., Aristotelian physics (and in the overwhelming majority, Aristotle's sublunar physics); (b) Maimonides recognized that the exposition of even sublunar physics was done under very strict rules which he observed meticulously; and (c) the reference to Aristotle's *Metereologica* (i.e., to the sublunar physics of the atmosphere) was to be taken as a main semantic axis and not as a reference intended to distract the reader from an exposition of metaphysics, i.e., of the emanation of the chain of spiritual beings. Second, the term *ʾElohim* is generally used in connection with the providential and managerial aspect of God and not with His creatorship. Third, the phrase *wa-yoʾmer . . . wa-yarʾ . . . ki ṭob* is the marker of the basic literary units and has as its purpose the assertion that whatever was done, was accomplished by both the Will and the Knowledge of God. It also delineates the self-contained purpose of that which is contained within the unit.

Chapters 5 through 11 of Part II deal with each of the days of creation. Klein-Braslavy's discussion of which terms refer to which elements in Gen. 1:2 is very good and well summarized (pp. 153-54). Her discussion of the two types of *ʾor* (pp. 57-58) is very clear. Her discussion of *meʾorot* and the problem of the relationship of the first and fourth days, especially in view of Maimonides' use of the relevant Rabbinic texts, is good, though it is not clear exactly what, according to Maimonides, actually happened on the fourth day (pp. 180-85). Klein-Braslavy's discussion or *raqiʿa* and the waters above and below in the light of Aristotle's *Metereologica* is brilliant (pp. 164-67). There she proposes two possible interpretations, both of which are clear (and in my opinion, Maimonides may have not known—or not cared—which one was most acceptable to the reader).

Finally, Klein-Braslavy's initial discussion of Maimonides' anthropology under the rubric of *ṣelem* (pp. 203-17) is a formidable step toward the solution of this very knotty problem. Throughout, the author has made very careful use of the traditional commentators as well as of the literary canons set forth by Strauss.

Chapters 12 and 13 of Part II deal with certain general problems in the fusion of the scientific-philosophical semantic axis with the Biblical-Rabbinic axis: the order of the created beings (pp. 218-27) and time (pp. 228-59). Here, in addition to dealing with the multiple levels of meaning of the term *qadmut* and the strange sayings of R. Abbahu and others, Klein-Braslavy poses a crucial question: Was the story of Genesis understood by Maimonides to be a temporal *récit* of what happened during the time of creation (in which case some events are out of order), or was it understood by him as a causal-ontological Torah (in which case the temporal motif of the narrative must be understood metaphorically). Klein-Braslavy cites texts from Maimonides on both sides. She also cites commentators on both sides. Her conclusion is that Maimonides intended to interpret Genesis on three levels: for the simple, creation was temporal: for the partly educated (symbolized by R. Abbahu and others), creation was also temporal though limited to sublunar reality, i.e., creation was a passing from potentiality to actuality within the Aristotelian framework of time; and for the truly elite, creation was simultaneous, i.e., not a series of events which took place in time but

an ontological-causal moment. In this interpretation words like "day" (indeed the whole temporal motif of the narrative) and metaphorical terms such as fetus and seed must be understood only as metaphors. The last was Maimonides' true opinion (pp. 246-47, 255-56), and this was consistent with his position that volitional but eternal emanationism was not incompatible with the truth of Torah.

Chapter 14 is devoted to a discussion of the Sabbath and the relevant terms.

Two serious reservations must worry the readers of this book, although as stated, it is a model of method and caution. First, the process of coming-into-being for all medieval philosophers after Alfarabi (perhaps even after Alexander of Aphrodisias) had three "moments": (a) radical coming-into-being (sometimes termed "ex nihilo," at other times "from no thing," and using certain terms in Arabic and Hebrew): (b) emanation, i.e., coming-into-being by the principle of plentitude or overflow; and (c) in-formation, i.e., coming-into-being by virtue of having a form "inserted" or "placed" or "set" into a substratum of some kind. Klein-Braslavy discusses all these terms at length and shows that they are all used ambiguously, that is, sometimes they mean one thing and at other times they mean another. However, theologically they must be differentiated if God's ontological preeminence is to be preserved. Furthermore, if medieval science (cosmology) is to be taken seriously, these terms must also have separable meanings, even if the usages thereof occasionally overlap. The differentiation of the various types of coming-into-being has not been dealt with by Klein-Braslavy (for an initial reflection, cf. D. Blumenthal, "On the Theories of *ʾibdāʿ* and *taʾthīr*," *Die Welt des Islams*, 1981). Secondly, although Klein-Braslavy has worked very closely with the Hebrew sources, she has not made extensive use of the Islamic ones. The literature on Alfarabi is in a terrible state, but it was read by Maimonides with interest. Similarly, the Arabic texts of Aristotle and his Greek-translated-into-Arabic commentators are not touched upon with sufficient depth. Perhaps Maimonides was not seriously influenced by them. Certainly, the *Guide* was intended for Jewish readers and not for the larger philosophic audience. Still, these sources need more attention.

These reservations notwithstanding, Klein-Braslavy's book is a model of scholarship and method, and deserves a wide audience, perhaps even a translation into one of the languages of the West.

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