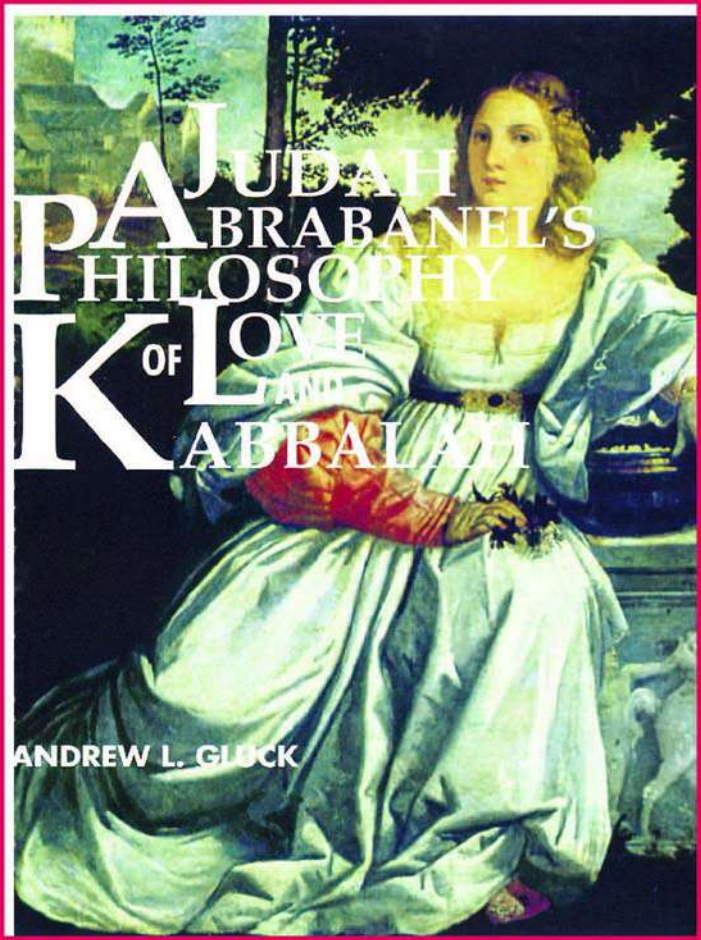

Judah Abrabanel's Philosophy of Love and Kabbalah

ANDREW L. GLUCK

JUDAH ABRABANEL'S PHILOSOPHY OF LOVE AND KABBALAH

Andrew L. Gluck

With a Foreword by
Menachem Kellner

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In memory of Chaim (Henry) Toledano, who always found the time to help me with my work in Judaica when I needed it.

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Foreword by Menachem Kellner

Among the many important issues raised in the book before us is the distinction between philosophical and kabbalistic temperaments. Kabbalists tended (and tend!) to stress ethnicity, magic and what appears to many as superstition in a manner that is largely incompatible with the philosophical temperament. Some scholars think that this distinction reflects a modern reading of medieval texts. In some cases they may very well be right, but it is important to note that the distinction was already drawn in the Middle Ages. In the Introduction to his *Ma'aseh Efod*, a work cited by Judah Abravanel's father, Isaac, Profiat Duran (c.1350 – c.1415) presents a stark trichotomy, distinguishing sharply among Talmudists, philosophers and kabbalists. Other medievals, such as Elijah Delmedigo and his student, Shaul ha-Kohen Ashkenazi, and certainly quite a few modern scholars, have followed Duran in so doing.

It is not clear that Isaac Abravanel would have been comfortable with the sharp distinctions drawn by Duran, but it is evident that however he saw himself, it was not as a kabbalist. His rare explicit references to Kabbalah and its texts are always presented from the vantagepoint of a respectful outsider, one who has some knowledge of Kabbalah, but who hardly seems himself as a devotee. He knew kabbalists, respected them and read their work, but did not see himself as one of them.

The issues which strike many contemporary readers of medieval Jewish philosophical and kabbalistic texts—universalism and particularism, the nature of holiness, the nature of the Jewish

people, the nature of the land of Israel, the point of sacrifices, etc.—did not, as it turns out, attract the attention of late medieval and early modern readers of our two thinkers. The questions that apparently bothered them, and that turned out to be cruxes of Maimonidean interpretation, revolved around philosophical naturalism. Isaac Abravanel himself insists that the radical interpreters of Maimonides misrepresented the master on the questions of creation, God's knowledge, prophecy, and providence. On these questions, Abravanel defended Maimonides from what he considered to be his overly naturalist interpreters.

My friend and student David Gillis once observed that for the Maimonidean philosophers, nature reveals God, while for the Kabbalists, nature obscures God. This observation is pregnant with meaning. The God revealed by nature is, not surprisingly, nature's God, the so-called God of the philosophers, as opposed to the personal and very active God of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs. This distinction is drawn by Judah Halevi and comes out very clearly in the first four chapters of Maimonides' great code, the *Mishneh Torah*. It is in those chapters that Maimonides makes clear that what he called physics and metaphysics the Talmudic sages called *ma'aseh bereshit* and *ma'aseh merkavah*. These terms were also used by the authors of the Hekhalot and associated texts, and by kabbalists to refer to the secret teachings of the Torah, which they took to be the sorts of mysticism in which they themselves were engaged.

This has led some of our contemporaries to confuse philosophy and Kabbalah, since both engage in allegorical interpretation of Scripture, and use similar terminology. It is one of the many benefits of the book that you are about to read that Andrew

Gluck keeps these distinctions in mind, and helps the reader avoid serious mistakes about the nature of the texts studied in this fine book.

Menachem Kellner is a Professor of Jewish Thought at the University of Haifa, Israel. He is also a Senior Fellow at the Institute of Philosophy, Political Theory and Religion, Shalem Center in Jerusalem. He has written extensively on Maimonides and medieval Jewish philosophy and has translated some of the works of Isaac Abrabanel.

Preface

When I mentioned to a friend (who is not a philosopher) that I was embarking upon writing a book about Judah Abrabanel, he asked me what Abrabanel's basic thesis was. I told him that it involved the entire universe being utterly dependent upon love. His immediate response was that something very important had been overlooked: namely, hatred! As it turns out, my friend's reaction (perhaps unbeknownst to him) could well have been a paraphrase of Heracleitus or Empedocles, who believed that both love *and* strife produced the universe, as they knew it.[1] But Judah Abrabanel, following a long line of other philosophers, believed that love is far more important and fundamental, as both an originative and regulative principle, than is strife.[2] Yet many of us devote our lives, to a very great

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[1] Ficino also thought that hatred had no real causal efficacy in the world. He argued that what appears to be hatred or animosity is really the love of self. See *De Amore*, III, 4 and III, 2, where he attributes this belief to Empedocles as well. Empedocles believed that strife was essential for dissolution and separation, which in his view were almost as essential to the universe as creation and adhesion. This will become a major theme in our study as well.

[2] See Aristotle, *De Caelo*, III, 2, 10-20: "But no natural fact can originate in chance... Hence Empedocles begins after the process ruled by Love: for he could not have constructed the heaven by building it up out of bodies in separation, making them to combine by the power of Love, since our world has its constituent elements in separation, and therefore presupposes a previous state of unity and combination." Judah Abrabanel was also well aware of Empedocles' doctrine as he demonstrates on p. 88.

> And for this reason the philosopher Empedocles says that the causes of generation and corruption among the lower bodies are six, to wit: the four elements, amity and enmity: inasmuch as amity of the four elements brings into being all the bodies compounded of the same, while their enmity dooms them to corruption. For, corresponding to the four degrees of creative love among the four elements, which I named to you as being the cause of the creation of all

extent, to strife. It is widely acknowledged that competition (whether economic, cultural or evolutionary) often produces good results. In academia, while sometimes drawing connections and seeking agreement, we quite often distinguish ourselves by making subtle distinctions and searching for disagreements, sometimes even to the detriment of establishing loving relationships. In religion we also quite often magnify differences between various traditions, sometimes in the service of establishing "identity." Politics and nationalism reinforce this same apparently hardwired human tendency to define ones self in opposition to some "Other."

The *Dialoghi d'Amore* is a work that certainly contains its share of disagreements, critical analyses and competing opinions but it also strives for unity, something that may now be out of fashion in some academic circles. In other kinds of scholarship, however, harmonization is still the name of the game. When it comes to the estimation of the correct relationship between philosophy and Kabbalah, for example, we can clearly see those two competing methodologies in modern scholarship. Harmonization, like differentiation, usually emerges out of some ideological commitment. When trying to understand a thinker it is important to recognize the world-view or "metanarrative" out of which his or her work emerges.[3]

> compound bodies on the four planes of material being, you must posit as many degrees of hate causing the dissolution and corruption of [those bodies]. In fine, even as all evil and destruction are caused by hostility of these four elements, so all good and birth proceeds from their love and amity.

[3] For a very good discussion of world-views and metanarratives and how they are often downplayed in contemporary thought see Huston Smith, "Science and the Great Chain of Being."

Nowadays, we are becoming less and less troubled by such things and whether that is a good or bad thing I will leave to the reader to decide but we would at least like to know what Judah Abrabanel thought about the relationship between philosophy and Kabbalah and some of us might want to make our own determination as well. I would hope that this book sheds some light not only on Judah Abrabanel as a figure in the descriptive history of ideas but also on that broader philosophical subject, which is unapologetically normative in nature. Hence this book and this subject have ramifications far beyond the work of academicians and raise questions regarding the intersection of the life of the mind, religion and the human existential dilemma.

Judah Abrabanel's *Dialoghi d'Amore* (originally translated into English as *The Philosophy of Love* but literally meaning *Dialogues of Love*) is in the estimation of many scholars one of the great philosophical works of the Italian Renaissance. Certainly it was one of the most popular. Written by the son of one of the greatest and best-known Jewish thinkers of his generation, Isaac Abrabanel, Judah (usually called Leone Ebreo) most likely remained a professing and practicing Jew, despite a claim after his death that he had converted to Christianity. Yet the book is not ostensibly a typical work of Jewish philosophy and seems to be directed to a more general educated readership. It has become conventional wisdom that it is permeated with kabbalistic ideas and it was indeed written at a time when Kabbalah was generally considered an authentic tradition among Jewish intellectuals. Jews and Gentiles alike were becoming intensely interested in

Kabbalah, both before and after he wrote the book.[4] This project is an attempt to understand that work and an effort to ferret out its religious, philosophical and/or kabbalistic roots without making any strong assumptions about the author's views regarding Kabbalah.[5] Hence, it does not attempt to be comprehensive in terms of understanding all of the author's views but surely it must be more inclusive than simply a discussion of its roots in or relationship to Kabbalah. Those issues can only truly be addressed once one understands to some degree what other ideas the author was attempting to convey, which sometimes seem clearer to me than his attitude towards Kabbalah.

The more I involved myself in the *Dialoghi*, as well as its antecedent and attendant literature, the more difficult my

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[4] I do not know who the first commentator to associate Abrabanel with Kabbalah was; but Abraham Cohen de Herrera certainly did so explicitly in the early part of the 17th century. See his *Puerta del Cielo*, p. 135. This perhaps would have been expected of Herrera since he often attempted to equate Neoplatonic thought with Kabbalah. Even before that, however, (1587) the *Dialoghi* was included in a larger book containing both Jewish and Christian kabbalistic writings called *Artis Cabalisticae*, edited by Johanan Pistorius. The first Spanish translator (Guedella Yahia, 1568) has been identified by some as Gedalia ibn Yahya, a noted kabbalist. See the new English translation, n.6, p.408. We can therefore probably assume by the weight of evidence that it obtained its reputation as a kabbalistic work sometime in the 16th century and it has more or less stuck with it ever since.

[5] The new English translation by Damian Bacich and Rossella Pescatori contains one of the best, and perhaps the most current, synopses of the historical, philosophical and literary aspects of the work in its introduction by Pescatori. Nevertheless, it simply assumes strong kabbalistic influence without any attempt to argue for it or prove it. See p. 15 where it is asserted: "Kabbalah, because it connects and gives a way to receive the revelation of Torah, not only permeates, but also often provides the background for Leone's syncretism and eclecticism." It is that kind of statement, so widespread among academicians today, that I will attempt to subject to a more critical analysis.

task seemed to become. The philosophy of Judah Abrabanel is a fairly complicated mélange of apparent influences and world-views. I say "apparent" because the very complex, eclectic style may at times conceal the real forces of influence and/or logical deduction. Those two forces ought at times to be distinguished from one another but frequently are not. So often, they are woven together in the minds of both the original author and those who choose to comment upon his or her work and they can be difficult to extricate. For example, it is common for religious thinkers to quote traditional authorities as a cover for their own more idiosyncratic way of thinking (either consciously or otherwise) and the real thought processes involved may get lost by those who are then influenced by that thinker and his or her "authoritative" sources. Conversely, a thinker may believe that he or she is simply following reason and constructing an argument but in reality he or she is justifying the opinions of earlier and more authoritative influences. Therefore, I have attempted to attack the work from a number of different perspectives they may frequently overlap. What may sometimes appear to be repetition is an attempt at exposition and elucidation of what is sometimes a rather difficult to understand point of view and the even more complicated sources of those opinions. I do believe, however, that despite the obvious challenges both this book and the *Dialoghi d'Amore* itself would be well worth reading and also capable of being comprehended by a rather wide range of educated people. That having been said, there may be discussions, such as the methodological one in the introduction or the one on pantheism, which some readers might opt to skip. Such a decision would not render the rest of the book unintelligible.

I became interested in Judah Abrabanel and the *Dialoghi* by way of prior interests in Sephardic culture, Jewish medieval philosophy and, in particular, the philosophy of Solomon ibn Gabirol. A perceptive and knowledgeable reader will most likely be able to guess what my primary concerns are by glancing at the table of contents, even if they are not always spelled out. I will admit at the outset that this work does not attempt to place Judah Abrabanel squarely within a particular social history, although we will consider that as a factor in understanding his father and as a basis for considering possible motives for concealing kabbalistic beliefs. It might be possible (at least conceptually) to situate Judah Abrabanel more firmly in the social history of Italy and in particular that of his own family. I will allude to those contexts on many occasions. Unfortunately, the historical information that we have about Judah Abrabanel, the man, is quite sketchy and such an approach if used excessively might be more impressionistic than factually based. For my purposes, on the other hand, the most important historical evidence is the book itself. In fact, I became quite intrigued by what seemed to me to be a contradiction between the literal text and quite prevalent contemporary conclusions regarding strong kabbalistic influences. It occurred to me that those not necessarily wrong but surely premature conclusions might be based upon a faulty methodology. I think that may be a result of not taking philosophical issues seriously enough in Judaic Studies. Of course the bias towards kabbalistic influence is not confined to Judaic Studies but permeates many other sectors of contemporary society and we will encounter countless examples.[6] More crucial to this particular study, therefore, than

[6] A good example is Umberto Eco's assertion of kabbalistic influence on

family or social history is the history of religion, history of philosophy, intellectual history and of course philosophy itself. I would now like to explicitly discuss some issues in the history of ideas that impact greatly upon the literary work in question.

The alliance of revealed biblical religion and Greek inspired philosophical thought in the West (as well as its correlate in the Islamic world) was always tenuous and fraught with problems. The area that has received the most scrutiny is faith vs. reason. It is quite possible, however (and it is my belief) that there were even more serious and fundamental conceptual conflicts. The conflict between faith and reason surfaced in the Middle Ages in the well-known dispute between creation *ex nihilo*, a biblical/rabbinic concept (also espoused by Christianity and Islam) and the eternity of the world as espoused by Aristotle. At times, due to his obviously extraordinary critical acumen, the views of the latter were practically equated with reason itself. Perhaps even more serious, however, was the conflict between Plato and the Bible. This may seem counterintuitive since Plato was, and still is, generally viewed as more compatible with biblical thought (and religion in general) than was his best and most famous pupil. After all, both Philo of Alexandria and the early Church fathers had been Platonists of sorts. But Plato's most essential teaching regarding the eternal Forms and their relationship to the physical world was completely foreign to biblical thought (just as it is foreign to our own way of thinking) even if his creation

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Dante. See *Serendipities*, p. vii. While there may be similarities between Dante and Kabbalah, based on shared Neoplatonic influences, I know of no convincing evidence for kabbalistic influence. Later on p.51 Eco admits that this view is "only a hypothesis."

myth in the *Timaeus* appeared more or less compatible with it.[7] It might have been that very *apparent* compatibility but possibly *essential* intellectual variance that made Platonic thought so essentially threatening.[8] Concepts that emerged from the Platonic and Neoplatonic traditions, such as emanation and Eros, threatened to swamp the more biblical and/or

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[7] Biblical religion is often viewed as more concerned with ethics than metaphysics, at least in comparison with other religions. The *Bible* does have mythological elements even if they are weak in comparison to ancient pagan literature but it has nothing comparable to the overarching metaphysical theory espoused by Plato; therefore the latter needs to be superimposed upon the former in order to harmonize the two. This attempt at harmonization becomes even more difficult once rabbinic *midrash* or Christian dogmas are added to the equation. Why those disparate elements needed to be harmonized at all are interesting questions but they need not detain us for long. Obviously, there are strands in all three Abrahamic religions that are pro and anti-harmonization. Perhaps a detached critic like Nietzsche could give us some insight into the *existential* similarity of Platonism, Judaism and Christianity, despite their many intellectual differences. This matter of perspective is quite important in attempting to understand what it was that led to schisms and trials for heresy in the Middle Ages that from our perspective seem of no importance whatsoever. Yet even in the modern world, such intra-religious disputes often reach massive and dangerous proportions within sectarian communities. This is something that secularists have difficulty understanding but perhaps future generations will have similar difficulty understanding some of the most vexing and contentious political and cultural conflicts of our day.

[8] Although we are concerned here primarily with the medieval Jewish tradition, Plato was viewed by many Renaissance Christians to be quite threatening despite his apparent compatibility, in contrast to Aristotle who appeared less compatible with religious faith. See Jill Kraye, "Moral Philosophy" in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, pp.356-359. Earlier Byzantine authorities had noted the threat of Platonic thought and Aristotle, while down to earth and less religious, often seemed less threatening in the Middle Ages. Platonic thought could be viewed as threatening to traditional ancient Greek thought as well. It is an extremely radical way of thinking that constitutes one of the greatest intellectual revolutions of all time. Like most such revolutions, it merged with pre-existing and subsequently occurring trends and by doing so appeared less threatening.

rabbinically orthodox concepts of creation *ex nihilo* and revealed teaching/law (both of which also became part of Christian and Islamic orthodoxy).[9] Whether the medieval thinkers were primarily influenced by Platonic or Aristotelian thought, however, the same conundrum remained and it still exists to this day. How does one reconcile religious and philosophical thinking and does the latter militate against the former in the minds of intellectual or even the masses?

Perhaps the Jewish medieval thinker who most *creatively* attempted to resolve those conflicts was Solomon ibn Gabirol with his reworked Aristotelian concepts of matter and substance and his expansive concept of will (both human and divine but mostly the latter) as related to form. Nevertheless, ibn Gabirol's audacious attempt to bridge the gaps between the Bible, Plato and Aristotle must be viewed as a failure within the context of the subsequent history of medieval philosophy and religion. It aroused interest and admiration but few were persuaded by it. Subsequent Jewish philosophers were generally less ambitious and perhaps more accommodating to rabbinic tradition.

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[9] While the doctrine of creation and particularly man's creation in the image of God may have stimulated human creativity in practical matters, creativity in theoretical thought may be more attributable to the Greek Platonic Eros. There is little doubt, however, that the combination of the two produced a turbulent creativity that the world had never before known. Either conception of the human condition by itself is in a sense deficient, at least from our current cultural vantage point. While some claims regarding a stark difference between the two outlooks are undoubtedly exaggerated, I would venture the following claims. The Greek conception seems not to promote either social justice or technological innovation, both of which may be dependent upon the abolition or regulation of slavery and other oppressive social practices. The Hebraic emphasis on practical creativity and imitation of God does not emphasize theoretical reason as much as it does practical heuristics.

Kabbalah was actually far more successful than was philosophy in bridging the conceptual gaps between pagan thought and biblical thought because it was not at all concerned with critical analysis and the discovery and bridging over of conceptual conflicts. In fact it accomplished that "bridging over" in a hidden, perhaps even unconscious, fashion. And despite my claim (more developed in the introduction) that philosophy may indeed be quite relevant to the believability of religion in any particular age, religion itself may spring from very different sources that are more deeply imbedded in the primitive human psyche. That may explain why religious (or anti-religious) belief and rational argument often seem to talk over one another. And it is quite likely that Kabbalah stimulates those very a-rational but powerful aspects of the human psyche that philosophy quite often does not appeal to at all.

Although I personally revere reason and believe in its majesty, its relationship to ordinary human life is not nearly as simple a matter as ordinarily supposed, especially by intellectuals. Those of us who fashion ourselves as such frequently fall prey to our own types of delusions and self-righteousness, along with our less "rational" counterparts, and we often forget that human flourishing is a complex combination of rational *and* a-rational elements.[10] As we will

[10] In some previous epochs intellectuality was more generally associated with intelligence than it is today, or at least that is my impression. That might be explained by the fact that in contemporary Western civilization there are more opportunities for the creative use of intelligence and consciousness, such as economic advancement, gadgetry, travel and other cultural pursuits, etc. It sometimes comes as a bit of a shock to intellectuals that some people of equal or even greater intelligence are far less concerned with the intricate pathways of pursuing truth. On the other hand, and this may be especially true in the United States, intellectuals are sometimes

come to see, that was an important Renaissance theme as well. Perhaps it is also relevant to the book under discussion. And we cannot help but simply note at this point that Judah Abrabanel's father, Isaac, was one who might also have felt that "reason" was at times a mixed blessing.

Along came Judah Abrabanel utilizing new tools and new currents of thought and beginning again upon the foundation that was long ago laid by the Arabic philosophers, including Jewish philosophers such as ibn Gabirol, Maimonides and Gersonides. Yet Abrabanel, like so many Renaissance philosophers, was very much a Platonic thinker and may also have been significantly influenced by Kabbalah but let us first look at what was new in his toolkit. What were those new thoughts?

The perennial conflict / alliance between the Bible and philosophy would now (in the Renaissance) move to a new plane involving not primarily reason vs. faith in tradition, as was so often the case in the Middle Ages, but reason vs. love/will. It is on this new playing field that the *Dialoghi* sets forth a most interesting point of view.[11] That is not to say that faith and tradition no longer were significant factors but simply

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viewed as odd birds, something like vegetarians. Yet intelligent people are not generally viewed in that way.

[11] Early on in the book (p.47) Philo alludes to the conflict between intellect and will, as regards man's relationship to God. On the one hand, love springs from will but on the other hand intellect is the "most essential and most spiritual faculty" of the soul. Interestingly, the conflict centers on which of these faculties renders the human being happy. He also notes that this problem was "long debated, alike by ancient philosophers and modern theologians." By the latter, he may have been referring to Christian theologians. He uses this term later on in his discussion of the cyclical destruction of the worlds and kabbalistic tradition.

that they receded somewhat into the background. This means that there were really two conflicts emerging: the new one that I just mentioned and one between the older way of seeing things and that newer one. Of course these were conflicts that were neither completely new to the Christian Scholastic world nor completely unknown to Jews but they were rather novel as conflicts in Jewish philosophy — so novel in fact that some medieval scholars still fail to see them in the *Dialoghi*. Subsumed within this new revolutionary approach is another problem that had surfaced once the Christian medieval world had become aware of the teachings of Averroes and the other Muslim Aristotelians. To what extent are human beings essentially distinct and unique? How does their relationship to God (through the Active Intellect) impact upon their apparent individuality?

Many say that behind Abrabanel's attempts to unite philosophy and religion lurks a kabbalistic doctrine. We will be investigating that claim by attempting to look at those kabbalistic motifs as well as other non-kabbalistic ones that may also have influenced him. I doubt that anyone could plausibly deny that he was exposed to kabbalistic ideas and somehow influenced by them. A more meaningful question therefore is the extent to which that influence prevailed and also to what extent he consciously welcomed it. Perhaps even more meaningful is the question whether Kabbalah was an essential part of his world-view and metanarrative or whether it was more or less superfluous to them. In addition to that investigation I hope to use the biographical and historical knowledge attained as a means of conceptualizing the relationship between philosophy and Kabbalah. That can only be done validly, however, by utilizing a premise that is not

purely historical or biographical. That premise is that Judah Abrabanel was a great enough philosopher to understand the relationships between revealed religion, philosophy and Kabbalah and what is at stake in those relationships. Admittedly, no such normative argument can be demonstrative or decisive but perhaps it can be rationally persuasive, which is to say that it can bridge the gap between reason and faith in a rational way.

We live in a time when Kabbalah is far more influential (in the Jewish world at least) than is philosophy. I hope that this study will be of benefit to those who are interested in either or both. But, aside from its intended consequences, it is important to understand what kind of study this is. On the one hand, it is an analysis of the text itself in the context of historical influences. On the other hand, I hope to use that analysis as a key to unlock the possibilities in the relationship between Judaism, philosophy and Kabbalah. I think that investigating the Italian Renaissance allows us an opportunity to expand the more traditional views of that relationship as well as the way in which Judaism interacts with its non-Jewish intellectual environment. Hence, as I will reiterate again and again, this is a book of both history of philosophy and philosophy proper. Some might agree with the former kinds of conclusions but not the latter or vice versa. I will deal in much greater depth with the relationship between those two disciplines in the introduction. I think this is an important issue for our time but that such an investigation would not have been of great concern to Judah Abrabanel in the time in which he lived. On the other hand, the relationship between philosophy and Kabbalah would have been very much on his mind.

Acknowledgments

I will be referring to many works of secondary literature in this study as well as more foundational texts. I will at times disagree with much greater scholars, regarding whom I have only the highest regard. For example, Moshe Idel is one of the most important Judaic scholars living today and I have learned an immense amount from him; yet I will be disagreeing with him on certain issues that are fundamental to my project. Another expert on Kabbalah, Elliot Wolfson, has articulated profound philosophical positions along with very interesting facts about the writings of kabbalists that are germane to our topic and of great interest. Seymour Feldman has dealt with Judah Abrabanel in a number of fairly recent publications that appear to me to be at least as incisive as those of any other author. The same could be said of Alfred Ivry. There are many more such authors, each of which has been extremely helpful to me in a unique way. One recent work on Judah Abrabanel by a lesser-known author (at least in this country) stands out for its uniquely comprehensive nature: the now published doctoral dissertation of João José Miranda Chã, SJ (Boston University, 1999, henceforth referred to as "Miranda"). There is no question in my mind that it is the most complete work on the *Dialoghi d'Amore* as well as on Judah Abrabanel himself, with the possible exception of the new English translation and the work of Angela Guidi. I will not even attempt to rival it in its scope. Nevertheless, I will be disagreeing at times with that author's assessments despite my admiration for his knowledge, insight and efforts. Therefore, if that (or any) work seems to be the object of disproportionate critique, it should only be interpreted as a compliment. The notes by Rossella Pescatori in the new English translation are also extremely helpful and up to

date and we will have much more to say about that book. Recent work by Angela Guidi has also revisited many old questions about the book in new and creative ways

Another book that I have found quite useful, though it says little about our immediate subject, is Paul MacDonald's *History of the Concept of Mind.* Although I mostly cite volume 2 in this particular study, reading volume 1 would be an excellent preparation for all those interested in mental phenomena in the context of ancient through early modern intellectual and religious history. Of particular interest, of course, is his discussion of the concept of mind and consciousness in the Renaissance. Much of it is redundant with the work of other authors whom I have cited but it is still perhaps the best synopsis of that specific subject and places it very well in its historical context. Mental phenomena have been somewhat overlooked, in favor of purely ideational *content*, in the study of medieval and Renaissance thinkers. This is perhaps inevitable since most intellectual historians are not psychologists and have limited background in that field. It might be thought that such phenomena are studied by psychology but that juridical decision may be the province of philosophy. Surely, some empirical matters related to the mind belong to psychology but there are borderline areas such as phenomenology and the psychology of world-views that might be of interest to both disciplines. We should remember that philosophy and psychology only separated in fairly recent times. The focus on mental phenomena as related to philosophical and religious ideas is one of my primary areas of interest and may emerge as a major issue later on. Elliot Wolfson has done some wonderful work in this area[12] but I am

[12] See *A Dream Interpreted Within a Dream.*

not able in this modest work to deal with many of the provocative questions that he raises. I hope in future works to do more in that regard. A glance at the bibliography will reveal many other significant issues and sources of important insights, far too numerous to specifically mention here.

In almost all cases I will originally refer to and quote from the older and well-known English translation (Soncino Press, 1937). Inevitably, however, certain problems (or suspicions of such) resulting from translation or from the ambiguity of the original text will require going to the Italian, in which case I will mostly refer to the 1929 publication, edited by Santino Caramella, which is the most widely used Italian text. At such times I will include the words "Italian text" as the title. The Italian text of Giacinto Manupella is generally considered the most correct Italian text, however. I will only rely on it on those occasions when conflicts in the other texts require a more definitive resolution. As luck or providence would have it, this will rarely be necessary since at the very time that I had erected the main skeleton of this book a new English translation of the *Dialoghi*, by Cosmos Damian Bacich and Rossella Pescatori, was published. In many respects it is superior to the older translation and it does of course rely on more recent scholarship including that of Manupella and utilized his text. It is quite readable and has corrected many non-literal and unhelpful parts of the older translation. The notes and extensive bibliography are extremely helpful and the section on the Spanish translations is of immense importance, especially to the English speaking public since most of it was not previously available to them. It would have been foolish to ignore this major breakthrough in the study of the *Dialoghi*; I have read it with great eagerness and have incorporated their new insights into this book as

seemed appropriate. Inevitably, however, it may not have been relied upon as much as it deserves. When I use their translation I will include the term "new English translation."

This book does not pretend to provide a critically adequate understanding or resolution of textual difficulties, however. We are eagerly awaiting a new critical edition. Nor does it include all the secondary literature on the subject. We are seeking to shed light on a particular issue rather than to re-examine all the theses of the book. Those opinions of Abrabanel and others that help in that regard will of course be examined. In general, I will seek out English translations of the various works cited but reserve the right to go back to their original languages if I suspect there is something controversial or otherwise problematic about the translation or at times simply to show that there is not. Although I have included a great deal of information in this book that I consider to be of interest to a reader, I have not attempted to achieve completion in that regard. For that I would recommend the new English translation, Angela Guidi and Miranda Vila-Chā's. My goal is a much more modest one than theirs: a full investigation of the highly touted relationship between the *Dialoghi* and Kabbalah. Nevertheless, in order to achieve that objective and in order to include a rather broad class of readers it will be necessary to deal with many other issues in religion and philosophy.

I would like to thank Isaac Sassoon for his help with biblical and Talmudic concepts and references, Seymour Feldman and Jaime Novoa for graciously sending me articles of theirs that I might otherwise not have known about or benefited from and Marc Angel who long ago advised me to pursue writing about the *Dialoghi D'Amore*. I am deeply indebted to Jaime Novoa for taking the time to make suggestions that have

greatly improved this book. His many corrections well illustrate and reflect the many entreaties regarding *musar* in *Proverbs*. In addition, of course, I am indebted to all of the excellent scholars who are referenced in this book: most notably perhaps Moshe Idel and Alfred Ivry for what I consider their quite novel approaches but to many others as well. It should become quite obvious which ones were the most influential as we move along and/or by inspecting the references. One other rule of thumb is that I will only bother to disagree with those scholars for whom I have the highest regard.

I also acknowledge Herbert Richardson for seeing the value of this project when some others did not, David Burrell, Jaime Novoa and Claude Stuczynski for reading the text, Mark Wolfson for his wonderful technical assistance, and Menachem Kellner for not only reading the book but agreeing to write an enlightening foreword and of course my wife, Denise, for putting up with this incessant project.

Introduction: Methodology

Discussions of methodology tend to either be superficial or eventually get stuck in a dilemma; but that does not render them useless. It is always valuable to reflect upon one's methodology. The following extensive discussion of methodology is prompted by the dual nature of this study and by the mutual suspicion that exists between those who try to do philosophy, those who restrict themselves to the history of philosophy and those who believe in the spiritual efficacy of Kabbalah. Modern philosophers sometimes view specialists in medieval and Renaissance philosophy as only doing history of philosophy but those specialists themselves often think they are indeed doing philosophy. They also tend to think that Kabbalah is a popularistic, degraded form of medieval philosophy. Students of Kabbalah, on the other hand, may tend to think that there is something spiritually profound in their subject that perhaps cannot be found in philosophy and/or cannot be studied adequately from an academic perspective. This book will attempt to do things that relate to each of those camps but what is the proper methodology?

We will not attempt to answer that question but simply note that the failure of many modern Judaic scholars to address the very question of methodology is problematic. Elliot Wolfson is an exception.

> Without ignoring or even rejecting the tacit assumption of classical philology that the competent scholar can reconstruct historical-literary settings, I am not certain this approach should be granted hegemony in the pursuit of

> hermeneutic discernment. To discredit philology would be to discard one of the most important tools in the effort to discern authorial intent, but this is not the only matter relevant to the construal of meaning and truth. To think otherwise would be to lapse uncritically into the lair of positivism.[13]

Without attempting to explicate what the meaning of a text could be aside from "authorial intent," it is fairly clear to me that Wolfson is correct in terms of some widely and tacitly accepted (but rarely articulated) theories of meaning. He then goes on to quote Dan Lusthaus. "The move from philology to philosophy does not entail a rejection of philology. On the contrary, philology is one of the necessary foundations on which philosophical investigations into systems remote in time and language stand."[14] I might add that philology (as well as philosophy) can be necessary foundations for the proper understanding of religion also. But this is somewhat controversial and I would prefer to argue for it more systematically later on. It also seems appropriate to note, especially given Wolfson's later discussion of counter-intuitive modern scientific/philosophical concepts, that we may not be able to agree on proper methodology in the humanities (or even in the sciences); but that does not obviate the desirability of discussing it.

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[13] *Language, Eros, Being*, xvi
[14] Ibid, xvi

Perhaps there is no truly correct methodology but that does not necessarily mean that there are no incorrect ones. I tend to think that the failure to consider the existential depth of Judah Abrabanel's commitment to philosophy has led some to rush prematurely to the kabbalistic hypothesis as an explanation for some of his views. While this tells us little about the truth of that hypothesis (and even less about the truth of Kabbalah) it is still something worth pondering.

The word "method" (*methodos*) in Greek means a way of transit, which implies some destination. Before even speaking of scholarly methodology, it might be appropriate to deal briefly with the question of purpose, recognizing at the same time that each individual's purpose is largely irrelevant to the standard methodology of his or her chosen field. The methods of medical research are the same for the altruist and the sadist. The method of empathy is the same for the social worker and the used car salesman. Yet there must be some connection between the normal purpose (or the lack thereof) and the methodology in any given field. Most of those who embark upon a career in scholarship, engage in it as an avocation or merely consume it have some purpose in mind. Perhaps they think it will improve their minds, provide a basis for ethical or prudential action, perfect the world, answer nagging questions or supplement some other, previously existing interest. It is conceivable, however, that some might engage in it as a mere game, with no purpose other than entertainment, pleasure, etc. While we do not intend to examine each of those motives or others yet unmentioned, once one understands what one is really doing in a scholarly activity, methodology could become a concern, just as one who wants to plays chess must learn and abide by the rules. One difference is that in activities that are primarily engaged in for an external

purpose, the question of correctly understanding or reinterpreting the rules might arise from time to time by those engaged in it. This is different from activities that are more purely game-like, where there might only be a concern for changing the more or less clearly understood rules. In science, for example, there is an implicit rule of parsimony, which dictates that the simpler explanation is to be preferred if it is at least as explanatory as more complex ones. Since science is a goal directed activity and not a purely game-like one, I assume that the rule of parsimony might conceivably be temporarily suspended if the stakes are high enough.[15] That would be quite likely to occur in practical applications of science And I would expect it to be even more likely in fields like religion, philosophy and literary criticism where subjective certainty is highly valued but there does not seem to be a great deal at stake in being wrong. If I use parsimony as a basis for some of my arguments, I do so with the recognition that it could be called into question by those who feel there is indeed a great deal at stake in their claims. For example, some may believe that Kabbalah provides such immense spiritual benefits that the risk of understating its influence on this particular thinker justifies the risk of overstating it. This is analogous to adjusting the probability of type one and type two errors in empirical research. Sometimes a desperately ill person is quite concerned with the possibility of finding a cure and relatively unconcerned about the possibility of being wrong about a purported cure. While such motives ought not to sway pure scientific research

[15] Scientists sometimes make bold conjectures in an effort to address gaps in their knowledge. This is analogous to practical applications like the use of expensive medications or other interventions in cases where there is no clear evidence of their efficacy but merely hope, based upon some fragmentary empirical evidence of their effectiveness.

over the long term, some fields are more inherently subjective, practical or for some other reason more prone to the distortions of personal preferences.

An author's methodology is often implicit in his or her work but left unstated and unexamined. That may be quite acceptable in many instances. In addition, many scholars in the humanities have their own methods but do not desire to impose them on others. That is fine as long as we recognize it for what it is. However, given the fact that I am somewhat critical of some of the intellectual processes by which previous authors have dealt with the *Dialoghi d'Amore*, some preliminary discussion of methodology may be useful.

Discussing religion, of course, is always controversial. A number of facts will need to be explored that some conventional religious believers or naïve seekers might find unpleasant or inconvenient. Perhaps some readers will even be offended by some factual assertions that I make. This, despite my obvious awareness of it, is not my intention but, on the other hand, this is not meant to be an exercise in religious apologetics. In order to finally arrive at even a glimpse of the truth, one must first debunk illegitimate claims regarding how to arrive at the truth. Ironically, however, some of the beliefs of those who were approaching the subject with a poor theory or methodology may turn out in the end to have been true nonetheless.

My methodological discussion is grounded in a distinction that I make between explanation and understanding. Not everyone will accept that distinction and even among those who do there will be a debate regarding the relationship between the two phenomena. While this is not the place for a full-blown discussion, it will suffice to say that explanation

often involves questions about "how" and understanding deals with questions about "why."[16] It should be apparent that in some fields, such as natural science, explanation predominates and understanding is secondary. Conversely, in other fields, such as religion, the reverse is the case. There are less extreme examples. History seems grounded in explanation but understanding seems much more essential to it than it is to science. The humanities in general appear to be more grounded in understanding but explanation is essential to their academic study as well.

Art and Philosophy/Religion

Firstly, the *Dialoghi* is not only a philosophical and/or religious work; it is also a work of art and literature. Some, like John Addington Symonds, have suggested that the traditional Jewish distaste for painting and sculpture is an example of a more general contradiction between those visual representational arts and higher religion.[17] Whether that is true or not or what its implications might be for abstract art is not the purpose of this section. Nevertheless, the Renaissance surely defined itself by its painting as much as any other historical period and the *Dialoghi* contains vivid descriptions of mythological narratives

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[16] Of course the matter is somewhat more complex than "how vs. why." And to complicate matters even more, sometimes those two words are used somewhat interchangeably. Some would restrict explanation to predictability but others would require some level of understanding for a fully explanatory model. While these are indeed nagging questions, I suspect that most people who have given this a great deal of thought would agree that at least on the psychological level there is a difference between having explained something and having a satisfying understanding of it. There may be a great deal more disagreement on the epistemic level of discourse.

[17] See *The Renaissance in Italy*, Volume 3.

that actually remind us of that kind of Renaissance art. But this work of art in which is embodied a philosophical/religious teaching and which I am discussing is a fictional dialogue. It may be somewhat anachronistic to assume that Judah Abrabanel's notion of art was like our own but that classificatory "fact" of its artistic quality does affect our interpretation of the work.[18] In such works, we cannot always assume that the speaker or protagonist represents the views of the author. I quote John Hospers, one of the great modern philosophers of art.

> First, we must remember the difference between the *author* and the *speaker*. This is obvious in the case of a character in a play or novel; the character speaks and his views need not be the views of the author — the author is simply *presenting* a character, not speaking through his voice. Even when the novel is written in the first person, we must not assume that it is the author speaking. *Huckleberry Finn* is written in the first person, but the teller of the tale (the speaker

[18] Whether it *should* affect our interpretation in a willing manner may be disputable. It is a fact that Renaissance thinkers, like Medieval and ancient ones, did not think of art as we do. For a very well documented discussion see Paul Oskar Kristeller, "The Modern System of the Arts." Although the *Dialoghi* does not qualify as fine art under the narrowest definition, most modern people would consider it to be more in the category of art than in that of either science or technical philosophy. Those divisions might not have been entirely intelligible to most Renaissance thinkers. Nevertheless, in order for us to make sense out of it we may need to keep this classificatory fact in mind, despite the fact that its creator may not have accepted it. It is also not extremely controversial to suspect that thinkers of other eras might have had some implicit understanding of things that they could not have explicitly thought but that we can think, just as there were things that they could think and that we cannot.

> in the novel) is not Mark Twain but Huckleberry Finn himself. Huckleberry Finn has mental anguish about whether the slave Jim should be returned to the South, but Twain himself would have had no such anguish...[19]

Admittedly, the *Dialoghi* is not a novel and technically speaking there were no novels then.[20] And just as aesthetic standards for novels are different than those of paintings and music, a philosophical dialogue has its own specific requirements. It does not for example require the same kind of character development as a novel, the unity of a painting or the emotional content of music. Unlike pure works of art, it would be impossible to appreciate it without a certain background in philosophy and religion and cannot even be fully appreciated without knowledge of the history of ideas. Similar problems of interpretation revolve around the dialogues of Plato as well.[21] Whether or not the purely aesthetic appreciation of art is enhanced by such knowledge is debatable but there is little doubt that it can be achieved without it and merely by the interplay of aesthetic experiential features.[22] Again, we must remember that these are relatively

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[19] John Hospers, *Understanding the Arts*, p. 254

[20] Precursors of the modern novel did exist and ibn Tufayl's *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*, of which we will have much more to say, might be considered a philosophical novel and the model for Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*.

[21] For a good analysis see Toby Reiner, "Texts as Performances," who makes the important distinction between texts that express the author's views and those that merely reflect them.

[22] See Arthur O. Lovejoy, "Reflections on the History of Ideas" for a critique of C.S. Lewis' view that such non-aesthetic knowledge not only fails to enhance aesthetic appreciation but actually interferes with it. I think this dispute boils down to a basic intuition about what aesthetic appreciation is.

modern aesthetic notions but they inevitably affect our interpretation of the work nonetheless. To truly appreciate a work like the *Dialoghi*, however, may require something altogether different, just as it may require something that ordinary philosophical thinking does not normally contain. It does seem to me that the *Dialoghi* reflects not only the views but, perhaps, also the *experiences* of the author. But we need to be careful here. In the *Dialoghi* we have two speakers, Philo and Sophia, and some, quite understandably, have assumed that Philo always represents the author because he seems to have most of the answers.[23] That is a rather simple approach to the work. It might quite often be right but we cannot always assume it to be. On the other hand, some, like Rossella Pescatori, seem to have assumed that it is really Sophia who has the hidden knowledge since she refuses to yield to the seductions of Philo.[24] That I think is a somewhat

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Some might view it as something purely formal or sensory while others view it as a more compound kind of experience.

[23] A rather similar problem exists in Plato's *Symposium*, which shares many of the features of fiction with the *Dialoghi*. For a good discussion of this see Toby Reiner, "Texts as Performances." Obviously, the two works also share the same subject: love as well as themes of androgyny, etc. that will be discussed later on.

[24] See her introduction to the new English translation, p.13 where she states: "Philo wants to gain access to the most profound knowledge through Sophia, who, however, being the rational side, resists the seductive speech of the lover and remains constantly out of reach." This assertion seems to me to be contrary to the plain meaning of the text, which shows Philo to have the profound knowledge but also portrays him as being emotionally smitten by Sophia, who is indeed portrayed as a rational and knowledgeable person. See her new English translation, p.196, where Sophia asks: "Even if what you say were so, would you not understand that what I want from you is the theory of love, and what you want from me is its practice?" Is it such a problem that a philosophically wise person like Philo could also be emotionally vulnerable, which would then require an esoteric interpretation of the text? I ask this question not simply rhetorically but in search of all available literary knowledge that might help us to understand the book in

premature and revisionist attempt to unify the literary and religious/philosophical aspects of the work, which is not to say that it is incorrect. But it would certainly require a great deal more analysis of the text in order to substantiate such a counter-intuitive claim. Yet at times it does seem quite clear to me that the author speaks through Sophia, as when she proclaims: "Although your arguments are no less plausible than subtle, yet I judge by experience, which deserves credence before any argument."[25] How then do we know which are the real views of the author? This is sometimes a problem even in non-dialogical works where (as is practically inevitable) inconsistencies are noted. Oftentimes, scholars assume that only one of the inconsistent views is really the

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terms of its time and place. Pescatori deals with such questions on pp. 10-16 of her introduction in a far more extensive manner than I am able to do but I still do not see any persuasive reason for altering the clear literal meaning of the text. Perhaps further literary investigations can shed additional light on this.

[25] See the *Dialoghi d'Amore*, p.55. The Italian text (p.50) reads: "io fo giudizio de l'esperienza: a al quale piú che a nissuno altra ragione si debbe credere." The new English translation (p.64) renders this (more correctly) as: "I base my opinion on experience, which is more valuable than any other reasons." It would be quite difficult to imagine that this is not the view of the author, especially since it introduces a narrative about Amnon and Tamar regarding which Philo and Sophia are not in disagreement and Philo adds some additional theoretical wisdom which Sophia never questions as being in conflict with experience. Nevertheless, this interesting observation of Sophia might be a criticism of Philo' excessive trust in theory over experience or even a critique of medieval philosophy. That it should be placed in the mouth of a woman should not surprise us since women are quite often more in touch with every day experience than with theory. This valuing of experience over theory may be a Renaissance motif. At least Daniel Boorstin thinks it was when he refers to Amerigo Vespucci's letter to Lorenzo de Medici. "It appears to me, most excellent Lorenzo, that by this voyage of mine the opinion of the majority of the philosophers is confuted... Rationally, let it be said in a whisper, experience is certainly worth more than theory." See *The Discoverers*, p.246.

opinion of the author and they attempt through other texts or contexts to determine which it is. This is a kind of detective work. Others allow the text to be the final product and the repository of somewhat impersonal cultural material; for them the problematic text simply is inconsistent or even contradictory but no attempt is made to ferret out the author's real opinion.[26] Of course this goes against everything we know about human beings because almost everyone admits that people forget, conceal, make mistakes, etc. and the only way to find out what they really believe is to engage them in dialogue and perhaps talk to them about their actions as well. That way of checking statements against other statements and ultimately against actions is how we really learn about people's intentions and motives. Just reading what they write is not sufficient. Unfortunately, we have little additional external evidence to go by in order to know the real opinions of Judah Abrabanel. Of course we must take into consideration the way of thinking of the times and also the idiosyncrasies of the text. But since it was a time of great intellectual vibrancy and disagreements, the author often appears quite syncretistic and there are no other extant philosophical works by him, we obviously have a difficult hermeneutic task. Therefore, we will have to use internal textual analysis to a great extent, especially when Philo and Sophia fail to come to full agreement. And even when they do agree, a closer look may sometimes be required. For example, the third dialogue provides the most incredibly complicated philosophical arguments in the book and yet ends with stark

[26] Sometimes this is a result of a theory of human action that ignores or denies individual choice in favor of cultural determinism in a manner analogous to the formerly popular physical determinism. Geertz developed a theory of social action based upon publicly available cultural meanings. See Clifford Geertz, "Thick Description."

disagreement. There is some evidence that a fourth dialogue was either lost or never completed but there is also the possibility that the dissatisfying end of the third dialogue was deliberate. Is it possible that the author was making a subtle statement regarding the futility of such arguments? Quite often artists subtly critique their father's (and grandfather's) generation by parodying their ideas. I am not yet prepared to make that judgment but it would be interesting to note the author's father's view of philosophy as well as other subjects, which will be provided in greater detail later on. There is surely much about the book that we may never understand; we certainly cannot assume that the author wholeheartedly approved of all the theories that are discussed in the dialogues, especially since many of them are inconsistent with one another. In most cases, however, when Philo and Sophia come to agreement (well-reasoned or otherwise) we will tentatively conclude that this is indeed the view of the author. Also, when Judah Abrabanel goes against the views that were current in his milieu there is reason to conclude that these are his own views and not simply ones that were externally related to him. Obviously, we must concern ourselves to an extent with all of his stated views, even if they are in conflict with one another but the ones that I will find of most interest are the ones that are idiosyncratic to him.

Having dealt to an extent with our means of detecting and interpreting the author's views, we may now want to inquire into how we can best understand those views. Is it through historical knowledge or through religious and/or philosophical understanding?

History vs. Religion or Philosophy

With the recent passing of Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, it is fitting to reflect once again on the relationship between history and the more value laden disciplines such as religion and philosophy, particularly as they affect Judaic Studies. This will constitute the basis for most of my remaining methodological discussions. While collective memory and its conflict with modern historiography may be considered by some to be particularly germane to Judaism, it is perhaps also part of a larger modern trend.[27] One of the first to articulate the importance of historical thinking for modernity was Ernest Troeltsch. While his widespread interests were not unique, perhaps better than any of his contemporaries he saw the advantages and "necessity" of historicism as well as its unwelcome effects on religious consciousness and its tendency to promote cultural relativism.[28] In contrast to previous rationalizing approaches to religion, which attempted to find their own universal truths, historicism, by stressing the particular and concrete, cast profound doubts on any kind of universal religious or philosophical truth. In the past many historians (particularly Jewish historians) actually saw their

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[27] See David N. Myers, *Resisting History: Historicism and Its Discontents in German-Jewish Thought* for a good discussion. Myers seems to admit that the conflict between historicism and theology/reason is as strong in Christianity as in Judaism. Yet it seems to have taken longer for Jewish intellectuals to recognize the problem. That perhaps was why *Zakhor* made such an impact on Jewish thought at such a relatively late date. The Jewish penchant for collective memory, rather than theology and philosophy, may have made it more difficult to distinguish the former from historiography. It may also have spawned the view (common to both Rosenzweig and Breuer) that the Jews live in a metahistorical space. That is one way of resolving the conflict. Another way is to imagine that Jewish history is Judaism. At any rate, history exercises hegemony in Judaic Studies to an extraordinary degree.

[28] See *The Absoluteness of Christianity and the History of Religions.*

role as reinforcing collective or social memory.[29] Because Judaism and history both stressed the memory of the particular, it was sometimes easy to confuse the two. That is no longer the case, at least in terms of conscious intentions. Peter Burke even sees the historians' role as the very opposite: "guardians of the skeletons in the cupboard of the social memory."[30]

It is undoubtedly true that intellectual history has liberated itself not only from popular social memory but also from religion, theology and philosophy and I believe that is essentially a healthy development. Nowadays we are always wary of anachronistic interpretations and searching for more accurate philological ones. This was not always the case, even with some of the greatest scholars upon whose shoulders we now stand. What we typically find when we attempt to be honest is that the values and world-views of the ancient and medieval masters were quite different from our own. To accept their views entirely is to repudiate our own. To stand firmly upon our own intuitions is quite often tantamount to repudiating theirs. Either conclusion is possible; it all depends upon how invested and convinced we are regarding the alternatives (revered historical figures vs. present ways of thinking). The way we usually resolve this is to simply describe the views of historical figures without any mention of possible conflicts with our own. This is often accomplished by denying that there is a current world-view that has anything like normative power over us and that all individuals simply

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[29] For a good treatment of this see Peter Burke, *Varieties of Cultural History*. In particular see chapter 3 entitled History as Social Memory (pp.43-59) in which he attributes that motive and intention to Herodotus, Cicero and others.
[30] Ibid. p.59

have their own "agendas." Hence, by correcting for such agendas we can arrive at the truth without concerning ourselves with our collectively more or less normative way of viewing things. We forget that aside from the discrete objects impinging upon our consciousness there is the entire horizon of that subjective state that changes from era to era and not only from individual to individual.

I, like most contemporary scholars, breathe the now normative atmosphere of "non-evaluative" historical research and I intend to largely adhere to it. Nevertheless, we should also be aware of the possible bad effects of this contemporary trend, at least if we aspire to be philosophers. Others, such as Jewish religious scholars, might have similar but perhaps slightly different complaints. The three major defects of that "liberation" of intellectual history as I see it are intellectual and/or moral relativism, the failure to see the inevitability of value judgments or at least perceptions of value, and the extreme estrangement of such scholarship from the non-scholarly public. The first is an ethical concern and the last may be a prudential one. The second (middle) problem may be one inherent in almost all scholarship and is perhaps of most interest here.

One of the things we have learned from Foucault is that inherent in all "historical" studies are metahistorical or philosophical narratives.[31] Of course this lesson can be

[31] For a good summary see Paul Wapner, "What's Left: Marx, Foucault and Contemporary Problems of Social Change," particularly p.102-104. While Foucault's insight might allow for and endorse a type of intellectual history, one must be constantly vigilant to avoid the smuggling in of contemporary sensibilities or conceptions into our study of past thinkers. One way to avoid this is to admit quite frankly (as Foucalt did) that the best tribute to past thought is "to use it, to deform it, to make it groan and protest." See Wapner p.89 and Foucalt, "Prison Talk," pp. 53-54.

learned without concluding that nothing objectively valid can be said about the world or human beings. We cannot, however, assume that sophisticated studies of intellectual history, no matter how factually based, will avoid the general need of all history for a comprehensible narrative. Indeed, a better assumption is that they all will contain some such meta-narrative. The impulse to philosophize is quite powerful in humankind and quite likely to become a subterranean current that is even more powerful for its invisibility. The same can be said of confessional theological tendencies, which are found not only within religions but also within secular and intellectual movements. We should also remember that scholarly consensuses are often short-lived.[32] Normative statements that are generally considered inadmissible in intellectual history may subsist in it nevertheless and might possibly be valid in religious or philosophical discourse. This conflict between history and philosophy ought not to be minimized. From a purely historical perspective, one's way of philosophizing is either just another expression of an impersonal historical intellectual trend or a purely

[32] For an excellent summary of the historical relationship between philosophy/religion and intellectual history see Gabriele Boccaccini, *Roots of Rabbinic Judaism*, pp. 15-41. He begins the end of his summary by extolling the work of Eugenio Garin and in particular his motto: "from philosophy to philosophies." His final summation is as follows: "The emancipation of intellectual history from philosophy stands today as a consolidated achievement of Western civilization." Despite my appreciation for both Bocaccini and Garin, there is something disturbing to me about this total victory of history over philosophy. Can we really rid ourselves of the need to decide what in the past is significant? And does that not involve a philosophical question? Perhaps a more individualistic conception of philosophy than the Hegelian one that intellectual history was rebelling against could allow us to reconcile the philosophical and historical approaches to the history of philosophy and, to a lesser extent, the history of religion.

idiosyncratic expression of a particular psyche. Either way (unlike the impersonal intellectual trend itself) it has no overarching historical significance unless the person in question is a particularly influential individual.[33] But from my own philosophical perspective, what I think after sufficient reflection is my best approximation of the truth (and that also includes my value judgments). Regarding philosophy, however, some might argue that it ought to be purely analytical and not axiological (with the possible exception of the meta-philosophical prescription that philosophy ought not to express value judgments).

So far we have isolated at least three distinct philosophical perspectives: the more traditional, the history of philosophy and the analytical. I will now attempt to critique the last two. Such philosophy seems very far removed from living culture (which is a network of meaning) and seems to be an attempt to carve out a legitimate place for philosophy alongside the specialized sciences. The problem is that whether we confine our philosophical studies to the analytical

[33] This might indicate that intellectual historians have no particular interest in ideas themselves and their logical implications but only in their historical interplay. This cannot always be true of historians as individuals but it might be true for them as they ply their trade. Even the latter possibility seems difficult to support, however. If one assumes that a historical figure was a reasonable person and her assumptions do entail her conclusions, there is no need to assert historical causation because the thoughts, perceptions, etc. are sufficient to explain the conclusions. Of course, one could always assert as a global assumption that a person's thinking is historically determined but that fails to explain the creative and innovative thinkers of the past. At any rate, such an assertion of universal historical causation is a philosophical assertion. However, if a thinker fails to follow the logical implications of his thoughts, it is then quite appropriate to seek historical causal explanations. But the conclusion regarding logical implications (or lack thereof) seems to fall more within the history of philosophy than it does within intellectual history.

or the historical it fails to mirror human life, as we indeed know it to be. Although I do not intend to go into detail regarding this, I will assume that human life is a rather complex interaction of objective facts (including social structures), culturally transmitted meaning and individual decision-making. The first is generally addressed by the sciences. The second is addressed by intellectual history and some variants of sociology and cultural anthropology (for example, Geertz, Weber). The latter is only addressed by philosophy and religion. Any attempt to restrict philosophy to analysis or to purely historical studies does not allow it to fulfill its traditional role of providing a magnified mirroring of human life. It is true that certain historically oriented philosophers have been able to provide us with wonderfully rich descriptions of lived and experienced cultures and how they were manifested in great thinkers. That is an essential starting point. But we still need to deal with the brute fact of individual thinking and decision-making. I suspect that any really adequate study of a thinker will in fact deal with that. The problem is that, due to scholarly conventions, coming to grips with the existential will of a great thinker may be hidden underneath historical descriptions and/or analyses of texts. But it is neither!

It might seem strange that we still have not come to a full agreement regarding methodology in a discipline as ancient as philosophy. But modern science (both physical and social/behavioral) has taken over much of what was included in ancient and medieval philosophy and there is much greater consensus regarding methodology in science than there is in either history or what is left of philosophy. Yet this very lack of systemization may actually be a source of strength and creativity. Science, philology and even history tend to follow

certain paradigms, which philosophers do not reject but might at times want to go beyond. In order to travel a road together we need to agree on certain basic assumptions but the strength of philosophy is its ability to question almost all such assumptions. In other words, a philosopher while respecting the conventions of other disciplines may draw conclusions that those others cannot. And what is even more problematic is the fact that different philosophers disagree as to which of those conclusions are valid.

At times philosophers take refuge in the history of philosophy because they perceive (quite correctly) that purely philosophical arguments are neither decisive nor generally agreed upon. At least we can come to an agreement regarding the historical facts! But as we have already seen to an extent and may become even more apparent, things are not quite so simple. There is no real escape from controversy in history. It is indeed true that regarding the most basic historical facts there is often little disagreement among competent scholars, in contrast to philosophy proper where thought experiments are often quite convincing to some but not nearly so convincing to others who may have very different basic intuitions.

But if that lack of universality were to defeat philosophy and if those who are philosophically inclined and trained were afraid to give their own reasoned opinions, the world would be far the poorer for it. The same of course could be said of religious faith and its relationship to history.[34] Perhaps, as Paul

[34] As Yosef H. Yerushalmi famously said (in *Zakhor*) that history is the faith of the fallen Jews. And as Moshe Idel in his observations on *Zakhor* has noted, the conflict between Judaism and history has its parallels in the conflict between faith in reason and faith in the redemptive power of history. Hence we seem to have three potential objects of faith: religious tradition, reason and history. In the medieval period the first two were often allies; in

Richard Blum has argued, due to the need for very basic interpretive questioning: "Doing history of philosophy, consequently, is philosophizing under severe conditions."[35] What exactly such "philosophizing" consists of, however, is not readily apparent. Nevertheless, I would be willing to assert what it is not. It is not simply describing the views of others and interpreting them, where hermeneutical disagreements exist. It is not simply about getting into the mental space of a former thinker or period in history. Nor is it simply refuting earlier intellectual methods by a facile acceptance of today's conventional wisdom. It may of course involve all those things; yet it must also involve individual engagement with the thought of another.[36]

Those who seem to believe that they have nothing to contribute to philosophy except to "interpret" philosophers who are long dead may actually be signaling their own philosophical world-view as surely as if they did openly promulgate their own opinions, even assuming that they are quite successful in keeping their own philosophical opinions out of the interpretation. Perhaps they are, consciously or otherwise, under the influence of analytic philosophy, which has raised

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the modern period the last two attempted a similar alliance. Yet both of those alliances have been subjected to a number of critiques, not only from literalist or fundamentalist elements but more recently from academicians.

[35] Paul Richard Blum, "Principles and Powers: How to Interpret Renaissance Philosophy of Nature Philosophically?", p.1

[36] I am actually quite amazed at how little philosophers and Judaic scholars discuss methodology. There are, however, some really lively discussions in the philosophy of history about intellectual history in particular. See Admir Skodo, "Post-analytic Philosophy of History," *Journal of the Philosophy of History*, Volume 3, No.3, 2009, 308-332 for a good summary and critique. Despite the great value of such methodological discussions, the philosopher who does history of philosophy (arguably) has additional work to do in comparison to the historian of ideas, just as the latter might do work in other areas that the philosopher might neglect.

serious doubts regarding the traditional philosophical enterprise. And, ironically, that very subliminal message (if it indeed exists) may to an extent invalidate the significance of the very philosophical thinkers whom they are interpreting (as well as their own philosophical views). That is because if one stops at the point where one believes that he or she understands another thinker, without further engagement, it is a signal that there is nothing much left to discuss. It is as if I understand that you like chocolate and I like vanilla and that is all there really is to a philosophical disagreement.[37] In many cases, that may actually be a quite adequate approach. Many thinkers of the past are really of greater historical interest as typological examples than they are of current religious or philosophical importance. And perhaps for that reason the approach towards history and philosophy that we call "historicism" answers to a quite prevalent current desire to somehow escape from the past. Ironically, that need or desire to escape can express itself in more and more historical studies, none of which have anything decisive to say to our current dilemmas because they completely subsume philosophy in history. Leo Strauss stated it quite boldly. "As far as we can speak at all of the spirit of a time, we

[37] Although a good argument can be made that philosophy is an individual enterprise in a manner that science and even history is not, one must be careful to distinguish such individuality from mere expressions of taste or emotion, which are not subject to dispute. In philosophy there is always something to argue about and such argumentation is not completely futile but leads to human growth and development. It is not as universalizable as science but it still retains universal elements, one of which is the very individuality that prevents consensus of the sort that exists in science. In a sense, therefore, it is more reflective of the human condition than are the social and behavioral sciences themselves. In this respect it resembles art and the humanities where most observers allow great latitude for individual creativity without adopting a completely relativistic stance regarding what constitutes good art.

can assert with confidence that the spirit of our time is historicism."[38]

I will state quite frankly that I do not think this is the best way to approach Judah Abrabanel and therefore a somewhat different method is required. One solution to this problem would be to frankly admit where history of philosophy ends and one's own philosophizing begins but to do so might reveal more of the interpreter's philosophy than he or she desires. After all, a book that I write about a dead philosopher (or a living one for that matter) should not be about me nearly as much as it is about him or her. Yet if it is not also about my own candidly acknowledged views it is not really philosophy but is only history of philosophy. Nevertheless, despite my obvious perception of problems inherent in it, I intend to pursue my subject matter in the spirit of contemporary intellectual history and without a great deal of philosophizing. That should not prevent us from attempting to include a specific thinker in a more general category of world-views. And it should at least be noted that, depending upon how we conceive of philosophy, there may be more in a philosopher's thinking than he or she was aware of just as every person is always more than he or she knows.[39]

Having said that, I would like to disassociate myself from certain methodologies that might be profound but which I find not particularly helpful for my project. The best example perhaps is the very important work of Elliot Wolfson, who may

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[38] Leo Strauss, "Political Philosophy and History," p.334

[39] As Karl Jaspers stated it in the *General Psychopathology*, p.294, "Every man's world is already a special one." This special world which the individual knows as his own and has so far confronted is always something less than his real world, which remains obscure, all-embracing, an over-reaching whole..."

well possess the most knowledge of Kabbalah, medieval philosophy and modern philosophy of any contemporary scholar. I will quote him here but unfortunately, due to the limited nature of this book, I cannot give his views the full attention that they deserve.

> In Foucauldian terms, scholars are faced with the constrictive function of controlling discourses through ordering systems of classification. All such systems are subject to their own dismantling, as any appropriate method of interpretation must be attentive to discontinuities and irregularities that interrupt and constrain the production of a particular archaeology of knowledge seeking to explain the past. The corpus of material studied under the rubric of kabbalah is no exception. Indeed, the quest for "origins" of kabbalah, paradoxically, obfuscates the possibility of comprehending the historical emergence of the phenomenon, as the notion of "origin" logically entails the proposition that every moment is a homogeneous totality, manifesting a unique confluence of events the significance of which is charted in predominantly spatial and temporal terms, but at the same time the moment evolves in an uninterrupted flow that allows one to identify something as cause engendering effect in temporal succession and spatial extension. The search for origins accordingly masks both the discontinuity and continuity necessary to (mis)

apprehend beginnings.

> We would do better to replace the modernist notion of origin with the idea of genealogy articulated by Foucault, a tracing of lineage that recognizes ruptures and divergences in the process of of extending the line, an orientation that disturbs what was thought stable, fragmenting what was thought unified, picturing heterogeneity in what was imagined hegemonic. Utilizing the genealogical approach we may chart an "effective history," in contrast to the more traditional history of ideas, which demarcates the inception of a phenomenon, always a "singular event" destabilizing taxonomy and defying thematization in a manner comparable to Heidegger's deconstruction of the ontotheological tradition by affirming ontological difference (the forerunner of Derrida's *différance*) as a merging of multiple forces rather than a discrete entity emerging at a particular time and place.[40]

I think it is fair to say that Wolfson's critique of prevalent historical methods is even more far-reaching than my own. I cannot argue against it or refute it (which may be both astrength and a weakness). Yet I do not consider it very helpful to me in so far as my own methodology constricts our ability to see things in the way that he recommends. It should be obvious, however, that if one were to accept his methodology most of my conclusions could be easily rejected.

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[40] Elliot Wolfson, *Language, Eros, Being*, pp. 2-3.

Oftentimes religious believers and academicians are incapable of truly communicating with one another and this is also the case in discussions between people of different faiths and even between different academic disciplines. This almost inevitable fact has been complicated (and even concealed) in Judaism by the somewhat fashionable doctrine that traditional Judaism consists of orthopraxis rather than orthodoxy. That notion, like so much in Judaism, may result from a reflexive desire to distinguish itself from Christianity and its strong emphasis on correct belief. This dogma of orthopraxis reaches its most absurd conclusion when a physicalist metaphysic is proclaimed to be perfectly compatible with Judaism.

It is also sometimes maintained (more generally) that the academic study of religion has nothing much to do with its actual practice but I suspect that this belief is at least sometimes wrong. And the notion of orthopraxy (in Judaism specifically) as normally interpreted, may rest upon a fundamental confusion between the *truly* practical and the merely technical mastery of rites, rules, etc. Truly practical mastery is dynamic and, though it is to be distinguished from theoretical knowledge, it has some of the characteristics of that kind of knowledge, which allow for expansive growth. Of course, academicians may well concern themselves with detailed factual or theoretical knowledge that would utterly bore the average religious practitioner, to say the least.[41] But, as Maimonides clearly recognized, beliefs are quite

[41] As a matter of fact, academic discussions of religion not only tend to bore believers but tend to repel them as well. This may stem partially from an exaggerated need of religious scholars to disassociate themselves from theology and/or confessional belief. Unfortunately, this methodology often ends up losing the distinctive flavor of a particular religion and/or losing the universal human need/tendency to form religious beliefs. While there is no

important to Judaism (or any religion for that matter) just as anthropologists tell us that primitive religious rituals are usually connected to some myth or other. This distinction between beliefs that constitute real knowledge and mere technical mastery of behavioral details is accepted by a diverse assortment of people. I once witnessed a rabbi dismiss grammatical objections to certain midrashic interpretations as merely "technical", implying perhaps that the *Midrash* in question had a deeper insight into the meaning of the biblical verse than a grammatically correct interpretation would yield. But others would argue conversely and assert that mastery of midrashic explanations is merely emotionally charged information about what has been said in the past and not really knowledge (at least in the modern sense). And that opinion might apply even if we were sure that we understood those *midrashim* accurately, which is rarely the case. In other words, knowing what others said and even what they really believed may be more like information than it is real knowledge. An obvious argument in favor of that opinion is the fact that midrashic explanations often contradict or are in conflict with one another while a true body of knowledge is normally expected to be *relatively* consistent.[42] Is it possible that this

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easy or even completely adequate answer to this problem, I would recommend lightening up on methodological strictures in the study of religion while of course holding all scholars to the norms of factual accuracy. For a good discussion of the relationship between comparative religion and theology see Hugh Nicholson, "The Reunification of Theology and Comparison in the New Comparative Theology."

[42] Of course, a historical understanding of how and why the various legends contradict one another would be real knowledge. One could also find additional inherent consistencies in rabbinic midrash but in order to do so it would be necessary to go beyond their literal meaning. This is a relatively new and emerging field of study although previous scholars attempted it without the tools of contemporary literary theory. Recently some Judaic scholars have indeed attempted to find commonalities between midrash and

disjunction between factual accuracy and a deeper truth applies to history as well?

In the view of some, the religious and philosophical problems regarding historicism are analogous to that of naturalism. From some religious and philosophical perspectives the human being can be viewed as *sui generis* but from the point of view of biology and evolution that is not at all the case. As much as we would like to be modern and scientific, this inherent conflict between world-views should be kept in mind. Likewise, from the point of view of non-evaluative history no period of human development is privileged but from certain religious and philosophical perspectives some obviously are. In my view, both nature and history have the potential of enhancing religious beliefs but only after ones basic theology is established. Granted, however, the historical status of the Jews as a kind of pariah ethnicity obviated the need for well thought out belief systems at times. When one is persecuted, that relationship to the outside world is sufficient for establishment of an identity. To be Jewish for many people means to not be pagan, Muslim or Christian: the belief systems of their persecutors. But if we look at almost any Jewish group today we see that they are held together not only by genetic and/or cultural ties and by negative views about the outside world but also by prevalent common beliefs, oftentimes quite secular ones. This has resulted in a rather severe estrangement of the religious from the non-religious Jewish communities, both in

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post-modern theories of literary interpretation. See José Fauér, *Golden Doves with Silver Dots* and *Midrash and Literature*, edited by Geoffrey Hartman and Sanford Budick. Whether or not these attempts are successful remains to be seen. Nevertheless, there surely can be a systematic knowledge of such literature if it is subjected to all available historical and literary interpretive tools rather than simply memorized as to their literal meanings and/or subjected to apologetic interpretations.

the United States and Israel. Alongside the ideal of orthopraxy of some enlightened traditionalists there has grown a more secular and exclusively ethical correlate alongside of the more traditional ethnic one.

One conjecture that has been made by some who study religion, culture and cognition is that fantastic or counter-intuitive beliefs are more easily remembered and transmitted and especially so by children. This can also be a handicap, depending upon ones purposes. If any religion, for example, were to consider some clearly untenable belief a fundamental dogma of faith, that would be problematic for any dialogue with others as well as for instructing their more mature and intelligent members. On the other hand, there is always the possibility of reinterpreting myths or beliefs in order to make them less problematic, and even attractive, to others without entirely eliminating them from conventional discourse. That has often been the way of religious philosophy.

One of the things that the prophetic and philosophical traditions have in common is their self-perceived ability to criticize fixed forms of religion, either from the vantage point of truth for the latter or revealed morality for the former. How can we reconcile those approaches with a scholarly, historical, non–evaluative approach to religion (as an academic exercise) and a polite, respectful one (as either a scholarly or moral approach)?[43] Obviously we cannot be completely dispassionate

[43] There is a prevalent, but not universally agreed upon, claim in religious studies that one should not make statements about a religion that its practitioners would not agree with. As Wilfred Cantwell Smith stated it in "The Comparative Study of Religion: Whither—and Why? (p.42): "no statement about a religion is valid unless it can be acknowledged by that religion's believers." With all due respect, I think this goes too far. I am in agreement that many dubious theoretical explanations about religion are not really statements about religion at all, as when Freudian explanations are

but we can surely agree to take the inquiry where the facts and logic lead us. That is the litmus test that distinguishes between two very different approaches to religion and philosophy. Nevertheless, I see no reason to hide the fact that I consider Judah Abrabanel's approach to philosophy and religion of great significance and value. And since Jewish thought has rarely benefited from that particular approach, the combination of those two statements (one factual and the other normative) ought to tell the reader something about the author of this book.

It should not shock anyone to hear that a faith-based approach to religion would differ fundamentally from an academic, historical perspective, subject to the cautions advised in the previous note. Is it also possible, however, that a philosophical approach could conflict just as radically with a historical one? This is something that may have slipped under the radar screen given the demise or transformation (depending upon one's view) of philosophy in recent years.

Historical Methods

In some disciplines, such as history of philosophy or history of religion (not to mention philosophy and religion, proper), there seems to be no fully agreed upon method of verification and/or falsification regarding the interpretation of some fairly

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offered as if they are substitutes for the actual beliefs and experiences of religious practitioners. But there are quite often historical facts about their religion that most believers are simply ignorant of or choose to deny and it would be perverse if scholars needed to deny them as well in order to remain "faithful" to that religion (in the scholarly sense). Religion must not be held sacrosanct and immune from investigation in a manner that other ideologies are not. No one would apply such a restriction to the study of communism, for example. That said, I am sympathetic to the view that a religion primarily consists of views that would be intelligible and sympathetically received by its practitioners.

significant facts. For example, to what extent should one make conjectures regarding hidden agendas? And what are the agreed upon rules of evidence for such conjectural assertions? Even the very words that we use to describe religious or philosophical phenomena are often suspect. Who determines whether or not to include various writings under a common heading such as "Platonic," "kabbalistic," etc? Are the sub-divisions of greater significance than the broad headings? Should we focus more on whether a thinker was a Platonist or a philosopher? Admittedly, such classifications are generally more useful than they are misleading but oftentimes imbedded in such terminology are an assumption regarding what is normative and how or why intellectual phenomena change or "evolve." The names that we attach to things do flavor our perception of them, and especially so when we don't have first hand acquaintance with them. Each individual author is both an heir of a tradition, existing within a certain cultural context, and a creative being. Which of these things are to be given primacy in interpretation? This becomes particularly problematic where extant literary evidence is scanty. In those areas the history of thought sometimes approaches literary theory as regards its impressionistic aspect. This might even be the case with the study of Judah Abrabanel, who left very few traces of his thinking except for the rather difficult to understand work that this book addresses. When we use labels like philosopher, Jewish philosopher, Italian Jewish philosopher of Spanish origin, etc. we signal what it is about the author that we consider significant and that decision regarding significance may ultimately be a normative judgment. We don't even have an agreed upon system of nomenclature, not to speak of a common methodology. This lack of agreement regarding methodology is not necessarily

bad but I think that we should be aware of it. This may help to explain why some have viewed Judah Abrabanel as a rationalist, somewhat akin to Maimonides and others see him as a kabbalist.

One of the other major issues regarding Judah Abrabanel has been whether he was really a "Jewish" philosopher or not, despite the fact that few doubt that he was Jewish by either ancestry or affiliation. I will be discussing this at rather great length but I suspect that it cannot really be resolved since different people have different views regarding the meaning of "Jewish." Nevertheless, I think it worthwhile to reflect upon this controversy since it may help us to understand the work. Although studies in the history of ideas can never achieve scientific status and should not even aspire to, I will tacitly assume that this is a Jewish book as a sort of null hypothesis. For that reason, Jewish sources and motifs will be stressed and when we find that the book deviates from those sources it will be duly noted. But we should not confuse the scholarly description of a culture and its relationship to other cultures with certain popular views, no matter how widespread they might be. I quote Peter Burke.

> Cultural history is also a cultural translation from the language of the past into that of the present, from the concepts of contemporaries into those of historians and their readers. Its aim is to make the 'otherness' of the past both visible and intelligible. This is not to say that historians should treat the past as completely alien. The dangers of treating another culture in this way have been made abundantly clear in the debate on 'orientalism', in other words the

Western view (or views) of the East (or easts).

> Rather than thinking in terms of a binary opposition between Self and Other, as participants in cultural encounters have so often done, it may be more illuminating to try to think in terms of degrees of cultural distance. We could try to acquire a double vision, to see people in the past as unlike ourselves (in order to avoid the anachronistic imputation of our values to them), but at the same time as like us in their fundamental humanity.[44]

Burke appears to be using a somewhat popular moralistic term "fundamental humanity" in a more academic sense. All human beings are somewhat alike from a biological, psychological and anthropological standpoint. I would offer a caveat to that and insist that some cultures are more similar to our own than others and that would tend to make the individuals affected by those cultures more similar. Yet some of the most violent confrontations between cultures occur between those that are rather similar: the civil war in Northern Ireland between Catholics and Protestants being a good case in point. Quite often in such conflicts people identify themselves in opposition to the Other who in fact is not all that different. So, two different versions of a cultural tradition emerge: the popular view and the view of scholars who probe the actual cultural and intellectual history. When we speak of what is or what is not "Jewish," this should be kept in mind.

Let us clarify another important methodological issue. We cannot always take the writings of medieval and

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[44] *Varieties of Cultural History*, pp.193-194

Renaissance writers at face value. They were not as free to express their beliefs as we are, at least in the sense that they had no legal guarantees of freedom of religion, speech or press. That having been said, in some specific contexts they may have actually been freer than we are. For example, some religious Jews today are quite reluctant to express beliefs that might conflict even slightly with a perceived "orthodoxy." The same is surely true of other religions as well. A case could be made that in the Middle Ages and Renaissance this was not so to the same extent, except when it came to the more radical opinions and even then they could often be camouflaged. Perhaps, despite its counterintuitive appearance, there was a greater diversity of opinion then, at least among traditional Jews. Granted, however, very extreme heterodox opinions like atheism, agnosticism, deism or belief in the eternity of the universe might have been very difficult to express in certain times and places in the Middle Ages and Renaissance. Nevertheless, history records a surprising number of martyrs to unpopular beliefs in those aforementioned periods. Exactly how many they were as a percentage of the population is not clear but we can perhaps presume that they were a small minority. Sometimes the suspicion of a debilitating fear of persecution has been made the presupposition for all kinds of speculation, perhaps justified and perhaps not. This is often the product of Leo Strauss' famous thesis in *Persecution and the Art of Writing*. Despite that quite respectable suspicion, I will not generally attempt to decipher a deeper or more sincere meaning of the text and some may see this as a serious weakness. At times, however, I may allude to a *possibly* hidden meaning, the presence of the Inquisition, persecution, internal censoring by Jews themselves, etc. These are realities that we must keep in mind even if we refrain from substantially altering

the plain meaning of the text. It does not hurt to raise questions that one cannot answer in the hope that perhaps someone else can. But we are dealing here with a *relatively* tolerant period and place and my underlying assumption is that Judah Abrabanel was primarily concerned with getting his message across to a fairly large audience, as well as attaining prominence. This was not a *Guide of the Perplexed*, the author of which was already extremely prominent and might have intended to hide his real message somewhat. In other words, I assume that Judah Abrabanel had his own unique message to broadcast and was not merely an apologetic spokesman for his religion, people or family. If that assumption were to be proven wrong then we would need to look at the text somewhat differently.

I would also like to make a few prefatory remarks about the categories: Middle Ages, the Renaissance and Modernity. As previous writers have often noted, these very terms reflect evaluative attitudes. In the case of the "Middle Ages" the term itself and the accompanying attitude are the products of modernity. Of course people in the Middle Ages had their own conception of and attitudes towards history. Some of our attitudes towards medieval life and towards the Renaissance emerged in the Renaissance itself and others (perhaps most) in Modernity. This creates interpretive problems whenever we speak about those periods as if they were naturally or essentially demarcated.[45] The problem is alleviated somewhat by the term

[45] The attack against such historical demarcations has taken two apparently diametrically opposed forms. Some say that human nature remains the same throughout history and others say that the uniqueness of individual ideas or expressions cannot be described in terms of such general categories. See Giuseppe Mazzota, "Antiquity and the New Arts in Petrarch", pp.46-48 for a good discussion. I would argue that the universal and the individual are quite closely related and therefore the two arguments are not so far apart as

"Early Modern." I have no intention of delving in any great depth into this problem or for that matter into the actual attitudes of Renaissance people vs. those of their medieval predecessors. But it would be impossible to do justice to a work of that period without alluding to attitudes that were contemporaneous to it. And many of the authors whom I quote will make similar assumptions regarding the distinction between medieval and Renaissance viewpoints. Such references, however, should not be interpreted as either bold historical theses or as unreflective acquiescence to stereotypes but only as reflections of conventional wisdom, which usually contains some degree of truth. The following is a well-written summary of such a limited truth.

> What differentiates the Renaissance from the medieval imagination, what determines the specific qualities of Renaissance intellectual and imaginative style, what leads to peculiarly Renaissance strategies of self-limitation is this awareness that the mind need not consider itself passive to dogma, tradition, and perception; it may actively choose, and reveal itself as actively choosing, the elements of its environment. When Descartes said, as he often did, that a good God would not deceive us, he intended not to question the motives or character of the traditional God but to remind us that since our senses were faulty, God must want us to

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they might appear at first blush. I would also argue, however, that historical demarcations (no matter how difficult they are to sustain) are quite important in understanding or at least conceptualizing intellectual trends. We can then proceed to note continuities and similarities that might undermine those demarcations.

> organize the appearances by a stronger effort of interpretation. Things are not known he said, "from the fact that they re seen or touched, but only because they are understood." Thus what is called reality is what issues forth as the product of internal experience, controlled thought, scientific method, and poetic creation.[46]

We must remember that the Iberian Jews who emigrated from Spain and Portugal brought with them their own historical prejudices. Some may have looked back at a "Golden Age" in the Iberian past but others severely criticized their rationalist Iberian forebears for angering God and man and thereby bringing about their expulsion. In general, however, they felt themselves to be superior to the native Jews that they found in their new homes. Quite often they wrested power from them, whether voluntarily or otherwise. In Italy, however, they may have encountered a somewhat more sophisticated type of Jew than in most other places. We cannot go into greater depth regarding those matters here but they are something to keep in mind.

Judaic Studies, History and Philosophy

As we have already seen, much of contemporary intellectual history has ostensibly dealt with the conflict between facts and values by "emancipating" itself from philosophy and religion. This may be particularly relevant for Judaic Studies, which I believe have been peculiarly influenced by history and only tangentially so by philosophy.[47] In earlier days Jewish

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[46] Harry Berger, Jr., *Second World and Green World: Studies in Renaissance Fiction-Making*, p.55

[47] I do not mean to assert that Judaic Studies is simply Jewish History, though much of it surely is. But even fields like Bible and Rabbinics are

intellectual history seems to have had some ideological purpose and could perhaps be termed "apologetic." More recently Judaic scholars have attempted to reduce or eliminate that ideological or axiological aspect of their work in favor of purely historical research. This hegemony of historiography in Judaic Studies has sometimes been viewed as a problem from a religious or philosophical perspective.[48] Sometimes, however, it is viewed as a valuable contribution to the reform of an ossified religion. But it is rarely (if ever) asked why it is that of the two comprehensive disciplines — History and Philosophy — only the former has come to so dominate Judaic Studies. We simply take it for granted and that may signal something very significant about our modern world-view. It may also make sense in terms of the long historical stretch of Judaism and the *relative* lack of philosophical influence upon it for much of that long history. That it should be the case even in the field of Medieval (and Renaissance) Jewish philosophy, however, may come as somewhat of a surprise. Can you really do full justice to a philosopher without engaging him or her philosophically? That is a philosophical question. While I have a great deal of

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under the influence of an historical attitude. In fact we are so inured to this that we may not even notice it. It would be much more evident if we were to compare it with more blatantly ideologically based approaches to the same subject. A philosophical approach to the same subject matter would not negate the historical work but might also be willing to draw normative conclusions.

[48] Leo Strauss put it this way. "The so-called discovery of history consists in the realization, or the alleged realization, that man's freedom is radically limited by his earlier use of his freedom, and not by his nature or by the whole order of nature or creation. This element is, I think, increasing in importance; this is so much so that today one tends to say that the specific character of modern thought is "history," a notion which is in this form, of course, wholly alien to classical thought or to any pre-modern thought or to biblical thought..." See "Progress or Return?," *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, p.104.

respect for those who restrict their efforts to reproducing and interpreting the thoughts of medieval or Renaissance thinkers, it seems to me that ultimately we must engage them as well. If an earlier form of thought were totally removed from our own questions and concerns we might not be able to relate to it at all. Yet in order to understand it well we would also have to understand where it differs radically from our own customary concerns and assumptions. In other words, traditional philosophy must be critical of both the present and the past. While history is the essential grounding of Judaic Studies as it is perhaps of all academic religious studies, philosophy has its own peculiar methods of seeking the truth. To the extent that it is ignored something important is lost. One might have thought, for example, that almost all contemporary "Jewish philosophers" would be able to argue philosophically with their medieval counterparts, as some undoubtedly have. Instead, however, many if not most have chosen to merely "interpret" them.[49] Yet in my view, a significant act of interpretation will

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[49] I would prefer that there be some discussion of the relevance of a great historical thinker to contemporary intellectual or spiritual problems even if the work focuses mostly on historical or textual issues. We must recognize that this has to be a motivating factor in any exhaustive study. Seymour Feldman, for example, does this in the introduction to his translation of Gersonides' *The Wars of the Lord*, pp.50-54. When this is not done, it is all the more likely that there will be a confusion between views of the historical figure under discussion and those of the scholar doing the commenting or describing. When certain weapons are removed from a scholar's arsenal, the original motive is likely to surface in more concealed ways. This is nowhere as true as in Maimonidean Studies where naturalistically inclined philosophers view Maimonides as a naturalist, Modern Orthodox scholars view him as an enlightened traditionalist and the more mystically inclined view him as a proto-kabbalist. At least one very positive thing can be said about this step of scholarship, however. It evades the prevalent tendency to ignore personal motives and conscious intentional states. Interest in such inner states of mind is practically inevitable when one concentrates on one particular thinker to the detriment of his or her surrounding cultural milieu. In fact, I tend to think that going too far in either direction is mistaken. For a

inevitably lead to normative conclusions even if such conclusions might be considered by some to be outside the boundaries[50] of both intellectual history and history of philosophy.

Ultimately, if we are to take them seriously, we must incorporate the insights of the medieval and Renaissance thinkers into our lives and in order to do so we will have to be critical of them as well. As an ally I will enlist someone who might appear at first blush a most unlikely candidate: Samuel Taylor Coleridge. He concluded that "without a congenial philosophy there can be no general religion, that a philosophy

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good discussion see Karsten Stueber, "Intentionalism, Intentional realism and Empathy." The disproportionate interest in Maimonides in the field of medieval Jewish philosophy also results in the mistaken impression (not always actually believed by the authors) that Maimonides' work is on the level of a revealed, esoteric doctrine and that one can even model oneself after a thinker who lived almost 1000 years ago.

The relative lack of true philosophizing in Judaic studies is an even more intractable problem and it is far more difficult to specify its solution or even to know whether there ought to be one. The very term "philosophy" is sometimes employed as an epithet by scientists and historians. Philosophy sometimes seems somewhat alien to the contemporary worldview even if some implicit philosophizing may be a part of the essential human condition. Some (like Salomon Munk) have even said that philosophy is alien to the Jewish mind.

[50] For example, an interpretation that a thinker's view (like Thomas Jefferson's acceptance of slavery) was conditioned by his political and cultural context almost inevitably counts as grounds for rejecting his view since we feel quite sure about our correct evolution of thought regarding the subject of slavery. On the other hand, interpreting a thinker as creatively defying the norms of her time leads to other types of speculation regarding the cogency of those views. In no case, however, should we attribute to historical figures views that they could not have held as they depend upon a subsequent history of thought. Nevertheless, there is a sense in which we might understand those thinkers better than they understood themselves. This is true not only in the detection of inconsistencies that they were not aware of but surely in their subsequent place in history. Whether those conclusions are strictly historical or whether they are philosophical can be debated.

among the higher classes is an essential condition to the true state of religion among all classes, and that religion is the great center of gravity in all countries and in all ages..."[51] In other words, an up-to-date religious philosophy is essential to religion, which itself is essential to the life of humankind. While Coleridge's view of life might appear to some to be hopelessly romantic, which it quite possibly was, we should remind ourselves that he was also quite cognizant of the hard science of his day and that his call for a "congenial philosophy" was based in part on that knowledge and the realization that the literal, evangelical religion of his time was irreconcilable with science. Our situation today is not very different; we have not made a great deal of progress since then in religious philosophy (in contrast to philosophy of religion). Our religions are imbedded in cultural warfare with history, science and philosophy; we need to deal with this and therefore we simply can't be content with the philosophies of Maimonides or Thomas Aquinas.[52]

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[51] A public lecture delivered in London in 1818. This was after his discovery of German philosophical and literary thought, such as Kant, Goethe and Lessing. See Roy Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason*, pp.398-412 for an interesting discussion. The kind of relationship between philosophy and religion enunciated by Coleridge can in turn be subdivided into an internalist and externalist interpretation. The former concerns itself with the influence on ideas with other ideas or mental states while the latter only is interested in the relationship between thoughts and actions. See John Higham "Intellectual History and its Neighbors" for a good discussion.

[52] Such figures, as brilliant and rational as they might have been, quickly become authorities and substitutes for true philosophical reflection, even in the practical area of ethics. For an incisive application of this principle to Judaism see Leon Roth, "Moralization and Demoralization in Jewish Ethics," *Is there a Jewish Philosophy?* pp.128-143. This essay was originally delivered as a lecture in 1961 and appeared in *Judaism*, vol. 11, no. 4 (Fall 1962).

Religion is often treated as sacrosanct from factual and theoretical criticism but an analysis of religious discourse reveals that it can be partially conceptualized as history, cosmology, metaphysics, ethics, anthropology, law, etc., fields of discourse that philosophers routinely deal with. I say "partially" because there is also an essential devotional quality to religion that cannot be categorized in that way and which might therefore be truly sacrosanct and not at all susceptible to philosophical analysis or scientific critique, even if it is a constituent part of the psychology of those disciplines. That devotional quality, though not susceptible to rational analysis, can perhaps be not only acknowledged but also understood[53] by

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[53] Understanding or *Verstehen* is not to be conflated with purely historical or factual knowledge. As the crowning glory of such knowledge, most people want to *understand.* Admittedly, there is a fine line of distinction between prejudice and valuation but we need not completely throw out the latter in order to rid ourselves of the former. I quote Leonard Ehrlich from "Jaspers' Method of *Verstehen*" p.6.

> One last characteristic of understanding is that valuation walks in lockstep with understanding. In other words: to be understood also means to be appraised. The minimal value inherent in understanding is consistent with reference to true-false, correct-incorrect, but extends also to right-wrong, good-bad, good-evil, worthy-reprehensible, loyal-treacherous, etc. Valuation pertains to the understanding of the author, and *a fortiori* to that of the reader. In fact, the author cannot avoid the reader's valuation that accompanies his understanding of what he reads, and *volens* or *nolens* the author provokes the reader's valuation....
> The inevitable resonance of valuation with understanding may interfere with methodical inquiry. In the natural sciences this can take many forms... That scientific research (pure or basic science) can proceed only by *suspending* value considerations has been a stumbling block to its acceptance, from Galileo's theory of heliocentrism to Darwin's evolution of species. The problematic nature of Max Weber's principle that natural

philosophy in a manner that history never can. Philosophy may also have something to say about the ethical aspects of religious thought that history cannot. Although we cannot fully understand it, there is an essential and unique affinity between religion, philosophy and certain aspects of psychology. This should become apparent as we plumb the depths of the thought of Judah Abrabanel. Whether that possible affinity between religion and philosophy can bridge the gap that has developed between Judaic Studies and Rabbinic Judaism, for example, is another matter. Most likely it cannot but perhaps our engagement with another system of thought, as flawed as it may be, can remind us that even the modern standards of scholarship that we so take for granted are not the only legitimate or conceivable possibility. Another method, so foreign to contemporary academic scholarship, has the distinct advantage of being relevant not only to scholars, but educated religious believers generally. And it has an even greater advantage that current historical scholarship generally lacks. While history can encompass philosophy and religion, only philosophy can unite

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scientific inquiry be free of value — though not devoid of value — is well known. And yet scientists proceed under that supposition as they aim at suspending valuation....
Can there be an analogous demand of keeping methodical understanding free of value judgment, considering that, since it is inextricably linked to understanding, it can hardly be suspended? What is called for is the enactment of a distinction between judging and prejudging; keeping an open mind in inquiry; maintaining a posture of justness and fairness; since opposites are equally possible, seeking out the alternatives of contextual interpretations and weighing their respective plausibility; and to be critically mindful not only of the limits of the understanding and judgment of what others have presented, but of one's own.

them all in an attitude of normative or devotional faith.[54] I am making that claim despite my willingness to place it on a back burner as regards this investigation. I will attempt to restrict myself to investigating the views of a past thinker strictly in terms of the information, motives, theories and knowledge available to him. Yet we can never forget the fact that he was a philosopher and that the justification of knowledge in any field (including history and religion) is ultimately a philosophical matter. This leaves open the possibility of other modes of interpretation.

This notion of the importance of philosophy to religion may be a radically different intuition from the one that views religious philosophy as only of value to those well educated or unlucky enough to be perplexed. That intuition may partially explain why so few people today are really interested in philosophy as does the analytical view of it as an under worker to the sciences (or history) whose job is to clear out the underbrush. This resembles somewhat the caricature of the medieval view of philosophy as a handmaiden to religion.

So, what does this rather long discourse about philosophy and religion have to do with Judah Abrabanel? Nowadays we tend to think that philosophy and religion are quite independent spheres. It is possible, and perhaps deserves

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[54] It has at times been claimed that History by uncovering more archaic modes of thought can guide us in thinking aright about political or perhaps religious issues. Recently this has been asserted by Quentin Skinner, whom I consider both a historian and a philosopher. I would have to draw the disciplinary lines somewhat differently and argue that when a historian draws normative conclusions from historical investigations she is no longer doing history but philosophy. Of course all such labels are somewhat arbitrary but if history and the social sciences were to take away the last substantive area in which philosophy has something to contribute is this not an unwanted act of aggression, especially since history is so occupied already. See Quentin Skinner, *Regarding Method*, p.21.

further investigation, that Judah Abrabanel's thinking was something like that of Coleridge. Abrabanel may have thought that philosophy was crucial to religion, which in turn was crucial to human flourishing. As Rossella Pescatori states it, "The *Dialogues* are a syncretistic opus representing an eclectic, multidimensional, and multicultural standpoint on *Prisca theologia* theorized by Ficino, where theology and philosophy are not considered to be two separate entities."[55] Yet the dialogues on the surface read somewhat differently, as if esoteric religious teachings were crucial to philosophical understanding. This may have been his actual view or perhaps a tactical means of reconciling reason and faith. Or perhaps this was simply the conventional wisdom of the day that he paid lip service to. This was still an age that revered authorities, even if those authorities might have been different (or expanded) from the medieval period.

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[55] The *Prisca theologia* is an ancient (presumably Hermetic) wisdom that combined religious and philosophical truths. See Rossella Pescatori, "Images and Simulacra of the Soul," p.134. She goes on to say that for Judah Abrabanel: "'philosophy' is equal to 'revelation.' ". She makes the claim that: "At the base of Leone Ebreo's work, there is a neo-Platonic perspective combined with the Jewish mystical tradition of the Kabbalah..." While I tend to agree with the first assertion quoted in the body text, the following two assertions are more dubious. The second assertion regarding revelation and philosophy makes of Abrabanel more of a radical than we know for certain that he was. The third assertion regarding Kabbalah is questionable and the subject of this investigation. Both, however, may well be true and perhaps if they are the foundational knowledge that makes them plausible is the *Prisca theologia* that she spoke of in the first assertion. It is that esoteric knowledge that would have allowed Abrabanel to practically equate (or at least unite) philosophy, revelation and Kabbalah. This would have allowed him to bridge some of the conceptual gaps between medieval philosophy and religion but perhaps by transforming both in to something more mystical. To what extent actual philosophy, actual religious tradition and for that matter actual kabbalistic teachings are structural in this system or are simply window dressing is the main question here.

I will now assert something that some may find self-evident: a thinker's departure from conventional wisdom is more significant than his or her adherence to it. So perhaps the long, pretentious list of philosophers and religious thinkers whom he marshals serves a function: to signal a better and more comprehensive way in religious thought than had prevailed in the past. And like so many others, perhaps he advertised his own better way as a return to ancient traditions. Be that as it may, it does seem fairly certain that he wanted to reconcile religion and philosophy. Yet, given our present situation, it might have to be admitted that either we have failed Judah Abrabanel or he has failed us because his hoped for reconciliation between philosophy and religion never really came to fruition.

Perhaps the overemphasis of historical studies has stood in the way of an integration of religion and philosophy.[56] Perhaps some enlightened Jewish thinkers in the 19th century even felt that history could replace religion as a bonding element for the Jewish people and this more radical approach seems to have left its mark on Judaic Studies. Perhaps they did not accept Ernest Renan's famous quip that a nation is "a group of people united by a mistaken view about the past and a hatred of their neighbors."[57] But if they had they would have realized

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[56] Aristotle believed that history only gives a partial truth regarding particular human beings while literature conveys a more universal and philosophical truth. See the *Poetics*, 1451b. The religious medieval thinkers transferred that belief to sacred scripture.

[57] Perhaps his somewhat negative view of the Semitic peoples in comparison to the Indo-Europeans did not endear him to them. Renan's great insight regarding nations aside, he actually had many very positive things to say about nationalism even if he was ambivalent about history and especially its effect upon national solidarity, as in his famous 1882 lecture: *Qu'est-ce qu'une nation?* The truth of the matter is, however, that national myths do play a great part in cementing national unity. One example is the myth of

that historical truth and nationalism are often somewhat incompatible. At any rate, we ought to be somewhat suspicious of history, which may function at times as a disguised philosophy just as did biblical narrative, pagan mythology and rabbinic *midrash*. We no longer believe that there is one privileged and neutral description of events nor is it readily apparent what constitutes an objective historical trend. Just as in experimental work, changing the sample size or the time span may seriously change the results. Effects of an independent variable look very different depending upon what you are comparing it with. Religions and their effects also look very different depending upon the reference group. This does not invalidate historical research. But it does disabuse us of the illusion that it can serve the same role regarding understanding as philosophy. The more we search the historical record the more we find, but it does not often produce truly normative results. For that we may need philosophy. Or perhaps even philosophy cannot produce such a result, as some contemporary scholars seem to believe. But even if they are correct, we may need it for other very practical purposes. It could be that popular religion without an adequate philosophy tends towards atavism and at times destructive violence.

Sometimes scholarly treatments of religious phenomena evade the issue of the truth of the latter and only deal with objective beliefs, their place within a larger cultural pattern, psychological and social effects, historical appearances, relative

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the non-violent, passive Jew, which helped to cement Israeli identity as a new and improved kind of Jewish identity, allowing for self-defense. Recent historical investigations have exploded that myth somewhat. That historiography has been met with predictable opposition, sometimes being accused of highlighting unusual and uncharacteristic examples or even of anti-Semitism.

prevalence, etc. This can actually be justified not only academically but also religiously by the insight that religions only *really* make sense to their practitioners and quite often appear absurd from the outside. Like psychotherapy, religion may only work if you believe in it. Hence, external scholarship could be quite incapable of fully appreciating the real depths of religious phenomena.[58]

But no work of scholarship in this field can entirely evade the normative characteristics that we call "truth" or, at the very least, "accuracy." Admittedly, however, the nature of truth is itself a philosophical issue and although we don't expect a full scale argument for a theory of truth from every scholar of religion (or even every philosopher) one might at least sometimes be justified in expecting some treatment of the truth or accuracy of the work under discussion. Although religious and philosophical works are closely related to works of art, and perhaps this one especially so, we do generally expect some correspondence with external reality. Therefore, when certain descriptive, historical or theoretical statements are made in the name or service of religion, they are always fair game for scholarship even if particular scholars opt not to deal with them or perhaps assume that they have a deeper, non-literal and more obscure meaning. That applies to the belief systems of "higher religions" as much as to more "primitive" or "indigenous" ones. If a "primitive" tribe believes in witches we need not necessarily assume that their belief in those beings is the same as the discredited belief in them here in the West. This quite

[58] For a very good and up to date discussion of methodological issues in religious studies see Jason A. Springs, "What Cultural Theorists of Religion Have to Learn from Wittgenstein; Or, How to Read Geertz as a Practice Theorist" *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, Volume 76, number 4. The value of this paper as a summary of issues in philosophy, social science and religion transcends its specific bias as suggested by its title.

profound anthropological reservation should prevent us from gratuitously criticizing beliefs that we don't really understand. But if a tribal spokesperson that understands our culture well (or claims to) were to tell us that the two beliefs are essentially similar and also quite correct, we would have every right to disagree regarding the truth content of those religious views.

Religious commentaries or reasoned explanations must be held accountable to truth in a manner in which the raw data of religion need not be. For example, the fact that some descriptions of events in the Bible seem factually erroneous and even contrary to one another need not invalidate the Bible for us but only a completely literalistic interpretation of it. But when someone purports to explain the *real* meaning of those biblical passages, such an explanation can indeed be held accountable to stricter standards of verisimilitude to the extent that they involve factual assertions. That distinction, between that which is falsifiable and that which is not, may mark the difference between irrational religiosity and the kind that while not strictly rational is not irrational either. Academic disciplines such as philosophy, history, anthropology and psychology can be quite helpful in that regard even if they are surely incapable of generating authentic religiosity itself. To give another example, we may have fairly good evidence that archaic religion included both rituals and myths and the former were often viewed as somehow useful to humans in terms of manipulating the cosmos. Similar observations have been made about "indigenous peoples" living today.[59] Since we don't fully understand those beliefs, we might be best off not evaluating them. But if a contemporary spokesperson, or even a medieval writer, were to opine regarding the efficacy of such rituals to

[59] See Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, Volume 1, pp. 22-28.

affect the cosmos (in language completely comprehensible to us) we would have every right to question the rational foundation of such a belief. Therefore, I believe that we can lock horns intellectually with such "rational" spokespersons without fearing being led astray by our own very particular rationalities, even if we cannot do that kind of rational analysis with the religious communities of which those spokespersons form a part. In fact, failure to evaluate the rationality of such spokespersons means that we have not really taken their rationality very seriously.

In the case of Judah Abrabanel, for example, the reader may want to know whether his philosophizing was really free, rational activity or whether it was in the service of traditional organized religion (apologetics). And if it were the latter, it would be interesting to know exactly what kind of religion he was attempting to promote. Of course we can't discuss this with Mr. Abrabanel but we can perform an empathic dialogic simulation within our own minds.

There is yet another area where a modern philosopher can (and perhaps even should) critique philosophers of the past. That involves the extent to which those earlier thinkers solved the problems that were indeed relevant to *them*. Such a critique involves both knowledge of history and an analytical ability that should perhaps be considered philosophical.[60] Too often historians of philosophy and intellectual historians either lack such ability or refuse to use it, in the interest of non-evaluative objectivity. This sometimes renders intellectual history rather boring and encyclopedic and only challenging as an exercise in rote memorization. We might want to heed the advice of R.G.

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[60] For a good discussion see Paul Richard Blum, "Principles and Powers: How to Interpret Philosophy of Nature Philosophically."

Collingswood that: "If a philosophical doctrine doesn't make sense, it is probably a good answer to a question we don't know.[61] I would disagree slightly, however, by qualifying that assertion somewhat. Philosophical doctrines that don't make sense *might* indeed be good answers to questions we don't know but we have no way of assessing the probability of that being the case. We also cannot assess their "goodness" until we come to understand those questions or problems that we currently "don't know."

In areas of ethics or morality, academic disciplines are even more challenged, as I mentioned earlier. One can certainly assert that some historical religious phenomenon offends current sensibilities/moral standards etc. or even the traditional standards of that particular religion itself; but no academic discipline (except perhaps philosophy) has a unique insight into morality. Yet I recognize no absolute prohibition against a scholar expressing his or her own moral standards, or even outrage at their violation, even if it is out of fashion. Traditionally, philosophers did that much more than they currently do and may even at times have conflated the demands of truth with the demands of their own religion or their own conscience. Is it possible, however, that philosophy itself can legitimately adjudicate some of those moral issues?

Perhaps there is indeed some natural law type vantage point from which conventional religion and morality can be objectively judged; to rule that out would be premature and biased. Indeed, our deepest sentiments and our normal practical wisdom both testify in favor of such a natural law position. As

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[61] R.G. Collingwood, *An Autobiography*, p. 31. Prior to reading Paul Richard Blum (ibid), I had not been aware of that very useful quotation and I therefore thank him for it.

Paul Kristeller, the great Renaissance scholar said: "It is now fashionable to consider the doctrine of natural law as antiquated, but I do not see how we can ever subject a given positive law to moral criticism unless we maintain a universally valid moral standard by which it may be judged and measured."[62] Nevertheless, I do not claim to have such a privileged theoretical perch, even if I would like to live my practical life as if I do. Therefore, I will attempt to avoid value judgments in a book that is primarily historical. For those who do not prize truth in quite the same way or who distinguish between historical accuracy and religious truth, different standards may apply. I think that we can indeed hold ourselves to certain standards without insisting that others do the same just as we demand the same freedom from others. Not every normative discourse is prescriptive.

Summary

To a great extent we will proceed in a historical fashion. We will attempt to explore the roots of Judah Abrabanel's thought in order to answer the question about kabbalistic influence. We will begin with those thinkers whom he himself gave credit to and also of course his father, who he never explicitly mentions in the *Dialoghi* but was obviously a great influence upon him. We will weigh the influences somewhat disproportionately on the Jewish side and especially as regards Jewish philosophy. We will also be looking for other likely influences, including of course kabbalistic ones. But in order to evaluate the claim of kabbalistic influence we will need to somehow contrast the likelihood of that influence with the alternative likelihood of other types of influence, especially as regards conscious intent

[62] See Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and its Sources*, p.120.

and world-view. This is not at all an easy task and is complicated by the fact that Kabbalah itself is the product of diverse historical and cultural influences. Thus, we will be looking at not only Jewish sources, but also Christian, pagan and Muslim ones as well. We will also be discussing the historical entanglement of those sources. In the final analysis, however, we will need to engage Judah Abrabanel in a philosophical manner, assuming that the historical influences and the personal motives all ultimately dissolve into a man's philosophy.

Judah Abrabanel was both a man of religion (Judaism) and a philosopher. He was obviously grappling with those types of problems. While we cannot hold him to contemporary standards of scholarship nor impute to him our own ideas, we can surely view him as a serious scholar of both religion and philosophy. He seems to have made a very serious effort to take both very seriously and was not a mere apologist or harmonizer, which is not to say that he never indulged in either activity. He was also a religious philosopher who spoke to both Jews and Gentiles and that is very significant. He was quite likely addressing various segments of two religious communities that may not have had the same values on some issues and surely had very different beliefs. Yet he was quite successful! This had very rarely been the case prior to the 18th century although there were some precedents. It is rare even today. We will never truly understand him unless we can relate to his goals and his methodology.

Chapter I: An Overview of the Milieu, the Book and its Author

In this chapter I will provide an overview of the substance of the *Dialoghi d'Amore*, give some information about its author and underscore topics regarding its environment that I consider of great importance. It attempts to give the reader a general picture of the subject we are about to discuss but without going into detail or drawing a great many conclusions. Some of what we begin here will be reiterated in later chapters but in much greater detail or in more specific contexts. Conclusions will be argued for in those later sections.

Some Biographical Facts

Let us absorb a few bare facts about the author. We know a little more than this about him but not very much more. Judah Abrabanel was born in Lisbon around 1460. He was the eldest son of Isaac Abrabanel, a wealthy financier, court Jew, biblical commentator and philosopher. They fled from Lisbon to Toledo in 1483 and then to Italy in 1492. Judah seems to have been a physician in Spain. In the course of fleeing Spain, he was forced to leave behind his one year old son Isaac, who was sent back to Lisbon secretly with a nursemaid and was soon taken hostage and baptized. Judah Abrabanel did not find complete peace in Italy either. He first arrived in Naples and ultimately died there around 1525 but in between he may have been forced to relocate around 1506. Nevertheless, the family retained its prominence in Italy and Judah continued to move in the highest circles of society, both Jewish and non-Jewish. In Italy he was known as both a physician and a philosopher, a

rather familiar combination in the Renaissance.[63] If we know relatively little about Judah Abrabanel himself, we know considerably more about his family (many of whom were more public figures), most of which does not really concern us here. What is quite relevant, however, is the fact that they continued to live a princely and privileged existence in Italy. Not only his father but also two paternal uncles (Joseph and Jacob) immigrated to Italy. The latter became the head of the Jewish community of Naples.[64] Later on, the brother of Judah, Don Samuel Abrabanel, was also the head of that community (until the final expulsion of the Jews from that Spanish ruled city in 1541) and, like his father, was considered exceedingly noble, educated and wealthy.[65] It may seem strange to some that these refugees from Spanish persecution might retained somewhat friendly ties to Spanish authorities in Italy and there is much about that era that we don't fully understand. There is a tendency to view previous periods of human history, when *de jure* freedoms hardly existed, as being much more tyrannical or totalitarian *de facto* than they really were. We are often surprised, for example, by the willingness of some members of

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[63] This was a part of the Galenic tradition. See David Ruderman, "The Impact of Science on Jewish Culture and Society in Venice (With Special Reference to Jewish Graduates of Padua's Medical School)" for a good discussion of statistics, curriculum, etc. The archives of the University of Padua, for example, list quite a few individuals who were teachers of both philosophy and medicine. For a good discussion of the relationship between philosophy and medicine in medieval Italy see Nancy Siraisi, *Taddeo Alderotti and his Pupils*, particularly chapter six. It was also a well-noted tradition among the Jews of Spain and Portugal to combine medicine and philosophy. Doctors in the Renaissance, in contrast to surgeons, were "gentlemen and scholars who preferred to read books and discuss words and ideas rather than to soil their hands with menial work." See George Sarton, *Six Wings*, p.197.

[64] See Aharon Mirsky's article on the Abrabanel family in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, volume 2, pp.101-102.

[65] See Cecil Roth, *The House of Nasi*, pp. 66-67.

a persecuted religious minority to engage in polemics against the more powerful religious group. This could only have occurred if there was a degree of *de facto* freedom of religion and speech, or at least a kind of corporate autonomy. Nor were all the members of the Abrabanel family (despite their prominence) particularly reticent to take controversial positions in religious or political affairs. The widow of Don Samuel, for example, was a supporter of the false messiah David Reubeni, who came to Italy to convert the Pope to Judaism and was lucky to escape with his life.[66]

The Book

The *Dialoghi d'Amore*, was written somewhere between 1500-1512 but not published till after the author's death in1535.[67] It appears to have been written in Italian but the unusual nature of the language has led some to conjecture that it was originally written in some other language, perhaps Hebrew, Latin or Spanish. It became one of the most widely read philosophical texts of the Renaissance and was mentioned approvingly by Miguel de Cervantes in his prologue to *Don Quixote*.[68] It was even presented as a gift to King Charles IX of France by

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[66] Ibid, pp. 67-68

[67] On p. 289 Philo asserts that the Hebrew date is 5,262, which corresponds to the Christian years 1501-1502. Other manuscripts, however, read 5,272, which corresponds to 1511-1512. See James W. Nelson Novoa, "L'impronta senese nella stesura dei *Dialoghi d'amore* di Leone Ebreo," p.7, n.18 and new English translation, p.401, n.101.

[68] "Si trataredes de amores con dos onzas que sepias de la lengua toscana topazreis con Leon Hebreo que os hincha las medidas." See Prólogo of Don Quixote (Spanish) and English translation by Putnam. This indicates that an educated Spaniard would be able to readily understand the Tuscan language of the *Dialoghi* and that its author was known in Spain as having a Jewish connection.

Ronsard.[69] It has been translated into many languages and has gone through many editions.[70] Yet it still has not received the critical attention that it deserves.

This is a unique and a peculiar work but also a product of its time. Judah Abrabanel in the relatively tolerant climate of Renaissance Italy engaged in an eclectic mix of Jewish and Gentile thought that might have been impossible in many other times and which few others even in his own time attempted to accomplish. He was in a good situation to perform that task, as his father was the last great Jewish thinker of the Iberian

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[69] This was pointed out by Shlomo Pines in "Medieval Doctrines in Renaissance Garb?: Some Jewish and Arabic Sources of Leone Ebreo's Doctrines." See "*Au Roy Charles luy donnant un Leon Hebrieu*," Ronsard, *Oeuvres complètes*, Volume I, p. 611. I reproduce it here in the original French and an English translation of T.A. Perry. See his *Erotic Spirituality: The Integrative Tradition from Leone Ebreo to John Donne*, p.44.

> L'un pousse les âmes guidées
> Aux belles contemplations,
> A l'intellect et aux idées,
> Purgeant l'esprit de passions.
> L'autre à Nature est serviable,
> Nous fait aimer et desirer,
> Fait engendrer nostre semblabe
> Et l'estre des hommes durer.
>
> One [kind of love] leads souls
> To contemplations of beauty,
> To the intellect and the Ideas,
> While purging the spirit of the passions.
> The other serves nature,
> Causes us to love and desire,
> To procreate our fellow man
> And to sustain our lives.

[70] Its influence was so great that one expert on the Renaissance stated: "Leone's influence on subsequent writers appears to have equaled that of Ficino." See John Charles Nelson, *Renaissance Theory of Love*, p. 102.

Peninsula. He could, therefore, survey the history of Jewish philosophy through his father's privileged vantage point. He was well aware of the Muslim and Arabic philosophical tradition going back to the ninth century that was the fountainhead of Jewish philosophy and could view the relatively recent rise of Kabbalah, which to an extent had replaced that older philosophical tradition. He also had access to the ancient glories of Italian Jewry with its own philosophical tradition, existing in a much more vibrant relationship to Greek thought and language than had the Iberian tradition; and he seems to have greatly appreciated the profundities of ancient pagan mythology. He was, of course, quite aware of Christianity and its attempted appropriation of the best of Jewish and pagan wisdom.[71] In addition he was quite intimately aware of the fact that since 1391 vast numbers of Iberian Jews (including members of his own family) had converted to that rival religion. Some went enthusiastically, others indifferently for purely utilitarian motives and yet others (like his own son) by duress. All of those historical memories must have weighed heavily on the author even though he never mentions them in the book. Yet, despite whatever idiosyncratic or particularistic concerns Judah Abrabanel might have had, this book is very much a product of its particular time and place and

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[71] Alexander Altmann described this confluence of influences as follows. See "*Ars Rhetorica* as Reflected in Some Jewish Figures of the Italian Renaissance" p.1.

> Jews living in Renaissance Italy had access to two different philosophical traditions: (1) the Arabic and Judeo-Arabic one, which was inherited from the Middle Ages, and (2) the Latin one, which was being enriched by the discoveries of fresh texts, Latin and Greek, and was being infused with a new spirit, that of humanism. The two traditions did not necessarily converge toward a unified pattern.

reflects universalistic themes that to a certain extent then prevailed. It may be, as Bernard McGinn stated, "arguably the most systematic and penetrating account of the favorite Renaissance theme, the nature and role of love."[72] Others, however, have viewed it as more of a popular work, merely reflecting on its surface those deeper Renaissance philosophical ideas.[73] Some have even questioned the depth of Renaissance thought in general, of which this is a representative case. Most importantly for our purposes, despite its popularity, numerous translations and large accompaniment of scholarly commentary, it remains an enigma.[74]

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[72] See Bernard McGinn, "Cabalists and Christians" in *Jewish Christians and Christian Jews*, p. 21.

[73] See Giuseppe Veltri, "Philo and Sophia: Leone Ebreo's Concept of Jewish Philosophy" in *Cultural Intermediaries: Jewish Intellectuals in Early Modern Italy*, pp. 55-66. Veltri sees the novelty of the *Dialoghi* residing in its claims for Jewish origins of general contemporary and ancient philosophical insights. This is a very interesting take on the book and a first reading of it may indeed lead to that conclusion. Its great popularity might also suggest a possible vulgarization or popularization of more profound philosophical ideas. Certainly, this view resolves a number of perplexities though it may contain its own problems. My reading, however, emphasizes the universal nature of the work and its actual downplaying of "Jewish" themes, even though it is not immune to the traditional apologetic tendency to subsume all wisdom under one's own religious word-view. If, however, Veltri were correct, then the great originality of the work would seem to me to lie in its very notion of Jewish philosophy. Yet the book also seems not to have been written for Jews. The subject of Jews writing for gentiles is raised by David Ruderman in his introduction and needs to be further investigated. Regarding popularization, I think this also needs further investigation as well as clarification.

[74] As David Ruderman expressed it so well: "Exhaustively studied by numerous scholars and passionately hailed as the most truly representative Jewish work of Renaissance thought, Leone and his treatise on love still remain somewhat of a mystery to contemporary scholarship especially the peculiar background of the author and the extraordinary literary and philosophical sophistication of his final printed work." See his introduction to *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, p.16. No matter how much this work may resemble other Jewish and non-

The Confluence of Judaism and Renaissance Humanist Culture

The history of ideas moves relentlessly from one epoch to another. Such movements of thought (making some ideas almost impossible to think at certain times) practically mimic geological structural changes and they lead Michel Foucault to ask: "Qu'est-il donc impossible de penser, et de quelle inpossibilité s'agit-il?"[75] Despite our inability to truly understand such historical movement of ideas (since our very understanding is conditioned by the ideas of our own epoch), it is a fact nevertheless.[76] It is not just the discrete ideas themselves that change since from time to time intellectual pioneers arrive with ideas before their time. It is almost as if the entire landscape in which those ideas are placed changes. Some have conceptualized this as a change in mentalities somewhat akin to Lévy-Bruhl's famous depiction of *la mentalité primitive*.[77] While the concept of impersonal "mentalities" is controversial and rubs against the grain of Anglo-American methodological individualism, we seem to need some such concept in order to make sense of the homogeneity of culture amidst the heterogeneity of concrete human beings. Like paintings and music, the approximate dates of literary works can be readily identified by experts, often

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Jewish Renaissance texts there is something peculiar about it that has never been satisfactorily explained. Perhaps this has led to premature conclusions regarding the meaning and intention of the work.

[75] See *Les Mots et les choses*, p.7.

[76] I am not making an assertion regarding the self being completely conditioned by external cultural forces. On the contrary, I believe that human beings can to a degree transcend their times. Nevertheless, without certain (unusual) conditions being met the effect of culture on human thought is utterly astounding and usually taken for granted.

[77] For a good discussion of the history of mentalities see Peter Burke, *Varieties of Cultural History*, pp.163-182.

within 50 years or less, not only by their styles but also by their ideas. But those objective facts of stylistic change may be much less the case with ancient Egyptian art or literature, which to a great extent defied that movement of ideas. And (to a far lesser extent) Jewish religious literature (even today) sometimes appears frozen in time even though it is not really an exception to the phenomenon I have described and cannot be considered completely frozen or fossilized. Such traditional Jewish literature can be temporally identified by experts (or even non-experts) though it often mimics older models and attempts to defy the aforementioned inexorable intellectual historical process. This seems to cut both ways. The *Zohar*, for example, mimics a much older *genre* of rabbinic thought but clearly betrays an influx of medieval thought. Some modern rabbinic writings, on the other hand, self-consciously adopt current ways of speaking but internally betray much older ways of *thinking*. Whether and to what extent these literary works are really the same as their older models is an open question but as with all mimicry there is both similarity and difference. Mimicry is a universal human trait and one that our species is quite good at; it is one of the prerequisites of cultural transmission. While conservative intellectuals attempt to consciously mimic older models, they are inevitably influenced by their environments and often in ways that may not be readily apparent to them.

That mimicry of older Jewish models seems, on the surface at least, not to be the case with Judah Abrabanel.[78] Like

[78] This is my tentative opinion and one that should be qualified by noting that other Jewish thinkers were quite innovative and unique, but perhaps not to the same extent. We will also be viewing learned opinions that are somewhat to the contrary, such as those of Shlomo Pines and Alfred Ivry. At any rate, and as prima facia proof of my contention, like Philo and unlike Maimonides (whose ambiguous nature may have saved him from that fate) contemporary Jewish religious thought has had little use for Judah

Philo of Alexandria and Maimonides, Judah Abrabanel was truly a man of his times. All three felt the need to reconcile Jewish thought with the prevailing Gentile wisdom in much more than a superficial manner. In the case of Philo, it was Platonism. For Maimonides, it was Arabic Neoplatonic Aristotelianism. And for Judah Abrabanel it was Renaissance Humanism, which was permeated by Platonism and related world-views. Yet despite their assimilation of non-Jewish ways of thinking, those thinkers maintained a radical separation between the socio-cultural world of the Jew and that of the Gentile. Judah Abrabanel, on the other hand, hardly does that at all even while maintaining Jewish superiority in the realm of ideas. It could be said that, unlike those others, he created a philosophy or world-view that truly transcended religious boundaries.[79] This is somewhat unprecedented, at least on such a scale, and deserves an explanation. Cedric Cohen-Skalli has in a private conversation given what I consider the best explanation that I have yet found. He said that the nature of the work stems from the nature of the Abrabanel family itself. They were always striving to be the premier family in the Jewish world. If the father was the greatest *Jewish* thinker of his time, then the son could only become the greatest *universal* philosopher of his time. We will have more to say about

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Abrabanel. He stands radically outside of mainstream Jewish religious discourse (whether of the left or the right). This, however, has not prevented some scholars from insisting that his work served a specifically Jewish purpose.

[79] It might be useful to quote a great contemporary scholar of the Jews of the Italian Renaissance, Robert Bonfil, to the effect that: "the difference/opposition between the world of the majority and that of the minority is seen as a pure and simple fact." (*Jewish Life in the Renaissance*, p. xi). This seems to be the case for almost all traditional Jewish thinkers even if an argument could be made for Philo of Alexandria having a predominantly ideological view of Judaism that eliminates those discordant ethnic or cultural elements to a great extent.

Cohen-Skalli's view of Isaac Abrabanel's image construction in the section devoted to him. And what would it mean to be a universal philosopher? It seems to me that it means being relevant to almost all religious persuasions. And if that is indeed the case, it should not surprise us that the *Dialoghi* became "a European bestseller among non-Jews."[80] But perhaps

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[80] Aaron Hughes noted this with apparent surprise in his excellent article on Judah Abrabanel in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, which calls the book a "work of Jewish philosophy." Hughs disagrees with Collete Sirat, who considered it a work of general philosophy "written in a secular language and...a work of profane philosophy." See *A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages,* p. 408. This dispute requires some definitional or at least foundational work if we would ever hope to resolve it. Firstly, we must define or delineate "Jewish philosophy." Obviously, it cannot simply be any philosophical work written by a Jew. Do the motives of the author matter? It could be philosophy addressed to Jews specifically or perhaps addressed to a wider audience but attempting to demonstrate the truth of Judaism. According to the latter criterion, the *Dialoghi* might indeed qualify. It does seem at times to defend Judaism. However, the fact that it became so popular among non-Jews indicates that its syncretism might have outweighed its polemics, at least ostensibly. I am sure that many people (including myself) would like to read the book as a work of Jewish philosophy but it seems to me that in order to understand it in that way one is forced to read a great deal into it. That type of reading could perhaps be justified by the fact that traditionally Jews did not write general philosophical works; and since Judah Abrabanel was (arguably) a traditional Jew, there must therefore be something hidden within it that would put it in line with those other writings. I suspect, however, that this kind of argument is at best probabilistic and may even be circular reasoning. According to one interpretation, therefore, it is a very clever Jewish polemical work and according to the other it is a profound work of philosophy that incorporates Judaic themes that could easily be accepted by educated Christians as well as Jews. Thus what appears to be a fundamental difference of opinion regarding the "Jewishness" of the book may boil down to a subjective plausibility assessment of its author's intentions and not everyone would consider that relevant. I will attempt to address the issue of Jewishness from a somewhat different perspective in a later chapter. If we are to judge the book by its effects, however, it could hardly be viewed as of much significance to subsequent Jewish tradition. It has even been argued by T.A. Perry that it began a non-Jewish literary tradition that lasted at least into the 17th century.

there was yet another important factor: Renaissance humanism. It was apparently a much greater influence on the son than on the father, though the influence of humanism on the latter has recently been asserted and will be discussed later on.[81] In fact, we could also say that the son was more of a philosopher than his father, who had mastered philosophy but still remained ambivalent about it. What type of philosopher Judah Abrabanel was, however, is still to be determined. So it might be useful to dwell ever so slightly on this question: What does it mean specifically for a Jew of the 16th century to be a universal philosopher? It is not at all an easy question to answer since anything remotely approaching that was a rare phenomenon indeed. Obadiah Sforno, a noted biblical commentator, did

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See his *Erotic Spirituality: The Integrative Tradition from Leone Ebreo to John Donne.*

[81] The power of humanism over Jews in Renaissance Italy has been minimized in recent scholarship and in particular (as relates to our subject) by Arthur Lesley. Without minimizing the importance of his scholarship, which will be duly noted as of particular value later on, I readily admit that I disagree with him on at least one methodological point and on one factual assumption. Regarding methodology, Lesley ("Jewish Adaptation of Humanist concepts," p.46) seems to assume that assimilation of humanism was not "automatic" but that Jewish scholars carefully selected what was of interest to them. I assume on the other hand that there is an automatic and almost inexorable cultural transmission and osmosis that occurs all the time and is only retarded by such selective intellectual measures. Automatic cultural transmission can occur as a result of at least two methods: shared cultural environment and contagion from one individual to another. Regarding factual assumptions, Lesley ("The Place of the *Dialoghi*," *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture*, 170-171) assumes that the *Dialoghi* was originally written in Hebrew and therefore addressed to a Jewish audience. This question will be addressed, albeit inadequately, in this work but I think it is fair to say that this is not something that can be safely assumed. Even one of the sources of his assumption that the book was written in Hebrew and therefore addressed to Jews, Saul Cohen Ashkenazi, characterized Judah Abrabanel as a "universal sage." See "The Place of the *Dialoghi*" in *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, edited by David Ruderman, p.184.

attempt to reach a general audience by publishing his work in Latin under the name *Lumen Gentium* (*Or Ammim* in Hebrew). But this was considerably later (1548) and the original Hebrew work was published in 1539. Although Sforno was well acquainted with Gentile philosophy, no one would have suspected that he had converted to Christianity, as his work was far too particularistic even if it was more universal than most other Jewish literature. For a thinker like Spinoza later on, being a universal philosopher meant abandonment of Judaism without converting to Christianity. Yet we have no reason to believe that Judah Abrabanel abandoned his ancestral faith and therefore, given the extraordinary universalism of his philosophy, the possibility of a conflict between it and his religion (as traditionally conceived) looms large indeed.[82] Perhaps the key to the resolution of this possible conflict lies in both the teachings of his father and the cultural milieu in which the son found himself. But this is only a conjecture. We have evidence that the father was quite proud of his son's philosophical achievements but as far as I know we have no evidence of how the son felt about his father's thought. At any

[82] There is no doubt that Judah Abrabanel was an ethnic Iberian Jew. The real question regarding his identity is a religious one, but one that places a great deal of emphasis on that ethnicity. Oftentimes questions regarding correct classification are ultimately evaluative questions, such as the question whether so and so is a scholar. Perhaps it is for that reason that some have chosen to insist that he was essentially a "Jewish philosopher" (in the religious sense) despite all the indications to the contrary. The contrary evidence is the anomalous nature of his writings when compared with other Jewish writings. His evocation of the authority of Moses might seem to some to preclude a relative lack of interest in Rabbinic Judaism altogether. In other words, either he had basically abandoned Rabbinic Judaism or he was choosing to reform it. This question of reform tendencies (in the broad sense) or lack thereof will be addressed later on but there is the distinct possibility here of an anachronistic interpretation, based upon the expanded religious options available to modern Jews.

rate, the father's influence or the milieu by themselves would not have been sufficient to produce this work and perhaps even the combination of the two was not sufficient. Of course, Ficino's commentary on Plato's *Symposium* had been around since 1469 and must have been an influence on our author. But if you add to those factors the creative genius of Judah Abrabanel, something utterly new emerges. While Solomon ibn Gabirol wrote a philosophical work (the *Fons Vitae*) without any mention of his ancestral religion, Judah Abrabanel seems to have written one that does indeed mention it, yet in a real sense transcends it. It sheds almost all particularistic elements of Judaism and goes to the very essence of what human life is all about, no matter what religion a person follows or espouses. One piece of evidence for this is his use of the *Book of Psalms*. While he quotes frequently from "David" most all of those quotes make a philosophical point and not one regarding personal piety or affiliation with the Jewish people. If my claim of an almost unprecedented universalism were correct, this book would be quite a milestone in Western thought. It may have more in common with later writings in the Spanish & Portuguese tradition than it has with previous works.[83]

We can also ask the question whether this book could have been written in any other country at that time and whether the cultural and political climate was a necessary (though surely

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[83] See "Bon Judesmo" by Josef Kaplan, particularly pp.659-666, for a list of universal learning and writing in the Spanish & Portuguese community of Amsterdam in 17th and 18th Centuries. While this may be explainable in terms of "Marino" culture, it is possible that it precedes 1492 or even 1391 in the Iberian Peninsula among Jews who never converted to Christianity. Both Judah Abrabanel and Spanish & Portuguese culture in Amsterdam could be examples of a much more historically extensive strand of Sephardic culture that has been largely lost.

not sufficient) cause of it being what it is.[84] The following quote from Cecil Roth will give us a flavor (perhaps magnified and distorted) of that era.

> There was no other time, and no other place, in which amorous offenses make their appearance in Jewish life to the extent that they do in fifteenth-century Florence... There was no other time, and no other place, in which the establishment of a disorderly house in the Jewish quarter could even have been discussed. There was no other time, and no other place, in which rabbis could have invoked "chaste Diana" in their sermons. There was no other time, and no other place, when erotic poetry in Hebrew could have presented a problem to moralists. There was no other place where a talmudist of unflinching orthodoxy would have discussed, in a commentary to the Book of Proverbs, whether or no Petrarch's Laura was a real person; where a rabbi's literary achievements could have included a translation from Ariosto's *Orlando Furioso*; or where a delicate ode to a Gentile lady of rank would have been penned on the flyleaves of a Hebrew prayer book.[85]

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[84] The Italian Renaissance and its humanistic climate have often been attributed (justly) to the revival of classical learning but, as is often the case, the political climate has not generally been given sufficient attention. See Hans Baron, *The Crisis of the Early Italian Renaissance*, pp. 3-11 for a good discussion.

[85] *The History of the Jews of Italy*, p.211

We must not, however, emphasize the erotic (in the physical sense) at the expense of the mystical and/or esoteric. Indeed, the *Dialoghi* specifically deprecates physical, erotic desire as a root cause of attraction and only allows it validity as an effect of spiritual love.[86] We will discuss the relationship between physical eroticism and spiritual eroticism later on in the context of the cult of St. Anne and other Renaissance ideals. What might suffice for now is to suggest that in the Renaissance the relationship between the spiritual and the natural/physical world becomes a little closer and this is rather evident in the art of the period.[87] What also seems quite evident in the book is a

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[86] See pp.55-57 where Philo insists his love for Sophia based upon her "virtue, intelligence and beauty" and not on "desire" or "idleness and human wantonness." He also allows for desire for physical union as a kind of culmination of spiritual love. Hence, Judah Abrabanel's attitude towards physical eroticism seems to be a compromise between total rejection and celebration. And his attitude towards spiritual romantic love seems to be quite positive.

[87] Judah Abrabanel actually defines beauty as "grace" (grazia) on p.264 (p. 226 in the Italian text). What exactly is meant by "grace," however, is not made entirely clear except that it "delights the mind which recognizes it and moves it to love." It seems quite likely that the word is used in its primary meaning of charm or attractiveness rather than in its religious meaning. That is not to say, however, that there is no religious connotation. Perhaps something that is beautiful, in contrast to something that is merely good, has a certain indefinable quality that can only come from God in a manner that other qualities do not. In the same way, for Ficino, faith and works prepare one for divine grace. This liberation from the purely natural may also be seen in Botticelli's bodies, as in his painting of the three graces, that suggests resurrected bodies free of natural impediments. That at least was the opinion of E.H. Gombrich; see his "Bottocelli's Symbolic Mythologies." Yet before we conclude that Judah Abrabanel completely accepted that view we should note that earlier on p.262 he teaches that the good has more of reality and the beautiful more of appearance. This does not invalidate our previous conjecture but places beauty and the love that it inspires somewhat in the realm of appearance. But as we have emphasized in other contexts Abrabanel sometimes speaks very highly of those appearances that are ordained by God. After all, it is appearance and imagination that engender love. Ficino's view as expressed in *De Amore*, V:1 is somewhat different

belief in secret mystical teachings. The esoteric Hermetic tradition exercised considerable influence in the Renaissance.[88]

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because there he practically equates goodness and beauty except that goodness is the inner reality and beauty the outward appearance. In his examples he shows that the inner perfection causes the external appearance of beauty. Pico (at least in some of his writings) was somewhat less positively inclined towards earthly beauty and love. While Abrabanel seems to be skirting the line between Ficino's concept of beauty and that of Pico, in my view he more resembles Ficino as on p.430 where Philo states: "although every beautiful thing is good not every good thing is beautiful."

[88] Perhaps the best explicit evidence for a strong Hermetic connection is the following rationale of Mariano Lenzi (of whom we know almost nothing) for bringing the *Dialoghi* to light. I quote from his short encomium to Aurelia Petrucci to whom he sent the book. It was translated by Damian Bacich and Rossella Pescatori and appears on pp.23-24 of their new English translation. Mercury was commonly identified with Hermes.

> Among the ancient Egyptians it was common to dedicate works to the god Mercury, since they believed that all arts, sciences, and many of the other beautiful things of this earth were discovered by this god, and that it was therefore only habitual for them to thank the inventor of all that man had learned and gained knowledge of. For this reason Pythagoras and Plato and many other great philosophers went to Egypt to study philosophy... I too, gracious Lady, believe that those who have had the pleasure of knowing you can likewise benefit, so that in turning to you their beautiful thoughts might become nourished by a divine spirit, and they might spend their energies in honour of your name... And those who, mired down by earthly concerns, are not able to rise to these celestial thoughts, need only turn their gaze to you, and instructed by your radiance, they will be slowly purged, and will also be made worthy of the lofty contemplation of your divinity.
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> Recognizing this communal and personal need, I have acted like those who, not having their own means, borrow from others to pay their debts. In my desire to repay this great debt, I owe you, but recognizing the limits of my own talents and not having produced anything worthy myself, I send you the fruits of another's labour: these books about love by master Leone, titled PHILO and SOPHIA. They are about a chaste Love, for a chaste woman who inspires Love; heavenly considerations for a

Frances Yates went so far as to argue that such a magical and mystical tradition was a coherent Renaissance theme.[89] Some of the features of that tradition were magic, ecstasy and spiritual rebirth. We will not look into that tradition in any great depth but it suffices to say that it has been frequently associated with other related texts and traditions, including Gnostic and kabbalistic ones. Since this book deals primarily with the question of kabbalistic influence and with other relatively direct influences on Judah Abrabanel, Hermetism will remain a relatively unexamined elephant in the room. It is obviously of great significance but with the following disclaimer. I have already warned the reader that what might look like an ancient secret tradition may actually be a more up-to-date philosophy in disguise. We can say, however, that the *Dialoghi* shares some characteristics of Hermetism but not others. It shows great interest in ecstasy and spiritual rebirth but few if any traces of magic.[90]

Although there is no real historical evidence that Judah Abrabanel converted to Christianity, as some had claimed, it

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woman adorned with heavenly virtues; the highest of intentions for a woman full of the highest ideals.

[89] See Frances Yates, *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*. For a quite readable and interesting discussion of the rebirth experience in Hermetism, see Harold R. Willoughby, *Pagan Regeneration: A Study of Mystery Initiations in the Graeco Roman World*, chapter VIII, pp. 196-224. For perhaps the most up to date summary of scholarly findings see Paul S. MacDonald, *History of the Concept of Mind*, Volume 2, pp.93-114.

[90] I do not intend to provide a complete discussion of magic in the Renaissance and its relationship to religion, philosophy and Kabbalah. The apparent absence of such thinking in the book under discussion is remarkable, however and may trace from the strong influence of Maimonides. For a good discussion of magic in the thinking of Ficino, Pico and the conclusions of Frances Yates, see S.A. Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, pp.115-132.

would be hard to find a Jewish philosopher until modern times who was quite so appreciative of the Christian civilization in which he found himself.[91] I make this assertion despite the fact that with the exception of John the Evangelist not one Christian philosopher or theologian is actually cited in the book. The evidence for his deep appreciation of Christian civilization is not simply the isolated praise of St. John, which itself is rather strange and begs for an explanation.[92] That praise is to be found on page 330, where Philo says: "I have learnt from the study of Holy Writ that Enoch and Elias and also St. John the Evangelist are immortal in body and soul."[93] The real proof, however, of

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[91] The claims that he had converted never actually asserted that such was the case prior to his writing the *Dialoghi*. Therefore, they would appear to be somewhat irrelevant to its contents.

[92] Positive allusions to *New Testament* figures were not unknown in Jewish medieval writings, though they are surely outweighed by the negative ones. One example of the former is the tradition that Saint Peter had written the important Hebrew prayer *Nishmat*. See Encyclopedia Judaica article, volume 12, pp. 1176-1178. But in general any Christian influence upon Jewish thought was hidden from view. For example, Peter Schafer has argued that certain kabbalistic views could well have been influenced by Christian thought, most notably the feminine images of God. See his *Mirror of His Beauty*. Nowhere in kabbalistic literature, however (as far as I know), are there positive allusions to New Testament figures.

[93] The first two biblical figures seem to have been carried away to heaven without a normal bodily death. Elijah, in Jewish legend, will come prior to the Messiah and Jesus alluded to his belief that he had indeed already come in the form of John the Baptist. This may be a rare Jewish-Christian reference to metempsychosis or perhaps, as similar statements in the Talmud have sometimes been interpreted, it only referred to some vague spirit of the deceased rather than literal reincarnation. Enoch is even more controversial since Jewish legends had him becoming an angel (Metatron) and a whole body of what one might call "sectarian" literature developed around him, much of which has been found at Qumran. See *Enoch and Qumran Origins*, edited by Gabrielle Boccaccini. St. John is perhaps the most controversial for a Jewish thinker. There does not seem to be a description of the death of John the Evangelist in the *New* Testament but there is a medieval tradition that he died a natural death (unusual for an apostle) at a very advanced age and there does appear to be another medieval legend regarding his unusual

death and/or the notion that he never really died at all. This may stem from the following saying of Jesus in *John*, 21: 20-23 (*The New English Bible*, N.T. p.142).

> Peter looked round, and saw the disciple whom Jesus loved following — the one who at supper had leaned back close to him to ask the question, "Lord, who is it that will betray you?" When he caught sight of him Peter asked, "Lord, what will happen to him?" Jesus said, "If it should be my will that he wait until I come, what is it to you? Follow me."
> That saying of Jesus became current in the brotherhood, and was taken to mean that that disciple would not die. But in fact Jesus did not say that he would not die; he only said, "If it should be my will that he wait until I come, what is it to you."

Some say the mention of John in the *Dialoghi* was a later addition, designed to make the work more palatable to Christians and perhaps even to underscore the claim that Judah Abrabanel had converted. Yet it appears in the earliest one that we possess and prior to the 1541 claim regarding his conversion in the second edition. Of all the Gospels it might seem especially strange for a Jewish author to extol the author of *John*, as it is generally associated with both Trinitarian and anti-Jewish views. Miguel Servetus, however, would later claim that the *Gospel of John* does not mention the Trinity and should be interpreted in Hebraic rather than Greek terms. For a good discussion see Jerome Friemans, "The Myth of Jewish Antiquity." I have not found earlier discussions of *John* that might serve an anti-Trinitarian cause but the translation of Erasmus (1516) did not include the *Comma Johanneum* in the *First Epistle of John* (1John v.7). That phrase was widely viewed as an explicit *New Testament* reference to the Trinity. Erasmus was criticized for that omission even though he defended it by his inability to find the phrase in any Greek manuscript. Although the completion of the *Dialoghi* most likely pre-dated the completion of Erasmus' translation, Cardinal Cisneros had already commissioned the *Polyglot Bible* in 1502. While the completed version did contain the disputed phrase, there may well have been controversial discussions prior to publication, especially since it does not appear in some manuscripts of Jerome's Vulgate (15th century). Word may have gotten out prior to 1512 that the original Greek manuscripts did not contain any explicit mention of the Trinity. But as we will see, Leone Ebreo seems to actually use Trinitarian thinking to reinforce the oneness of God. Although we don't know all of the details, we can also conjecture that *John* might be pivotal in proving the oneness of God since many would have thought that it should prove the Trinity. In addition,

deep appreciation of his surrounding culture goes beyond doctrinal statements and rests upon the obvious fact of his quite complete cultural assimilation.[94] No literate person of the period, for example, would not note a similarity between Judah Abrabanel's cosmic love and Dante's divine love that moved the sun and the other stars.[95] Dante, like most medievals after

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John's *Logos* doctrine might have appealed to Abrabanel. The original meaning of *Logos* in ancient Greek was not the same as *verbum* in Latin and may have also included the concept of *ratio*. This coheres with ancient Jewish wisdom literature. See our discussions of Proverbs, *Ben Sirach*, etc. in Chapter IX. Finally, there are many parallels between *John* and the Hermetic literature, which Judah Abrabanel was quite likely influenced by. See C.H. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, pp. 44-53.

[94] Many previous historians of the Jews in the Renaissance, such as Cecil Roth, focused much of their attention on this phenomenon of cultural assimilation. See his *The Jews in the Renaissance*. Recently, that view has been severely challenged by Roberto Bonfil and others. See his *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy*. His alternative is a shared culture between Christians and Jews, despite the persistence of a prejudicial psychological outlook that viewed the alternative religious community as the "Other." There is certainly much truth in Bonfil's assertions and it is a much-needed correction to a somewhat naïve and anachronistic view of the Renaissance as a period of fun-loving fraternization between Christians and Jews and harmonious *convivencia*. Nevertheless, that shared culture (which most everyone seems to agree upon) was primarily the product of Christian civilization just as is our shared culture today. For that very reason, some religious Jews explicitly reject many aspects of Western civilization today, as they surely did then. But learned Italian Renaissance Jews generally did not ignore or reject Christian civilization to the extent that Jews traditionally have even if some did reject it and others were ambivalent about it. From a methodological standpoint in the social sciences it is very difficult to distinguish shared environment from contagion as causal factors in the spreading of ideas and behaviors. One of the distinguishing factors in this case is the extent to which individuals of different religions might have interacted with one another, either physically or intellectually. What is somewhat unique about Judah Abrabanel is not that he accepts Christian humanist civilization but that he even seems to celebrate it and makes it such a prominent part of his philosophy.

[95] Such influence was not at all unique. It has been claimed that Dante himself was friends with the greatest Italian Jewish poet of his time:

Immanuel of Rome. See Israel Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*, p.419. See Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy*: *Inferno*, Canto I: 35-38.

> The hour was morning's prime, and on his way
> Aloft the sun ascended with those stars
> That with him rose when Love Divine first moved
> Those its fair works
> Temp'era dal principio dell mattino,
> e 'l sol montava 'n su con quelle stele
> ch'eran con lui quando l'amor divino
> mosse di prima quelle cose belle

The idea may actually originate from Boethius, *Consolation of Philosophy*, II, poem 8 and IV: poem 6, pp. 41 and 96-97.

> That the universe carries out its changing process in concord and with stable faith, that the conflicting seeds of things are held by everlasting law, that Phoebus in his golden chariot brings in the shining day, that the night, led by Hesperus, is ruled by Phoebe... all this harmonious order of things is achieved by love which rules the earth and the seas, and commands the heavens
> But if love should slack the reins, all that is now joined in mutual love would wage criminal war, and strive to tear apart the world, which is now sustained in friendly concord by beautiful motion.
> If you wish to discern the laws of the high and mighty God, the high thunderer, with an unclouded mind, look up to the roof of highest heavens. There the stars, united by just agreement, keep the ancient peace...
> Thus mutual love governs their eternal movements and the war of discord is excluded from the bounds of heaven.

On the other hand, somewhat similar ideas regarding divine love and the heavenly lights are found in the Jewish liturgy, are generally considered quite ancient and may therefore be quite universal. This one is found in the penultimate paragraph prior to the *Shema* in the Sephardic morning prayers. It follows praises of God for creating the luminous heavenly bodies, associates them with the angels and describes their worship or praise of God. Similar wording is also found in the Ashkenazic liturgy but there is one curious difference. The Sephardic liturgy includes the assertion that earthly, human praises of God actually exceed those of the heavenly beings. It is also significant that the praises of the heavenly choir appear to be justified by God's eternal love.

the 13th century, had been entranced by Aristotle. It was not long however before Petrarch, and later on Judah Abrabanel's most illustrious contemporaries, began to view Plato's more artistic and literary work as expressing an even greater truth regarding the human condition, despite the typical attempt to reconcile the two Greek philosophers.[96] But the unique quality of the *Dialoghi* also goes beyond mere cultural assimilation, since many other Jews of his time were equally assimilated without attempting such a bold synthesis. Was this a conscious attempt to blend Judaism with general Renaissance culture?

> Lord of wonders, He renews with goodness continuously, every day, His work of creation. As it is said, 'to the Maker of great lights, because His love (kindness) is forever.' And He establishes lights that gladden His world that He created. Blessed are You creator of the lights. (The translation is my own, see de Sola Pool prayer book, p. 54 for both the original Hebrew and a more poetic translation.)

What we seem to be witnessing here is a Renaissance reversion to ancient models of piety, which while obviously alive in the Middle Ages are now reinvigorated. This follows a period in which extreme humility had perhaps superceded the human quest for spiritual mysteries. I quote Erwin Goodenough, *Jewish symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, Volume 12, p.187.

> The astronomical symbols, whether in terms of Helios, of the menorah and other temple and synagogue instruments, or of the Aaronic allegories of Philo, tell me that Jews who used them had their piety oriented in a scientific (or pseudo-scientific) sense of God as the cosmic ruler to a degree that goes much beyond the universalism commonly made a part of Jewish piety. For here was not the sense of humility and prostration of Job, but the recognition of God through cosmic order such as we properly associate with Greek thinking. A Jew could believe, as Philo did, that this was the true meaning of Torah and Jewish cult.

[96] See Raymond Martin & John Parresi, *The Rise and Fall of Soul and Self*, pp. 110-114 for a good discussion.

Judging from his extant poetry, he may have actually felt vastly superior to the Christian thinkers of his day. Perhaps he may have wanted to incorporate their ideas into an even higher Jewish philosophy or perhaps he may have failed to see how deeply influenced he was by them or how much they in turn were influenced by prior Jewish thinkers.[97] Nowadays (in

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[97] As an illustration of this recycled influence, which might also explain Abrabanel's praise for John, as well as a number of other issues, I would like to quote Harry Austryn Wolfson regarding the *Gospel of John*.

> This pre-existent idea of Christ, which in the epistles of Paul is called Wisdom or perhaps also Spirit is described in this biography of Jesus by the term Logos, which is conventionally rendered into English by the term Word... Then like the Logos of Philo, which became immanent in the created world, the Logos of John, which is the pre-existent Christ, became immanent, or, as it is commonly said, incarnate, in the born Christ...
>
> In this Prologue of the Fourth Gospel, there are similarities between the Logos of Philo and the Logos of John. But two main characteristics of the Philonic Logos are missing in the Johannine Logos, or, with regard to one of them, it is not clearly stated. There is no hint at all that the Logos of John, which is the idea of Christ, contains in itself the intelligible world of ideas and there is no clear statement that before its incarnation it had two stages of existence, one from eternity as the thought of God, and then, with the creation of the world, as a real being distinct from God.
>
> Those two missing characteristics were supplied in the second century by those Church Fathers known as Apologists, who, having been born pagans, were before their conversion to Christianity students of philosophy. As they themselves tell us, what has led them to their conversion was the reading of Scripture, the Hebrew Scripture, naturally in the Greek translation. From internal evidence of their writings, we may gather that they used the works of Philo as a sort of commentary upon Scripture. From these works of Philo they became acquainted with Philo's interpretation of Platonic ideas, at the center of which was the term Logos...and thus...it acquired the two main characteristics of the Philonic Logos.

academia at least) we are quite aware of intellectual influences, both conscious and otherwise and deliberately seek them out. But we cannot project our modern style of scholarship onto earlier thinkers who may not have seen intellectual history as we do.[98] They had their own traditions about historical

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I am not claiming that Judah Abrabanel viewed the Logos or Christianity in exactly the same way as Wolfson did or that he was even well acquainted with Philo of Alexandria. These are all open questions. It is quite possible, however, that he might have had similar views. See *Religious Philosophy: A Group of Essays*, pp. *38*-39.

[98] It is still common among religious partisans to contrast the differences between rival religious persuasions in an exaggerated way. I once read in a right wing Jewish publication that Spinoza had converted to Christianity, which of course is not the case. In fact, Spinoza's beliefs were more contrary to Judaism than is Christianity. The foundational bias that leads to such distortions of reality is a belief that the rival religions must be in fundamentally ideological opposition rather than being simply variant traditions. As another example, recently a Russian Christian philosopher told me that Christianity is the very antithesis of Judaism. Such biases often find their way into the most erudite scholarship. For example, Robert Bonfil raises the extremely interesting question regarding how to interpret Jewish Renaissance "adherence to the contents of the general culture." He states that the assumption of a "negative valency" to "Jewish Otherness" leads to the conclusion that such "adherence" is a sign of "the abandonment of Jewishness." See *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy*, pp.167-168. He is quite correct. But a more balanced presentation would also remind the reader that assigning an extremely *positive* valency to Jewish Otherness would render the same resulting conclusion. Hence, among certain Jewish groups today speaking English correctly and in a manner not dissimilar to educated Gentiles means that one has abandoned ones Jewishness. Of course there is a legitimate factual question regarding to what extent the Jewish minority in any particular period did indeed adhere to general cultural norms. And there is also an axiological question regarding whether such adherence is a good or bad thing. And there is a whole continuum of views regarding that latter question. Obviously, one who values Jewish continuity will desire some distance between Jews and Gentiles and one who opposes such continuity would want the majority to completely prevail and obliterate the minority (in the diaspora). But in between that latter extreme and the other one that sees any resemblance between Jews and Gentiles as bad, there is a whole range of opinion regarding the valency of various aspects of "Jewish Otherness." Perhaps this prejudice of extreme Jewish Otherness results from the biblical

causation in the realm of ideas. At any rate, Judah Abrabanel's final product is a blend of many belief systems and that seems to be very much in the Italian humanist tradition. If not for the fairly numerous references to Jewish beliefs often described as the teachings of Moses and if we did not know whom the author actually was, we might simply assume that he was a Renaissance Christian, but surely one of a decidedly unorthodox, philosophical, mystical and allegorical bent.[99] Perhaps such a Christian would also feel the need to insert some

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and Talmudic mentalities and was only intensified by medieval Christendom, in which only Jews were allowed to exist as a *de jure* minority. It seems to have been somewhat less intense in areas where three or more religious communities coexisted. At any rate, such a mentality of Otherness is certainly not required in order for religious minorities to survive and flourish, the best counter-example being India, where a multitude of religious traditions coexist within a general feeling of togetherness. While we will not opine regarding the historical cause of such *conviviencia*, some might attribute it to the Hindu mentality, others to the Moghul conquest and yet others to British rule.

[99] John Charles Nelson stated it as follows. "Except for a few passages which extol the Jewish faith and Mosaic teaching it is hard to believe that we are not reading the work of an Italian Neo-Platonist such as Pico or Ficino." See *Renaissance Theory of Love*, p. 85. For a good description of this kind of Renaissance religiosity, including its repercussions in the New World, see Linda Báez Rubí, "De Harmonia Mund." The following is an excerpt from pp. 56-57.

> Para Bouvelles, el alma internamente se eleva hacia Dios a través de las peticiones del *pater*: cada una se liga con un nivel de la jerarquía, es decir cada petición es suministrada por uno de sus integrantes específicamente. La oración, así ejercitata, concilia el alma con dios. Más allá, el deseo de la oración nace puramente del impulse amoroso neoplatónico, que como producto final, genera la concordia que ratifica el deseo y establecimiento del orden. Se constuye y se confirma, así, ls jerarquía armónica del universo. Antes esta exposición, podemos suponer que no solamente estamos frente a una explicación doctrinal of la oración, según el método medieval, sino ante la integración del systema luliano-dionisiano.

obligatory praises of Christianity, Jesus and the apostles and even an affirmation of the Trinity[100] but the overall teaching might not be very different.[101] From another perspective, the biblical and religious references in the work while fairly numerous are actually few and far between, given the size of the book and they are somewhat different from what one might expect. We are accustomed to Jewish religious works using biblical or Talmudic proof texts for almost all substantial assertions.[102] And even Judah Abrabanel's frequent praise of

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[100] Judah Abrabanel also uses "trinitarian" language and as we will see such terminology has also been detected in the *Zohar* (the first three Sefirot), as well as the *Chaldean Oracles* and the Neoplatonists and the Three Graces were often interpreted in the Renaissance as philosophical concepts rather than specifically Christian ones. See R.T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, pp.106 and 171. Most likely the origin of such discourse lies in quite ancient Jewish and non-Jewish thought, particularly the mystery religions. See Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, volume 12, pp.173-175. The real question is to what extent Philo of Alexandria believed in the concepts behind the terminology of the mysteries or whether he simply used the language. For a reaction to Goodenough's thesis see Wolfson, *Philo*, Volume I, pp. 44-51. Wolfson tended to view Philo more along the lines of the medieval philosophers. This dispute has reverberations for our interpretation of Judah Abrabanel. Though, unlike Philo, he came after the medieval philosophers and the Kabbalah, we continue to debate regarding whether he was more of a philosopher or a mystic. But unlike the case of Philo of Alexandria, by the time Abrabanel was writing the lines had been drawn to a great extent between the various schools in the Middle Ages and then blurred again somewhat in the Renaissance. So Abrabanel had the clear choice before him of attempting to maintain certain distinctions or erasing them. The flow was in favor of syncretism. But it seems to me that the choice he made was to blur the boundary lines between philosophy, mythology and mysticism even more than would have been expected.

[101] For example, Francesco Cattani besides attempting to harmonize Plato and Aristotle also asserted: "Is it not true that the splendor of our theology, the great Dionysius, admired and followed Plato so much that he came to explain Christian mysteries in Platonic terms?" See Eugenio Garin, *History of Italian Philosophy*, Volume I, p.380.

[102] This medieval tendency is not restricted to Jewish religious writings. See J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, p.228.

Moses never expresses itself in the typically Jewish preoccupation with religious *mitzvoth* (commandments). He seems much more interested in the imputed *views* of Moses than in the *laws* of Moses.[103] Therefore, if "that tension between the active and contemplative ideals" was as T.A. Perry has suggested "Leone Ebreo's central theme"[104] it had little to do with Jewish rituals, symbols or even ethical practices. And, perhaps even more shockingly, he shows relatively little interest (in this book at least) not only in the actual practice of Judaism but also in the earthly fate of the Jewish people.[105] There are

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> In the Middle Ages everyone liked to base a serious argument on a text, so as to give it a foundation. In 1406, at the national council of Paris, where the question of the schism was debated, the twelve propositions for and against renouncing obedience to the pope of Avignon, all started from a Biblical quotation. Profane orators, too, no less than preachers, choose their text.

[103] This relative lack of concern for legal/practical solutions to human problems is perhaps even more significant than it might appear at first blush. In the Middle Ages law was an ally of freedom, as a much welcomed antidote to arbitrary patrimonial authority. For a good discussion see R.W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages*, pp.107-110. Hence, the exaltation of obedience to law in Judaism makes a great deal of sense from a historical perspective, once society advanced beyond the stage of traditional authority in the Weberian sense.

[104] See T.A, Perry, *Erotic Spirituality: The Integrative Tradition from Leone Ebreo to John Donne*, p.99. I am not sure that I agree with that assessment but it certainly deserves some careful consideration. I tend to view the tension in the book to be between two kinds of contemplative ideals: one that includes the self and the other that excludes it. But perhaps Perry's view and mine amount to the same thing in the end.

[105] As a way of contrasting the *Dialoghi* with a more typical Jewish religious writing, I provide an excerpt from Obadiah Sforno (an Italian contemporary). Sforno was known as both philosophical and universalistic. Like Abrabanel, he sought to find deeper meaning in biblical texts but also eschewed those legends that seemed mythical or far-fetched. This is from his introduction to his biblical commentary in *Sforno Commentary on the Torah*, p. 3.

very few books by Jews from the Middle Ages or Renaissance of which this could be said, as most contain either copious discussions of Jewish legends, symbols and rituals, denunciations of Christian dogma or evince special concern for the historical vicissitudes of the Jewish people — not that Judah Abrabanel in his personal life was immune from such affections or tendencies.[106] This book, however, does none of those

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> For indeed (as a result) of impatience of the spirit, bondage and the preoccupation of our people in a land which is not theirs, confronted by oppressors who pressure them daily to incapacitate and destroy them, they all as one have concentrated their attention, eyes and hearts to (amass) wealth, (which will) shelter and protect them from the daily alien stream which envelops them as bees, so that there is no proper place or time to consider the wonders of our Torah. Therefore they have become like 'dreamers' (deluded) in the midst of the nations, drawing nigh as disputers saying: "What profit and gain is there in the promise of our holy Torah, considering that it (deals) only with the material (i.e., this world) devoid of hope for eternal life? And to what avail its many stories, which at times are without chronological order?"

As one can see, Sforno is quite concerned about the plight of his people. He worries about their living in a "land that is not theirs." He attributes their spiritual blindness to "oppressors" and to their need for wealth as protection. Such statements are simply not to be found in the *Dialoghi* though somewhat analogous expressions of disdain for his Christian neighbors may be present in Judah Abrabanel's extant poetry, as the next note attests to.

[106] See his poem to his lost son, translated from the Hebrew by Raymond P. Scheindlin in *Judaism* 41 (Spring 1992). I reproduce a part of it below. It exudes anger and pride and its tone is very different from the *Dialoghi*. This may well be in the tradition of medieval Jewish poetry, which takes on different moods with different subject matters. Compare the secular and religious poems of ibn Gabirol, which also differ greatly.

For you, my son, my heart is thirsting, burning;
in you I quell my hunger and my thirst.
My splendid skills are yours by right, my knowledge,
and the science that has gotten fame for me.
Some of it my mentor, my own father

particularistic things. It seems to have more in common with contemporary Christian literature such as Ficino and Pico della Mirandola than it does with most contemporary Jewish literature — indeed it is more universalistic than most of that humanist Christian literature.[107] When I speak of universalism, however, we should not confuse that with egalitarianism. Like his medieval predecessors, Judah Abrabanel's philosophy is an elitist one, though that elitism is mitigated by his extraordinary philosophy of love. And the implicit assertion may well be that it is the Jews and their teachings (correctly interpreted of course) that form the true elite of Western civilization.[108] Along

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bequeathed to me – a scholar's scholar he:
the rest I gained by struggling on my own,
subduing wisdom with my bow and sword,
plumbing it with my mind. Christian scholars
are grasshoppers next to me. I've seen their colleges -
they've no one who can best me in the duel of words.
I beat down any man who stands against me,
crush and hush my opponent, prove him wrong.
Who but me would dare to tell the mysteries
of the Creation, of the Chariot, of its Rider?
My soul excels, surpasses all the souls
of my contemporaries in this wretched age.
My Form is fortified by God, my Rock,
locked, imprisoned in my body's cage.
It yearns for you to surpass my degree;
I always hoped that you would outdo me.

[107] As Julius Guttmann opined "He wrote, not as a Jew for other Jews, as had the Spanish Jewish philosophers, but for the members of an enlightened philosophic circle, who were superior to any particular religion; he was not content to use Latin, as Elijah del Medigo had, but as was customary among the first Italian philosophers, he used the living language of the new culture. In place of the conceptual dryness and sobriety of the medievals, we meet here a vaulting imagination, an emotionally moving presentation of a world view based in the depths of feeling." See his *Philosophies of Judaism*, pp. 259-260.

[108] If this conjecture is correct, it would set Judah Abrabanel apart from both his Jewish medieval predecessors and his Jewish contemporaries, most of

with universalism (if the climate is conducive) goes individualism. This quote from Jacob Burckhardt, with some qualification, retains much of its force and truthfulness.

> In the Middle Ages both sides of human consciousness-that which was turned within as that which was turned without-lay dreaming or half awake beneath a common veil. The veil was woven of faith, illusion, and childish prepossession, through which the world and history were seen clad in strange hues. Man was conscious of himself only as member of a race, people, party, family, or corporation-only through some general category. In Italy this veil first melted into air; an *objective* treatment and consideration of the State and of all the things of this world became possible. The *subjective* side at the same time asserted itself with corresponding emphasis; man became a spiritual *individual*, and recognized himself as such.[109]

It should be kept in mind that for the most part the Christian humanists, despite their willingness to learn from Jews, retained a great deal of contempt for Judaism.[110] Perhaps this book by

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whom did not consider the Jews to be a part of a larger whole. Nevertheless, many of the emerging nation states and their kings did view themselves as having Jewish origins, often from King David, Joseph of Arimathea, Phillip, Peter, etc. For good discussions of this phenomenon see Benzion Netanyahu's *Origins of the Inquisition*, pp.581-582 and Barbara Tuchman's *Bible and Sword*, pp.13-21. For a good discussion of the role of elites in late medieval civilization see Johan Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, pp. 56-67.

[109] See *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, Volume 1, p. 143.

[110] Witness the following observation of Jews by Gianozzo Manetti (a 15th century Hebraist) in his *Apology*, f.78r. "For in the first place they imitate their ancestors and hence they are incensed against Christians and hate all of

Abrabanel is a cleverly designed attempt to answer that contempt with a soft and seductive voice, rather than the more common shrill and defensive one. One of the things that the humanists had in common and which set them apart from their direct medieval predecessors was an emphasis on "irrational or a-rational elements in man's psychic makeup."[111] We will explore this more fully in the section devoted to Marsilius Ficino and in other sections as well. This emphasis on the a-rational within man's psych is a distinguishing characteristic of the Renaissance. The following small poem written by Michelangelo in 1529, and might possibly have been influenced by Judah Abrabanel, is an example.

I am complained of and reproached by reason

When I, in love, hope to get happiness.

With true word and with potent illustration

She brings my shame to mind in me, and says:

"What will you garner from the living sun

Except for death, and not the phoenix's?"

But it helps little; if you will fall down,

No other's strong or ready hand suffices.

I understand the truth, and know my hurt,

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them equally." The translation is by Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Likeness*, Volume 2, p. 592.

[111] See Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Renaissance Thought*, Volume 1, p. xx for both the quotation and a further exploration of this theme.

On the other side another's heart's my guest,
That kills me more the more that I submit.

My master is in the middle of two deaths,
One I don't understand and one don't want,
And soul and body die in this suspense.[112]

And so it is with Judah Abrabanel. Philo, representing love, cannot be satisfied because Sophia, representing wisdom, never quite agrees to reciprocate his love for her. Philo is also clearly the wiser of the two and is her teacher.[113] Hence, love has a wisdom that wisdom by itself knows nothing of. This seems to be in stark conflict with the prevailing Arabic and Jewish philosophy of the Middle Ages and perhaps closer to more modern conceptions of humanity.[114] It should also be noted that

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[112] See the *Complete Poems and Selected Letters of Michelangelo*, p. 26.

[113] Although the literal text would seem to support the superior wisdom of Philo, some contemporary authors have argued or simply asserted that it is the other way around. See Brian Copenhaver's forward to the new English translation, p. xii where he asserts: "Filone's guide is Sofia, as Diotima was the informant of Socrates." Although I have also argued that in places Sophia seems to be more rational than Philo, I think that is a bit of an overstatement and at least deserves some substantiating argument.

[114] In the Middle Ages Jewish philosophy often conceived of the human soul in terms of three distinct entities or aspects: the vegetative, animal and rational. This may stem from the views of Avicenna. The vegetable soul deals with nutrition and growth; the animal soul deals with perception and motor processes; the human or rational soul deals with practical and theoretical intelligence. Where would emotions fit in? They inhere in the animal soul, its perceptive and imaginative faculties and its proclivity for movement. According to Avicenna, the human soul's practical intellect uses those passions along with imagination in order to formulate plans in the physical world. One might ask, however, where the extreme emotions come from that some (but not all) people experience when they sit quietly listening

wisdom (Sophia) is feminine and love (Philo) is masculine. And Sophia exercises an enticing asymmetrical power over Philo despite the fact that she has so much to learn from him. If that typecasting of the genders is confusing perhaps it was meant to be. It may be a subtle message regarding a spiritual reality that defies simple or conventional categorization. So despite the strange and controversial superiority of masculine love we also need to be alert to areas where a more earthly and feminine wisdom ought to prevail. This may account for some of the enigmatic elements of the work.[115]

If Judah Abrabanel diverged from Jewish tradition, however, he also challenged the conventional wisdom of the

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to classical music and neither doing nor planning to do anything. Oliver Sacks describes pathological conditions where the patient can still derive intellectual satisfaction from music but no longer experiences the deep emotions that were previously associated with it. He also describes more normal conditions of amusicality, as seems to have been the case with both William and Henry James. See *Musicophilia*, pp. 289-292. This distinction between mere intellectual appreciation and the emotional depths that sometimes accompany it is nowadays seen as valid in all fields but perhaps nowhere as starkly as in music. It is questionable whether Judah Abrabanel's medieval Iberian philosophical predecessors would have made much sense out of this but perhaps his father (who was somewhat anti-philosophical) would have been better able to relate to it. At any rate, the new philosophical milieu of Renaissance Italy surely allowed for this distinction in a way that the medieval Iberian philosophical tradition had not.

[115] There are elements in the work that may even reflect older chivalric ideals and ascetic vows, as when Philo says to Sophia it is "time indeed for your sweet person to seek rest, while my mind keeps its usual anguished watch." (p.64). Again on p.67, Philo says: "I cannot remember promising you anything save that I would love you and endure your scorns even until Charon ferries me over the river of oblivion; and that, if the soul takes any feeling with it into the world beyond, mine should retain even there its love and crown of thorns." Although a crown of thorns may indeed have been a part of pagan Greek culture, the use of such a Christian symbol does seem remarkable. See Sarah Pomeroy, Plutarch's Advice to the Bride and Groom, p.5.

Italian Renaissance, especially in his depreciation of art as a means of achieving happiness. After all, if any epoch is to be defined by its art it is surely the Renaissance. Witness the following abridged dialogue on pp.37-38.

> Sophia: What and how many are these faculties of the intellect?
>
> Philo: I distinguish five: Art, Prudence, Understanding, Science and Wisdom.

Philo then goes on to describe the various faculties and in particular describes art as "the faculty of producing things according to reason which requires the work of our hands or physical labour..." Sophia then asks: "In which of these two faculties does happiness lie?" It seems that by the term "two faculties" she is referring to practical vs. theoretical faculties; art is among the former.

> Philo: It is plain it does not consist in Art or the products of Art, which rather hinder than forward our acquisition of happiness. It consists therefore in the other faculties whose activities aim at virtue or wisdom, in which happiness really consists.

It seems, therefore, that Judah Abrabanel, while being a true Renaissance man, was also a bit of a critic of his age and that he seems to draw upon his religious and philosophical traditions in that endeavor. This ought not to surprise us since most profound religious and philosophical thinkers have been critics of their own age even when they were very much a part of it. This willingness to learn from one's contemporaries while retaining an essential independence seems to be a requirement of all great philosophical teachings.

As another example of his somewhat nuanced relationship with his age we will consider Judah Abrabanel's rather extreme flirtation with pagan mythology, which also begs for an explanation. Even Plato was scandalized by much of that mythology and recommended its censorship in *The Republic*, not to mention the attitude of the rabbis and the early Church. It was, however, in vogue among Italian Neoplatonists of the time to attempt to reconcile mythology with Christian beliefs.[116] Perhaps Abrabanel was attempting to reconcile both with Jewish beliefs but he, like most thinkers of the past, had to exercise some caution in what he chose to say. In a relatively tolerant Renaissance milieu, perhaps no one would seriously accuse him of being a pagan especially since he praises Moses and also because there were few pagans around.[117] Perhaps many Italian Renaissance Jews might not have minded such explicit references to pagan mythology but I suspect that many rabbis were not pleased.[118] And the author seems to have had

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[116] For example, Boccaccio seems to have been of the opinion that with the triumph of the Church there was little reason to be afraid of pagan mythology. He may not have been consistent in that belief however. For a discussion of the poetic attitude towards mythology see Burkhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance*, Volume 1, pp.212-217. Of significance as regards Boccaccio is Sergius Kodera's opinion that Judah Abrabanel was influenced by his *Geneologia deorum gentilium*. See his "Leone Ebreo, Dialogues of Love," a review of the new English translation.

[117] The recounting of pagan mythology may not have been totally uncontroversial however. In 1378 Coluccio Salutati found it necessary to defend pagan literature by saying: "In these days there is no mixture of heathenism among Christians throughout the civilized world." See the letter from Salutati to Cardinal Dominici, translated by Ephraim Emerton, *Humanism and Tyranny: Studies in the Italian Trecento*, pp. 358-360.

[118] Pagan motifs have been found in ancient synagogues and may even have been used at times to express religious themes. See Erwin R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, p. 182. This points out that the relationship between Judaism and surrounding religions was more nuanced than popularly believed. Philo of Alexandria at times used expressions such as "the Most High" (also employed in the *Septuagint*) that were associated

an even broader goal in mind than the reconciliation of paganism, Christianity and Judaism. He also wanted to deal with Kabbalah and Islamic philosophy, both of which had caught the attention of Renaissance thought.[119]

Judah Abrabanel had apparently been in close contact with some of the greatest minds in the Christian world (whether physically or merely intellectually), as a physician, astrologer and philosopher. It ought to be noted that unlike so many Jewish philosophical texts there is no effort here to repudiate Christian theology and in fact some of the author's abstract philosophical beliefs bear a distinct resemblance to it. For example, regarding the original position of God as both lover and beloved, Abrabanel makes the following statement expressing what seems to be a triune description of God. "The coexistence of lover and beloved creates no diversity in Him, but rather it is this intrinsic relation which makes His unity more perfect and more truly one; because His divine essence would not represent the highest form of life did it not reflect in itself the beauty and wisdom of the beloved, the wise lover, and the perfect love of them both...and although we count them to be three...the whole is one simple unity and essence or nature,

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with Zeus; but Philo was also explicitly contemptuous of Greek mythology. For a good discussion see Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Philo*, Volume I, pp.38-43. Such explicit appropriation of pagan symbols came to be out of fashion, however. And by the Renaissance the time had long since lapsed since that was considered generally acceptable in Judaism. On the other hand, pagan-style art was used by Jews in the Renaissance and pagan mythological motifs were employed by other Jewish thinkers so I cannot claim this is completely unprecedented. But I have not seen anything quite as extensive and explicit as Judah Abrabanel's use of pagan mythology.

[119] The interest in what might be considered alien modes of thought might have been the result of a relative lack of theology taught in the great cathedral schools, which did not exist in Italy and a supplemental interest in ancient Roman law. See Denys Hays, *The Italian Renaissance*, pp. 68-74 for a good discussion.

which can in no way be divided or multiplied." (p.299).[120] Modern scholars such as Yehuda Liebes have also found Trinitarian notions in the *Zohar* but I suspect that this discussion in the *Dialoghi* was intended more for a Christian audience than a Jewish one.[121] It was already an established Christian theological dogma that the three persons of the Trinity were one substance or essence. Because of the author's obvious acquaintance with and reliance upon Christian thought, Shlomo Pines believed that his failure to cite Christian sources begged

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[120] I am not suggesting Judah Abrabanel held trinitarian views (as normally construed by Christian dogma) but only that he was willing to use such terminology to prove the oneness of God. One possible difference, which T.A. Perry pointed out, is that for Abrabanel the hypostases are not equal to God the Father. "Since the beloved is always superior to its lover, Leone concludes that God as beloved is superior to God as lover of Himself, in contradiction to the Christian view that Father and Son are equal." See his *Erotic Spirituality: The Integrative Tradition from Leone Ebreo to John Donne*, p.20. The actual history of trinitarian views has not received enough attention. Apparently, the number three has often been associated with metaphysical reality, for example in Philo, *The Chaldean Oracles* and Plotinus. For brief discussions see R.T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, p.106 and Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, Volume 12, pp.11-12. Whether Abrabanel obtained his "trinitarian" views from Christian or non-Christian sources such as Philo, *Chaldean Oracles* or Plotinus is not known but surely he was aware of the fact that such views, commonly associated with Christianity, were anathema to medieval Jews. See the next note for an amplification of this topic.

[121] In his *Studies in the Zohar*, Liebes attributes such Trinitarian doctrines to the influence of Christian theology. It must be emphasized, however, that the *Zohar* and the *Dialoghi* belong to two very different genres. The former is addressed to insular, gullible and prejudiced people while the latter was designed for much more philosophically sophisticated ones. The latter, perhaps quite unlike most readers of the *Zohar*, must have seen those Trinitarian utterances and their resemblance to Christian views clearly. Of course philosophically and culturally sophisticated persons also read the *Zohar* and still do. It is therefore quite interesting that prior to Liebes these views regarding the number three seem not to have received a great deal of attention. Perhaps the very particularistic quality of the *Zohar* insulates it against such interpretations.

for an explanation. He favored explaining it in terms of either a "personal decision" or a "Judaeo-Arabic convention." [122]

Another indication that the book was not written specifically for Jews is that it explains some terms that any knowledgeable Jew would have been acquainted with.[123] Christians seem to have appreciated it more than did Jews although many Jews read it as well. The article by Aaron Hughs in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* attributes its popularity among Christians to the "prominent role that grace (*grazia*) plays" in it and the fact that it "stresses the interlocking relationship between the corporeal and the spiritual" which "resonated with contemporaneous Christian treatments of the incarnation."[124] I tend to think that its affinity with

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[122] See Shlomo Pines, "Sources of Leone Ebreo's Doctrines" in *Studies in the History of Jewish Thought*, Volume V, p.651 (also in *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*). Pines' comment is not exactly correct since Abrabanel does in fact mention at least one "Christian author," John the Evangelist. This reference is in the first Rome edition and most subsequent ones, though it was removed from the Ladino version (British Library: Gaster Or. 10688). We know that some other Italian Jews were influenced by Thomas Aquinas. Seymour Feldman states that this was a common influence in Italian Jewish literature, which functioned as a counterweight to Averroes. See "The end and after effects of medieval Jewish philosophy" in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, p. 416.

[123] For example, "Again, according to their rites, the Hebrews must number seven weeks from the day of their exodus from Egypt, making forty-nine days; and on the fiftieth day they celebrate the feast of the giving of the law, which God vouch-safed to give to be a universal law for all people." (p.293). Another example is as follows: "The scriptures say that in this year of Jubilee every man shall return to his possession and to his family, and liberty shall be proclaimed throughout the earth." (p.294). Both of these examples not only give information that would not be required by most Jews but also provide interpretations that would be repugnant to many of them. The "law," according to the rabbis, is not meant to be a "universal law for all people" and likewise the law of the Jubilee was not meant for "the earth" but only for the land of Israel.

[124] Perhaps he means that contemporary Christian thinkers were interpreting the theology of grace and the incarnation in a philosophical or metaphorical

contemporary Christian thought is even more broadly based than that. This is a continuation of the Abrabanel tradition — the father had already been quite knowledgeable regarding Christian theology and appreciative of some Christian biblical commentaries.[125]

It may also be the first Jewish book written in a *Western* vernacular language, a living language used by Christians and Jews, men and women. It must be conceded, however, that there is some evidence that the book may not have been written originally in Italian. For many years it was suspected that it might have been written in some other language because of peculiarities in the Italian text. More recently, Carlo Dionisotti and Arthur Lesley have reasserted the claim that had been made more than 70 years ago by Isaiah Sonne that its original language was Hebrew. I will not attempt to deal with that question in anything like an adequate fashion but I would suggest that in the absence of clear evidence to the contrary the actual and immediately experienced content[126] of the book may

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manner. Surely, Abrabanel never appeals to divine grace through Jesus. By the same token, he never explicitly argues for the notion of a particular people chosen by God's grace either, though he does not deny it. His most prominent concept that might appear to be a doctrine of grace is the superiority of being loved by God to anything else (even including loving God or one's neighbor). This might at first blush appear to be somewhat at variance with the Jewish concept of the importance of earning one's salvation through good deeds. This has been called "the bread of shame" in kabbalistic circles, the notion that there is something deficient, shameful or even wrong with a benefit that is undeserved. Hence, the initial Divine gracious act must be reciprocated by acts of righteousness.as well as symbolic acts of identification with the people graciously chosen by God. But the emphasis in the *Dialoghi* always seems to be on the individual soul and God.

[125] See Solomon Gaon, *The Influence of the Catholic Theologian Alfonso Tostado on the Pentateuch Commentary of Isaac Abrabanel.*

[126] See John Hospers, *Understanding the Arts*, pp.252-257 for a good discussion of the immediate impact of literature, especially Ayn Rand's

tell us more about its author's intent than do inconclusive kinds of textual evidence.[127] Therefore, I don't think that its original

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concept of the author's "sense of life," something that is immediately discernible in a work of literature, even before one can infer the author's views.

[127] Some have questioned whether the author could have perfected his Italian so soon after emigrating. But perhaps he had been studying Italian in Spain. It seems likely that his interest in Renaissance would have predated the expulsion from Spain. I have been informed by Javier Castaños that there was a great deal of cultural interchange between Italy and Spain in this period. The evidence that the book may not have been written originally in Italian which seems most convincing to me is that a number of Italian manuscripts of the third dialogue have surfaced that differ from one another somewhat. It is true that non-Jewish works, such as Averroes, were often translated into Hebrew for Jews and the fact that this is not a particularly Jewish book would not prevent it from being written in Hebrew but no one would have written anything in Hebrew unless it was meant to be read by Jews. Perhaps he wrote the book in both Hebrew and some other language in close temporal proximity and perhaps, as Cecil Roth thought, he wrote the book originally in Spanish. It is obvious that it was circulating in Italian long before its publication and there may have simply have been different versions. In its present form it was obviously written after Abrabanel left Spain, as it alludes to both the Spanish and Portuguese voyages to the extreme southern regions (p.40). The Portuguese reached the southern tip of Africa in 1488 but it was much later until Spanish explorers went that far south and not until 1513 that they reached the southern tip of South America. What seems obvious to me, however, is that the book was attractive to (and perhaps designed for) either philosophically sophisticated Gentiles or Jews and that it breathes the atmosphere of the Italian Renaissance. Therefore, it seems plausible that it was addressed to two distinct religious communities, no matter what language or languages it was originally written in. If it is not a particularly Jewish book, writing it in Hebrew might have been a strategy designed to assure his brethren (and perhaps others) that he had not converted and was still very much committed to the Jewish people. As we have seen, however, some argue that this was indeed a specifically Jewish book addressed to the then current and direct concerns of the Jewish community in Italy. I cannot altogether agree with that assertion. The fact that opponents of the book wrote critiques in Hebrew is also no evidence for its original intent, in my estimation. The basic assumption operating in this argument seems to be that particularistic Jews would not be concerned about ideas not addressed primarily to Jews. If Jewish scholars did not care about works written by Jews but addressed primarily to gentiles they perhaps should also have not cared about Jewish *conversos*, as long as they did not

language is all that crucial (for my purposes at least).[128] Others disagree, however; for a more adequate discussion, see Rossella Pescatori's Introduction to the new English translation, pp.8-9. Some may also find it incongruous that a prominent Jewish philosopher would write for both Jews and non-Jews but it is not exactly unprecedented. Some of Philo of Alexandria's writings, like his defense of the Sabbath, certainly seem to be apologetics aimed at Gentiles. Ibn Gabirol's metaphysical treatise (*Fons Vitae*) shows not a single trace of Jewish authorship and may have been written for a mixed audience. Like the writings of Philo and ibn Gabirol, this book not only

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attempt to convert their fellow Jews. But those hapless Iberian *conversos* in trouble with the Inquisition were sometimes condemned by rabbis in other European countries even after there were no longer any Jews to convert or corrupt in the Iberian Peninsula! Spinoza also drew the ire of rabbis despite the fact that he seems not to have addressed himself specifically to Jews at all once he left the community. Jews were obviously concerned with their reputation and worried about the consequences of controversial public statements, though perhaps not as much as one might imagine. For the evidence regarding the claim of Hebrew as the original language see Arthur M. Lesley, "The Place of the Dialoghi de'Amore" in *Essential Papers on Jewish Culture in Renaissance and Baroque Italy*, Carlo Dionisotti, "Appunti su Leone Ebreo" in *Italia mediovale e umanisitica 2* (1959) 407-428 and Isaiah Sonne, "On the Question of the Original Language of Yehuda Abravanel's *Dialoghi de'amore*" (Hebrew) in *Tsiyyunim: Kovets le-Zikhrono shel Y. N. Simhoni*, 143-148.

[128] Maimonides wrote the *Guide of the Perplexed* in Arabic, a language understood by Jews and Gentiles. Italian would have also have been understood by Jews and Gentiles alike. If however it had been written originally in Hebrew it could be assumed that a Jewsih readership was originally intended. Perhaps some of the scholarship related to the issue of language is motivated by a desire to reclaim the work as a Jewish one. At any rate, recent scolarship has shown that the vast majority of books in Jewish libraries in Italy from the period in question were indeed written in Hebrew. Therefore, the fact that it had been written in Italian might signal some sort of intention. See Robert Bonfil, *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy*, pp.146-148 for a summary of the findings of Moses Avigdor Shulvass, Isaiah Sonne and others as well as an analysis of the list of books owned by the Jewish community of Mantua, compiled by the Inquisition.

seems designed for but reached a Gentile audience. A book written for Jews would not normally contain non-condemnatory allusions to homosexual lovers (p. 274) or nearly so much pagan mythology as this one although Johannan Alemanno, a kabbalistically inclined Jewish Renaissance thinker, also exhibited interests in mythology. Regarding that, Judah Abrabanel while obviously knowledgeable about those stories shows a shocking misunderstanding of their meaning. For example on page 116 Philo makes the following statement.

> The first god of the poets is that first creative cause, preserver of all things in the Universe, whom they generally call Jupiter, which means father and helper, because he is the father and helper of all things, since he created them out of nothing and gave them being. The Romans called him 'best and greatest' because all good and all being are derived from him; and the Greeks called him Zeus, which means life, because from him all things draw life, or rather he is the life of all things.

This is a rather clear example of Abrabanel projecting the Judaeo-Christian notion of a God who helps all and "created them out of nothing and gave them being" with Jupiter (Zeus) who was the son of Saturn (Cronus), had siblings and obviously did not create all things.[129] Furthermore, Abrabanel seems to

[129] Jupiter was the king of the gods, ruled heaven and exercised political authority, so important and vital to the ancient Romans and therefore they gave him special deference but he in no way approached Abrabanel's description. See *Oxford Companion to Classical Literature*, edited by M.C. Howatson, pp. 603-604 and Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, Volume 1, pp.247-248. This is another example of the medieval and Renaissance penchant for harmonization that is quite jarring to the modern academic mind, which prides itself upon the ability to make fine distinctions.

project his own peculiar quasi-pantheistic theology onto Jupiter by calling him "the life of all things."[130]

Like some other Jewish literature of the Renaissance, the *Dialoghi* exhibits a rather extreme assimilation of Gentile mores.[131] It seems to have been written for whoever possessed

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Shortly after making this statement, Abrabanel makes a distinction between this real Jupiter and Jupiter of Crete, whom people worshipped because he supposedly had godly qualities. Even this apologetic exercise overlooks the rather unsavory qualities of that person or god. What is more interesting, however, and which vindicates Abrabanel's view somewhat, is the little-known fact that in the Hellenistic period some people did speak about Zeus (Jupiter) as being "unbegotten or self-begotten." See Erwin Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, Volume 12, p.4. This is one of many clues that Judah Abrabanel might have had access to Hellenistic Jewish literature or Hermetic literature. But it is also possible that in the Hellenistic period some had ceased using "Zeus" as the name of a particular god and were not in fact referring to the traditional god, Zeus at all. See Wolfson, *Philo*, Volume I, p.15n. The Jewish author of the *Letter of Aristeas* states that Zeus and the God of the Jews is one and the same but the person ostensibly saying that was not Jewish (Aristeas). See *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Volume 3, pp. 438-440. The Stoics also seem to have changed the meaning of "Zeus" somewhat and applied it to the cosmos as a kind of super-deity, which might invite monistic and pantheistic parallels with Abrabanel but this is complicated somewhat by the Stoic distinction between the manifested and unmanifested aspects of Zeus. On the other hand, a more likely source of Abrabanel's understanding of Jupiter (Zeus) might be Gemistos Pletho who also was of the opinion that Zeus was uncreated. See Eugenio Garin, *History of Italian Philosophy* Volume 1, pp.221-224. However, Pletho's project of restoring Pagan religion might not have sat well with Abrabanel and it is perhaps more likely that such influence was filtered through Ficino and/or Pico.

[130] There is however a traditional and enigmatic Jewish description of God as *melech chai ha'olamim* (in the *Yishtabach* prayer), which literally means either "king of the life of all worlds" or "king of the life of all times (eternity)." Both are problematic and might possibly have originally referred to a transcendent spiritual Being who is in a position of authority over a more immanent one.

[131] The word "assimilation" has taken on bad connotations on Jewish discourse. We can see this in Robert Bonfil's use of the term in *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy*, pp.2-3. What I mean by it is the activity of coming to a resemblance with the surrounding culture and it does not imply passivity or

the necessary intellectual tools to read it and its author's religious affiliation really seems of negligible importance. Perhaps it was that unapologetic and unselfconscious acceptance of Renaissance humanist culture that allowed many to believe that Judah Abrabanel, like so many other Iberian Jews, had indeed become a Christian. And the publisher of the second edition in 1541 specifically claimed that he had.

Cervantes shared many humanist predilections with Abrabanel. Meticulous in having some of his characters repudiate Jews and Judaism, as one would expect in his time, he still referred quite approvingly to this treatise and to Judah Abrabanel (Leone Ebreo) in his prologue to *Don Quixote*.[132]

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wholesale abandonment of one's own traditions, although in the modern world it may often entail those things. That is the case because religious identity is no longer a crucial component of social identity. In the Middle Ages and Renaissance no matter how much a Jew might assimilate he retained a certain religious otherness, unless he actually converted to the majority religion. Assimilation was therefore never complete without that conversion. Today, however, one can assimilate totally without conversion because what one assimilates to is oftentimes a completely secular social identity.

[132] Needless to say, we can't ascribe causal efficacy to later events or to an author who lived well after Judah Abrabanel. But the opinions of Cervantes do tell us something about how the *Dialoghi* was viewed by Christian humanists long after it was written or how its ideas cohere with theirs. It is of interest that Cervantes in 1605 did not seem to know of the first Spanish translation of the *Dialoghi* by Gedalia Yahia in 1568 and re-printed in 1598 (both in Venice) or the much more popular Montesa translation of 1584 or the 1590 translation by Garcilaso de la Vega. The 1568 edition was dedicated to King Philip II but has not been found in the Royal Library. The 1590 translation was found there and the Gedalia Yahia was found in the library of Baruch Spinoza. All those Spanish translations were investigated by the Spanish Inquisitors but perhaps not completely banned until 1632. James Nelson Novoa has shown that it was condemned in both Spain and Portugal much earlier than that from at least 1590. See "From Incan Realm to the Italian Renaissance" and "An Aljamiado Version of Judah Abravanel's *Dialoghi d'Amore*," 323-324 and the new English translation, pp.361-371.

Apparently, the *Dialoghi d'Amore* was not under great suspicion at that time by the Spanish Inquisition despite its author's avowal of his Jewishness.[133] This is another indication

[133] I do not mean to imply that Cervantes was prejudiced against Jews but his characters often reflect prevailing attitudes towards both Jews and *conversos*. Anyone in Spain had to be wary of the Inquisition and this makes his endorsement of Leone Ebreo somewhat problematic. It has been conjectured that Cervantes himself might have been a new Christian with pro-Jewish sympathies. Being a new Christian by no means ensured pro-Jewish sympathies, however. See Norman Roth, *Conversos, Inquisition and the Expulsion of the Jews from Spain*. It does seem that Cervantes had a mistress (Ana Franca de Rojas) who bore him a daughter and was a descendant of an individual traditionally considered to be the descendant of a *converso* (Fernando de Rojas, author of the *Celestina*). Some recent scholarship however has questioned the ancestry or at least the subjective identity of de Rojas. See Miguel Nicasio Salvador, "La identidad de Fernando de Rojas." The *Celestina* was published in 1499 and it is not unlikely that Judah Abrabanel knew of it. His familiarity with such a broad range of pagan and Christian literature almost guarantees an interest in contemporary Spanish literature and especially that of *converses* or new Christians, although he never mentions the *converso* problem. Of course, descendants of *conversos* were everywhere and perhaps few men of accomplishment in Spain were completely free of Jewish blood. Cervantes seemed to be well aware of that. Sancho Panza, who is practically illiterate, is quite proud of his old Christian roots but Don Quixote never boasts of his. In other works Cervantes comes even closer to openly ridiculing the whole concept of *limpieza de sangre*. For example, in *La Ilustre Fregona* the two well-born young men sell their proofs of *limpieza* (*sus cabales*) in Madrid with little difficulty. There must have been an open market for such proofs of pure ancestry that would allow for government employment. See *Novelas Ejemplares*, p.307-308. It does indeed seem that Cervantes was a critic of many of the prejudices of his own time. Despite all that there is no real conclusive evidence for some of the exaggerated claims regarding Cervantes and his relationship to Judaism. *Don Quixote* itself survived the scrutiny of the inquisition with the exception of one sentence, which seemed to some to imply that one could perform charitable deeds without the benefit of grace. Perhaps such a view might be attributable to a Judaizing heresy. While Jewish ancestry was a major stigma in the Iberian Peninsula, where a "*converso* problem" existed or at least was believed to exist, such a problem was not nearly as severe in Italy. The term "Hebrew" (Ebreo) was probably not an epithet in Italy and could also be applied to new Christians who had converted or whose family had converted. Proof of this lies in Giordano Bruno's praise of a "Hebrew" preacher "for his eloquence and still more for

that despite the author's insistence on his Jewishness and his allegiance to the teachings of Moses, it might well have been possible for some readers to believe that he was actually a Christian.[134]

The Style

The dialogue was a common Renaissance style and this one reflects a genre in which the enamored lover woos his beloved with somewhat vacuous or superficial discussions of love and the beloved lady exposes that which is lacking in her lover's arguments.[135] The two protagonists, Philo and Sophia may have

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his knowledge." In the opinion of Salo Baron, this praise actually referred to a Christian, the convert Andrea del Monte (formerly Joseph Sarfarti). See *A Social and Religious History of the Jews*, Volume XIV, pp. 12, 305-306. The affirmation of Jewish ancestry or even claims to specifically Jewish insights might not seriously prejudice the book in Italy and the elimination of any particularistic affirmations of Rabbinic Judaism (as opposed to Jewishness or a vague biblical religiosity) may have increased its popularity and also prevented publishing problems.

[134] Perhaps the connotations regarding Moses or the Law of Moses were different in Italy than they were in Spain. In inquisitorial proceedings in the Iberian Peninsula, the "Law of Moses" often connotes a Judaizing heresy. This may not have been so common an assumption in Italy. The Quiroga Index of the Spanish Inquisition (1583) banned all books by Jews. But as we have seen, the 1541 edition of the *Dialoghi* already asserted that Leone Ebreo had converted to Christianity. And even after 1583 we have no evidence that the book was completely banned in Spain though it was investigated around the year 1612 and at least one of the Spanish translations was banned in 1632.

[135] For a good discussion of this medieval and Renaissance motif, including interesting discussions of Judah Abrabanel, see Alban K Forcione, *Cervantes and the Humanist Vision*, pp.113-136. This book also traces the influence of Erasmus on Cervantes. Apparently, there is a great deal in common between those three thinkers, particularly regarding the relationship between romantic love and the more "modern" concept of selfhood that they all shared. Like most Renaissance themes, however, the exaltation of romantic love can be traced back to the Middle Ages and perhaps even as early as Scotus Eriugena. See Stephen C. Nichols, "An Intellectual Anthropology of Marriage in the Middle Ages" (pp. 80-83).

Greek names but their relationship is hardly the ancient Greek ideal. Sophia in particular defies the ancient Greek ideal of the quiet woman. As evidence of this enhanced Renaissance view of the feminine I would like to cite a well-known painting by Fra Filippo Lippi, entitled "Portrait of a Man and Woman at a Casement." It is in many ways a typical Renaissance portrait of a bride and groom. What makes this one so astounding, among other interesting features, is the absolute dominance of the bride as an idealized figure with her lover barely peaking his way into the picture from the outside. This iconic view of the female as possessing something quite culturally substantive and spiritual that the male desperately needs is also a recurring theme in the *Dialoghi*. Surely, Philo speaks much more than he needs to and Sophia is certainly no dummy. At times she even appears more rational and critical than Philo, which makes sense given her name. But it is also clear that Philo has access to esoteric knowledge that she almost completely lacks and has something of great importance to impart to her, despite his desperate plight as one smitten by unrequited love. Most commentators have assumed that Philo is the real spokesperson for Judah Abrabanel. T.A. Perry, however, viewed the dialogue form as much more significant. In fact he seems to think that Sophia is the more theoretical thinker of the two. However, he also admits that the truth as Abrabanel sees it may perhaps lie mostly with Philo, but requiring the dialectic to bring it out in its full strength and accuracy.

> Leone Ebreo seems to be suggesting either that his own views are not the privilege of either party alone, or, at the very least, that the dialogical form is not of mere expository

> importance: it is a method of philosophical discovery, of the transformation of learning into understanding. Whether Sophia is thought of as a real person or as the master's own critical sense, it is through her serious and persistent questioning that Filone's own philosophy becomes explicit. Moreover, such critical activity is central because it reveals – whether in the outer world or within the psyche – the presence of those antagonistic elements that give dialectic its necessity.[136]

I would offer the following assessment. Like many (and perhaps most) philosophers, Judah Abrabanel probably had doubts about his own formulations or even had alternative ones that he considered viable. He might have used Philo to express his best working hypotheses (many based on esoteric traditions) but used Sophia to cast doubts upon them and/or to suggest alternatives. This pattern seems to be transformed in the final dialogue where there is an extended discussion regarding the relationship between privation (desire) and love vs. the relationship between knowledge and love. Philo wants to assert that since love originates in the intellectual realm it requires knowledge but that it also requires privation and desire. But Sophia notes that privation is less in the angelic realm than it is in the earthly one. Philo relies on the absolute disparity between God and His creatures and between the finite and the infinite to assert that the privation is equal in both realms since the distance between infinity and any number is still infinite; but knowledge is obviously greater in the angelic realm.

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[136] T.A. Perry, *Erotic Spirituality: The Integrative Tradition from Leone Ebreo to John Donne*, p.29

Therefore, love as desire can originate from there too. Both Philo and Sophia seem to be stuck somewhat in the notion of the primacy of the intellect but perhaps Sophia is suggesting (along the lines of Augustine's thought) that love might possibly be superior to knowledge and utterly independent of privation. It comes as no surprise that Sophia is aware of such philosophical controversies and opinions. In this case, however, she uses such knowledge to fine-tune Philo's more esoteric knowledge of heavenly love.

Another characteristic feature of Renaissance humanism was the strong interest in the inner life and in particular what Charles Trinkaus called "the direction of the will."[137] This interest may have changed the relationship between fiction and non-fiction, rendering the latter of greater interest as reflecting the new emphasis on interiority.[138] It appears that in terms of knowledge and critical faculties the two participants in the dialogue are fairly evenly matched but Philo is certainly far superior in that somewhat elusive knowledge of love and the will. Yet the wisdom of Philo is not ostensibly about man as much as it is about the universe and God. It appears mystical and metaphysical. Is it possible, however, that this is really anthropology and psychology masquerading as metaphysics and theology? We will return to that shortly.

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[137] See Charles Trinkaus, *In our Image and Likeness*, Volume 2, p. 628.

[138] See Harry Berger, Jr., *Second World and Green World*, pp. 3-17 for an interesting discussion. Berger believes that fiction in the Middle Ages tended to masquerade as non-fictional *genres* and that changed in the Renaissance. The medieval motif is certainly still the case with the *Dialoghi* and the tendency has generally been to view it as a didactic work of philosophy, focusing on the doctrines enunciated by Philo. But perhaps more emphasis should indeed be placed upon the fictional relationship between Philo and Sophia. Not being a literary specialist I cannot do a very good job in that area but I will attempt some such, albeit limited, analysis.

Despite some initial sparring during which the reader might be unsure about who will prevail, by page ten it is clear that Philo has the upper hand, at least intellectually. Is it not strange that Love should know more than Wisdom?[139] This certainly fits in with certain trends in Renaissance thought but Abrabanel never *explicitly* endorses a value that is completely beyond the intellectual. My interpretation is that he accepts it nevertheless but tries not to make it patently obvious. What is also clear is that the borderlines between human romantic love, God's love and the human love of God are not very bright. In good Platonic fashion, Abrabanel insists again and again that the beauty of the corporeal is worth little in comparison with the incorporeal but there seems to be little trace of real asceticism here despite the almost obligatory medieval affirmations of the superiority of the spiritual and intellectual over the physical.[140]

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[139] This is noted by Alfred Ivry, who nevertheless concludes that Abrabanel fails to successfully distinguish or promote love over intellect, and thus remains within the Jewish/Arabic medieval philosophical tradition. He argues: "Ebreo is, however, more of an Aristotelian, and more of an Averroist, than he would care to admit...hard pressed to offer a definition or description of love which is essentially different from the intellect." See "Remnants of Jewish Averroism in the Renaissance." I agree partially with Professor Ivry's assessment but I think the problem is not Abrabanel's desire to hide his Averroism as much as it is his syncretism, which prevents him from taking a firmer stand in opposition to medieval Aristotelianism. That syncretism masks his true intentions, which in my opinion were not Aristotelian. While he may not have developed a proper definition, he surely distinguishes love from intellect on p. 59 of the *Dialoghi*, as we will see shortly.

[140] At the very end of the book (pp. 467-468) Sophia states: "Of that other union of the body which lovers are wont to seek, I do not believe nor do I wish that we ought to feel any desire: for as spiritual love is full of goodness and beauty, and all its effects contribute to our happiness and well-being, so corporeal love seems rather to contain naught but evil and ugliness, and its effects for the most part to be pernicious and hurtful." Of course we cannot assume that Sophia is Abrabanel's spokeswoman here but surely she expresses a somewhat prevalent medieval philosophical viewpoint. Such a statement, even if believed by the author on an intellectual level, seems out

In other words, the impression given is more of a belief in spirituality suffusing the physical world rather than a completely dichotomous model of physicality vs. spirituality. For example between pp. 12-15 there is a discussion of the Stoic versus the Peripatetic evaluation of worldly wealth. The admission is made that for some "exalted spirits" who only pursue contemplative virtue, wealth is unnecessary and then in good Aristotelian fashion the value of worldly goods is reaffirmed as a means for obtaining the secondary practical or moral virtues. But an interesting twist is put on Aristotle's notion of practical virtue. The only moral virtues mentioned are "generosity... munificence... alms-giving or other charitable works" (p. 14). In other words, Aristotle's interest in individual happiness (or flourishing) is muted in favor of his concern for communal obligations. This may require an explanation because Abrabanel seems at times to value non-carnal pleasurable experiences far more than did Aristotle and seems to value social adaptation somewhat less, at least on the practical level. My interpretation is that for Abrabanel the ultimate value is mystical union with God and the penultimate one is beneficence towards one's fellow human beings. For Aristotle the ultimate value is intellectual contemplation and the penultimate one is practical virtue (often called ethics). This divergence from Aristotle is practically inevitable given Abrabanel's reliance upon him on the one hand and his religious and mystical preoccupations on the other. But where does pleasure fit in to this world-view?

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of tune with the rest of the book, especially with the discussions of lovers, the testicles of pagan gods, etc. I am not averse to admitting that even great thinkers harbor inconsistencies and this may reflect a conflict between the Renaissance atmosphere and Abrabanel's medieval sources. .

Immediately after this discussion (pp. 16-17) Abrabanel makes clear what the correct place of sensual pleasures in human life is. When they are pursued in opposition to reason, it is the vice called "lust." When they are denied altogether it is the vice called "excessive abstinence." The mean between those extremes is "the great virtue" called "continence." But that virtue can be exercised in two ways. When "we feel the prick of sensual desire" and "overcome it by reason and virtue" it is called "temperance." But when "sensuality no longer assails our virtuous reason, but seconds it in a temperate reaction to pleasures" it is called "fortitude" and the latter is obviously the higher virtue. For some idealists, all human love and enjoyment of physical things seems to be an annoyance and a distraction from the more serious contemplative business of life. Not so for this treatise, despite occasional disavowals of the physical. Here enjoyment of life and romantic love are either metaphors or steppingstones for what is considered the most profound understanding of human existence possible. Indeed, as will become quite evident, love is the most vivid affirmation of both God and of human individuality. Herein lies what I see as the key to understanding the book. Knowledge of man and God are both dependent upon the *experience* of love. In fact, the ultimate knowledge of both can only be obtained by transcending knowledge and love in the unitive embrace, which is the very culmination of love. In this doctrine Judah Abrabanel does indeed transcend his own Arabic/Jewish philosophical heritage by incorporating it into a prevailing Renaissance humanism, perhaps in a much more explicit way than did his father. But one feature of that medieval world-view remains intact: this book retains an explicit opposition to carnality. Despite the celebration of the male-female polarity, imagination, emotion, etc. both Philo and Sophia repeat their

revulsion regarding the purely carnal on many occasions and Sophia even seems at times to be almost oblivious to its attraction. In the first dialogue (p.52) she justifies her refusal to requite Philo's love by the suspicion that it is at least partly carnal in nature. They had already agreed that the objects of the lower senses (like touch) produce not only satiety once possessed but may even turn love into hatred.

> Sophia: If, as I believe, you reckon your love of me a precious thing, I should be acting but unworthily if, by granting you the fulfillment of your desire, I cause the extinction of that love. In so doing, I should indeed be shewing cruelty alike to myself and to you; since that would put an end both to your loving me and to my being loved. Instead I will be kind to both of us, denying you the object of your wild desire, in order that your sweet love may endure.

A conversation ensues in which it is agreed that satiety and extinction of love are not characteristics of the more spiritual senses such as hearing and sight. But Sophia clearly recognizes that Philo's attraction to her is more (or perhaps less) than that and contains carnal elements as well. She responds as follows on p.53.

> Sophia: I quite understand that the more spiritual faculties of the soul enjoy a proportionately more inexhaustible and cloyless pleasure. But, following common practice, your desire expects

> of me a gratification of the sense of touch; which is the very one most closely succeeded by satiety and abhorrence; so that it is reasonable to deny it to you.

It is at this point that Philo points out how the sexual attraction can reinforce a more spiritual love and its resulting union of the lovers as well as ensure the survival of the species. But Sophia (p.55) seems to misinterpret him as meaning that physical union is his desired end.

> Sophia: So you admit that the end of your desire resides in the most material of the senses, namely: touch. And I am amazed that you should place the end of love in so low a thing, if love is as spiritual as you say.

> Philo: I do not admit that this is the end of perfect love; but I have been telling you that this act, far from dissolving perfect love, rather confirms and integrates it through the bodily activities of love, which are desires insofar as they give indication of such reciprocal love in both lovers. Furthermore, when two spirits are united in spiritual love, their bodies desire to enjoy such union as is possible, so that no distinction may persist, but the union be in all ways perfect; the more so as a corresponding physical union increases and perfects the spiritual love, even as prudence is perfected by

the correspondence of prudent actions.

Later on in dialogue two (p.110) Sophia expresses strong doubts that anything profound could be learned from the sexual escapades of the Greek gods since: "Such things are assuredly quite alien to the nature of celestial beings; but many are the lies of poets, as the common saying has it." Philo, nevertheless, attempts to convince her that those lascivious stories have a deeper meaning. Finally (p.145) she relents by saying: "And truly it is a wonder how such great and exalted matters could be hidden under the mask of Jupiter's carnal loves."[141]

One of the major objections to Arabic philosophy in the medieval West was its tendency to merge the human personality into the Godhead, a universal soul or the Active Intellect.[142]

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[141] The love (and copulation) between man and woman might not seem particularly profound from the point of view of some classical sources. For example, Aristotle thought that the woman only provided the matter and that the superior form was entirely encapsulated in the sperm. The Garden of Eden story attributed the desire of the woman for the man to her contribution to sin and disobedience. From a medieval scientific and medical perspective, the Galenic tradition attributed much more significance to the female than did the Aristotelian one. The latter, however, was far more elaborated and taken more seriously. For a good discussion see Nancy Siraisi, *Taddeo Alderotti and his Pupils*, pp. 186-192. Interestingly, ibn Gabirol in *Tikkun Midot ha Nefesh* (*Improvement of the Moral Qualities*) gives a great deal of credence to Galen but also deprecates human romantic love as akin to lust. It seems that Judah Abrabanel was heir to traditions that mostly found romantic love irrelevant to spirituality but also was aware of those that gave it a great deal more importance. He obviously sides with the latter and this could be considered a somewhat revolutionary aspect of his philosophy. See Kodera's "Nymphomaniac Matter." How kabbalistic interest in copulation fits into this equation will be discussed later on.

[142] This tendency was described poignantly by Reynold A. Nicholson: "Strange as it may seem to our western egoism, the prospect of sharing in the general, impersonal immortality of the human soul kindles in the Sufi an enthusiasm as deep and triumphant as that of the most ardent believer in a personal life continuing beyond the grave." See *The Mystics of Islam*, p.168.

This was a major concern of the Scholastics despite the fact that unitive mysticism is not altogether foreign to Christianity. Thomas Aquinas had criticized the views of Averroes regarding the ultimate unity of the individual intellect and the Active Intellect. One of his criticisms (perhaps the strongest) had to do with the irreducibly individual nature of the will, which is a faculty of the human soul. Later on Descartes would also view the will as an intrinsic, though secondary, faculty of the human soul. For him, emotions, while arising from the body, are indispensable to that spiritual faculty of will. Renaissance thinkers such as Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Ficino, while not altogether unsympathetic to unitive mysticism, also struggled to find room for individual human dignity in the face of the Infinite. This seems to be one of the major motifs of the *Dialoghi* as well. Perhaps (within that medieval/Renaissance world-view) a certain respect for human emotions is a requirement for human autonomy and dignity because without it the human mind seems grossly inferior to celestial intelligences. Physicality and its resulting emotionality grants uniqueness or individuality to the human being. That respect for human emotionality might also militate against extreme asceticism. While Abrabanel certainly exhibits some ascetic tendencies in this work and definitely treats emotion or affect as an inferior quality, it also imbibes to an extent the Renaissance zest for individuality, emotional life and physicality.

There is one more aspect of the style that I think is worthy of mention. It is somewhat annoying at times, replete with unnecessary literary, philosophical and mythological allusions that do not seem particularly crucial to the subjects being discussed. In other words, it appears somewhat pretentious and this can even at times mask the profound arguments and subtle hints that make it a great work. Although

within it is the ability to make fine distinctions and thereby choose between different strands of thought, all too often that is marred by a syncretizing tendency. Perhaps this overly verbose harmonization of previous philosophical and religious thought was the popular style of the day that people were accustomed to (or at least becoming accustomed to). Paul Oskar Kristeller had this to say about the Italian humanists.

> Even their treatises on philosophical subjects, if we care to read them, appear in most cases rather superficial and inconclusive if compared with the works of ancient or medieval philosophers, a fact that may be indifferent to a general historian but which a historian of philosophy cannot overlook.
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> ...I should like to suggest that the Italian humanists on the whole were neither good not bad philosophers, but no philosophers at all.
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> The humanist movement did not originate in the field of philosophical or scientific studies, but it arose in that of grammatical and rhetorical studies...After the middle of the fifteenth century, we find an increasing number of professional jurists, physicians, mathematicians, philosophers, and theologians who cultivated humanist studies along with their own particular fields of study. Consequently, a humanist influence began to appear in all these other sciences. It appears in the studied elegance of literary expression, in the increasing use made of classical source materials, in the greater knowledge of history and of critical methods, and also sometimes in an emphasis on new

problems...

> Yet if the humanists were amateurs in jurisprudence, theology, medicine, and also in philosophy, they were themselves professionals in a number of other fields. Their domains were the fields of grammar, rhetoric, poetry, history, and the study of the Greek and Latin authors.[143]

The humanists (for lack of a better word) knew so much about so *many* areas of knowledge that the entire image of humanity changed. In the words of Harry Berger, Jr., he acquired "god-like powers of thought." Nowhere is this more obvious than in a very well known drawing of humankind by Leonard da Vinci, which he compares (unfavorably) with a similar but quite distinct medieval version.

> When we turn to Leonardo's man, we are immediately struck by the increased scale and solidity, the plastic assertion of the figure. And we are reminded of the Renaissance image — familiar since Burkhardt — of the overreacher, the fully self-sufficient hero playing the role of an incarnate god. Drawn in symmetric frontality, with athletic limbs in two positions as if doing the jumping jack, the hero marks the limits of circle and square. He seems virtually to hold them in place, to give dimension to these geometrical symbols of perfection as he lends his proportions to the universe.[144]

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[143] Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and its Sources*, pp. 91-92
[144] Harry Berger Jr., *Second World and Green World*. P.49

Perhaps this need to represent man as almost superhuman explains the extremely complex arguments of the book, especially in the third dialogue. It is difficult to believe that such arguments could have been popular; yet as I have been at pains to express, it is equally difficult to understand the thinking of another age.

The Philosophical Sources

In order to truly understand this book, we must go back to Greek philosophy, mostly through medieval Muslim, Jewish and Christian sources. If this were a more complete analysis, we would want to discuss many more Pagan, Jewish, Muslim and Christian philosophers. In particular, we would be interested in exploring the influence of Aristotle, Plotinus, Pseudo-Dionysius, Al-Farabi, Avicenna, Al-Ghazali, Averroes, Augustine, Eriugena, Crescas, Aquinas, Scotus, Cusanus and Plethon.[145] There is little doubt that much of the philosophical and mystical influences came through what could be broadly described as the Hermetic tradition.[146] We find Azariah dei

[145] There is no reason to think that Judah Abrabanel knew Greek but Byzantine influence in Italy was far stronger than it had been in his native land. Although it would take us too far afield, the question of such influence upon Italian thinkers merits a great deal more investigation. The influence of Crescas, while unacknowledged, seems more natural for a Jewish thinker. Such influence has recently been proposed by Seymour Feldman (2005) and Mauro Zonta (2001) but the connection between Renaissance philosophy and Crescas was suggested as early as 1929 by Wolfson. The more recent scholarship suggests that Pico might have obtained access to Crescas through Judah Abrabanel. But the connection between Pico and Abrabanel remains tenuous and the former was quite capable of accessing Hebrew manuscripts by himself and with the help of Flavius Mithridates.

[146] Ficino was influential in popularizing that tradition. Some have noted that there was really little of philosophical interest or profundity in it but that is much easier for us to say than it was for the thinkers of the Renaissance. It must be remembered that they had their own agenda just as we have ours. They were to a certain extent rebelling against a medieval tangle of words

Rossi, a little later, attributing some of Philo of Alexandria's views to that tradition.[147] There are a lot of parallels between Judah Abrabanel and Philo of Alexandria and one could speculate regarding whether the former knew of the latter. On the other hand, Plotinus was actually acknowledged in the *Dialoghi* but probably not nearly as much as he deserved. In particular, Plotinus' view of intuitive insight as "the culmination of man's rational life"[148] is a theme that renders the *Dialoghi* much easier to understand. In addition, as will be discussed more fully later on, Plotinus deals with conceptual issues related to mystical union. But, despite those tantalizing possibilities of fecund influences, I will restrict my primary discussion of philosophers to Plato, ibn Gabirol, Maimonides, Isaac Abrabanel (the author's father) and Ficino. These appear to be the thinkers to whom he was most obviously indebted, whether directly or otherwise. Nevertheless, it seems obvious to me that there is a more general and pervasive influence of Renaissance culture in this work. Therefore, some fairly major sources, mainly Christian, will be overlooked, at least individually.[149] It is also worth noting that he mentions four of the great Muslim thinkers: Al-Farabi, Avicenna, Al-Ghazali and Averroes, at a time when the influence of Muslim thought had

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and arguments that seemed to leave little room for human experience. At least that is how they might have seen it. When one is motivated by such an interest it is fairly easy to grasp at ancient claims of wisdom. In fact we have seen similar reactions in our own time. But most importantly, there is always more than one-way to read a text, especially an ancient one.

[147] See *The Light of the Eyes*, pp. 114-117.

[148] See R.T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, p53.

[149] For a good discussion (perhaps the best) of possible Arabic sources and a likely reason for omission of Christian ones, see Shlomo Pines, "Medieval Doctrines in Renaissance Garb? Some Jewish and Arabic Sources of Leone Ebreo's Doctrines" *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*.

waned in the West.[150] Although I have already mentioned them, I feel it is important to stress here that there were two huge elephants in the room that Judah Abrabanel curiously failed to mention: Ficino and Isaac Abrabanel. Why he failed to mention them, I will not attempt to explain but the influence of Ficino on contemporary culture was of the same magnitude as the influence of his father on Judah Abrabanel himself. I will also, of course, discuss Kabbalah in a separate chapter since many people believe that Judah Abrabanel was a kabbalist or at least heavily under the influence of Kabbalah and this is something that he explicitly discusses, albeit to a limited extent, in the book. In fact, that (as the title attests) will be the more specific focus of this book. But first I will summarize the three parts of the book and discuss a rather nettlesome problem in religious philosophy previously alluded to and how he resolves it. It may even be a problem particularly germane to the Renaissance period in which human beings began to assert their dignity in a more conscious and profound way. I believe that his resolution of that problem is a key to truly understanding the book. It also sets it apart somewhat from most of the literature of the Middle Ages even though there are of course deep affinities and continuities between medieval and Renaissance thought.

A Very Brief Description of the Three Sections of the Book

As I have not proposed to deal with every aspect of the work, there is no need to cover every topic discussed in the three dialogues. It does seem useful, however, to give an overview of

[150] For an interesting discussion see Archibald R, Lewis, "The Islamic World and the Latin West, 1350-1500.

how they line up with one another. The first thing to be noted is the centrality of Philo's feelings for Sophia, which emerges in every one of the dialogues and should not be easily dismissed as a mere literary device. The second is the centrality of God, a topic that also crops up in each of the sections. Third but not necessarily last is the centrality of desire, which Philo insists is integral to love, even more so than voluntary will.

Dialogue I

Philo begins by telling Sophia that his acquaintance with her awakens in him both love and desire. Sophia, however, insists upon a firm distinction between the two. What is the difference between love and desire? This turns out to be a rather difficult question. Regarding certain goods, we can love and desire them at the same time. But regarding others, the love that is the product of their acquisition extinguishes the desire for them. A distinction is made between goods that depend upon pleasure, profit and virtue (goodness). Things that are "profitable" (wealth, personal possessions) cannot be loved and desired at the same time according to Philo. But other things (such as Sophia herself) can be both loved and desired. Sophia has great difficulty understanding this and mounts many arguments designed to show that love and desire can never really coexist. At times a reader might actually conclude that Sophia is the voice of reason and that her arguments are correct. Even Philo praises Sophia for her highly developed intellect but insists that her views are not really correct and attributes them to inexperience in love. While true love springs from reason it is not governed by it. Hence while Sophia establishes her intellectual and philosophical credentials early on, Philo insists upon his mastery of the subject of love, something that transcends ordinary reason. One distinction that is made, but

hardly developed, is the distinction between intellect, will and desire. Soon enough the conversation turns to true happiness, the Active Intellect, God and to the human intellect, which is the highest human faculty. The dialogue ends with a discussion of the difference between "perfect and true love" such as Philo feels for Sophia and which "is born of reason" and "begets desire" and other lower kinds of love (which presumably begin with physical desire). Philo touches upon some important topics that he cannot expound upon but promises to do so in the future. He bids farewell in order that Sophia can rest and so that he can resume his "anguished watch" which will be tempered with the joy of her continued presence in his thoughts.

Dialogue II

Philo had promised to discuss the universality of love as well as its origin. This dialogue is mostly concerned with the former. It might have been thought (from a philosophical perspective) that voluntary love is dependent upon intellect but Philo claims that love is far more universal than that would suggest and that it even exists in inanimate beings. Here love is defined in terms of its opposite: hate. Any movement towards something is therefore defined as a species of love, which also exists between heaven and earth. One suspects that the definition of love has been subtly changed.[151] What is perhaps most significant is the discussion of the apparently selfless love of spiritual beings,

[151] Garin views this "universal sympathy" as a "naturalistic flavor" and as related to "astrological correspondences." He also sees it as a deviation from the more human orientation of Pico. There is much to be said for that observation. Yet in the end both natural and human reality is subsumed in the ultimate reality of God. Hence where some might see naturalism, I would tend to see pantheism. See Eugenio Garin, *History of Italian Philosophy*, Volume I, pp.392-393.

who only desire the perfection of their beloved.[152] A long discussion of mythology, astrology and medieval philosophy ensues. In the end Philo promises to discuss the birth of love and re-affirms his love for Sophia. In this way, both his personal love and the more impersonal attraction that he has discussed but hardly developed may be correctly understood in a comprehensive cosmic vision.

Dialogue III

This is the most crucial dialogue because it expounds on the origin of love in God. It is also the longest of the three by far. Although the first dialogue was left in a somewhat incomplete state, Philo had apparently admitted that some (but not all) love is to be distinguished from desire. In apparent contradiction to that discussion in the first dialogue, love is now equated (by Philo) with desire, but not necessarily with the kind of desire that we can know of. In apparent contrast to and conflict with the second dialogue, the only truly spiritual and unselfish love is now God's love for His creation.[153] Hence, we may be

[152] See p. 180 where Philo states: "the higher, too, love the lower, and desire to unite with them, to render them more perfect." There is no indication that this only applies to completely spiritual beings, let alone only God. In contrast, Sophia asserts the contrary principal: "the superior does not love the inferior."

[153] See pp. 250-251 where he seems to say that this formerly general principle only applies to God. This either had been left unclear in the second dialogue, there was an evolution of thought or is an unexplained conflict with that earlier teaching. Sophia, however, sides with Plato on p.252: "For it seems more reasonable to maintain, with Plato, that no love can exist in Him." Yet after a brief discussion, she agrees with Philo on p.253 that "the love of God for His creatures is more excellent than their love for each other and for Him..." Then on p.254 Philo agrees that there is an element of this unselfish love even in human fathers and teachers. It is possible that the more extreme position held in the earlier part of the dialogue was a means of showing Sophia the nature and origin of this unselfish love. Yet Philo was not immediately successful because on p. 259 Sophia reverts to her previous

entering a higher and more mysterious level of discourse. In this dialogue we find some of the more innovative discussions and also the ones that are most difficult to comprehend. It begins with Philo's inability to recognize Sophia in the flesh and ends with the perennial problem of Philo's love for Sophia, which the latter still refuses to acquiesce to and indeed even seems to misunderstand. Despite the declared spirituality and superiority of his love for her, he remains in anguish since it is unrequited. There is now an interesting discussion of the ideal Sophia vs. the physical one and what makes it particularly intriguing is its ambiguity. This is not nearly as simple as the typical medieval distinction between reason and imagination. Sophia even notes this on page 201 by remarking on Philo's apparently conflicted conception of the relationship between sleep and contemplation. Philo's answer is remarkably similar to some rather modern views based upon brain functioning and cognitive science. It minimizes the medieval rationalist tendency to deprecate or even demonize imagination and, as the subsequent discussion reveals, Abrabanel considers all consciousness to come from God.[154] Sophia, of course,

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position that; "the true nature of love is always to wish for one's own good, and not for that of another." Finally on p.262 she seems to fully accept his argument except that she questions his distinction between the good and the beautiful.

[154] The positive valuation of reason over imagination continued into the Renaissance and early modern period with thinkers such as Francis Bacon and Vico. See Paolo Rossi, *Francis Bacon: From Magic to Science*, p.127. Vico, however, seemed to consider primitive civilizations to be influenced by reason through the imagination. The modern view of the neural basis of imagination and reason is far more nuanced. Compare the following observation of Oliver Sacks in *An Anthropologist on Mars* (p.57, n.7) and the opinion of Judah Abrabanel (Philo) on pp. 201-202. Of course, Abrabanel lacks the modern knowledge of brain functioning and gets the physiology wrong yet he seems to anticipate the modern discovery of the parasympathetic nervous system as the regulator of both digestion and sleep. On the other hand, Sacks in this passage seemingly ignores the crucial

difference between constraint by external reality and constraint by higher internal rational activity centered in the cerebral cortex. There are those who are quite adept at following sensory cues but relatively undeveloped in their ability to think. Traditionally, brain science has focused more on sensory consciousness than it has on the consciousness of thought.

> Rodolfo Llinás and his colleagues at New York University, comparing the electrophysiological properties of the brain in waking and dreaming, postulate a single fundamental mechanism for both – a ceaseless inner talking between cerebral cortex and thalamus, a ceaseless interplay of image and feeling, irrespective of whether there is sensory input or not. When there is sensory input, this interplay integrates it to generate waking consciousness, but in the absence of sensory input it continues to generate brain states, those brain states we call fantasy, hallucination, or dreams. Thus waking consciousness is dreaming – but dreaming constrained by external reality.

> Sophia: At one moment you make sleep to resemble contemplation in that they both deprive the body of sense and movement and draw the spirits within; and at another you make them at variance, since you say that the one must dispel and overcome the other.

> Philo: And so it is in effect, because they are similar in some things and dissimilar in others: similar in those which they discard and dissimilar in those which they adopt.

> Sophia: How can this be?

> Philo: Because both sleep and contemplation discard and inhibit sense and motion; but in doing so, sleep strengthens the power of nutrition and contemplation the power of thought [*virtù cogitative* in the Italian text, p.175]. Again, they are similar in that both draw the spirits from the exterior to the interior of the body; and are dissimilar because sleep draws them to the lower part of the body beneath the breast, viz., the belly, where the stomach, liver, intestines and other organs are placed, that they may take charge of the digestion of food for the nourishment of the body; whereas in contemplation, the spirits are drawn to the highest region of the body, above the breast, namely

assumes that what absorbs Philo and prevents him from recognizing her is an abstraction (*astratte fantasie* in the Italian text, p.172). The English translation problematically renders this "absorbing fancies" (p.198).[155] But as it turns out, that is precisely what they are. Philo now accuses her of feigning ignorance of his passion for her. Sophia refuses to admit or deny this charge but insists that Philo tell her what was making him so "pensive."[156] Using a common theme of the melancholic madness of lovers, Philo turns this into a discussion of the divine origin of not only love but indeed of all consciousness. Yet even while reflecting that divine light Philo is lovesick. This emphasis on the misery of the wise lover seems far from the classical view of wisdom inevitably bringing happiness. Obviously, Philo is wise and he finds much joy in the possession of that wisdom but he also feels a lack of

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> the brain, which is the seat of the faculty of thought and the dwelling place of the mind...Since, therefore, there is such diversity between sleep and contemplation, it is with reason that the one banishes and overcomes the other. Contemplation, however, no less than sleep, robs the body of all feeling and motion, and perchance its action is even stronger and more violent.

[155] The new English translation, more literally, renders this "abstract imaginations" on p.170. The translators, Rosella Pescatori and Damian Bacich, distinguish *fantasie* as something dependent upon the physical world from *immaginazione*, which is "independent from the physical world and connected with the Divinity" and likens this to the views of Averroes. It is not clear which of Averroes' views they are referring to. See p.19 of the New English translation where she explains that the first phenomenon will be translated "fantasie" and the second "imagination." It seems, however, that the translation fails to really distinguish between those two words on pp. 170 -172 as is promised on p.19. In fact, by translating *astratte fantasie* as "abstract imaginations" she seems to be implying that what Abrabanel meant by *fantasie* was something connected to the Divinity and not the corporeal world. I cannot agree with that, if indeed it is her opinion.

[156] See Italian text, p.172 "*cogitabundo*." In Latin it would be *cogitabundus*.

something earthly that is essentially good: namely Sophia. That is the case even though he claims to possess an ideal Sophia in his mind (p.198).[157] While he answers the subtlest metaphysical questions with self-assured facility, that most basic human existential problem of love remains unresolved. It becomes quite obvious here that Abrabanel has left the medieval world-view behind to a certain extent and has entered into the world of Renaissance thought. This transition is explained theoretically on page 204 where Philo attributes the agonies of love to divine

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[157] Interestingly, Abrabanel seems not to makes an attempt to distinguish this ideal Sophia from a mere imagination of Sophia, extracted from the sensation of her beauty as a physical person. Although he uses the somewhat ambiguous word *contemplare*, his language encourages the conclusion that this is precisely what he is talking about: "my mind...was rapt in contemplation of your beauty, the image of which, being impressed upon it, is the constant object of its desire." (p.198). See Italian text, p.172: "*la mente mia, retirata a contemplar, come suole, quella formata in te belleza, e in lei per immagine impressa e sempre desiderata, m'ha fatto lassare i sensi esteriore.*" The new English translation (p.171) is essentially the same. Interestingly, this whole discussion, which includes fantasies of sleep, (p.203) reaches its pinnacle in the discussion of the deaths of the "two holy shepherds, Moses and Aaron" by the kiss of God. Later on (p.215) Philo explains the nature of vision and presumably how the fantasies based upon it can accord with reason. For he says that according to Plato (and even Aristotle) the eye not only captures the form of the object but transmits rays from itself, not once but twice: "to make the form impressed tally in every respect with the external object." In the same way (p.215) he says: "you must not believe that the sun only gives light and does not see". And he continues asking rhetorically: "And what eyes are more excellent than the sun and stars, which in Holy Writ are called the eyes of God on account of their vision?" And so this "lengthy discussion" ends on p. 229 with the conclusion that "when our soul contemplates an object with intense love and desire, it can abandon the senses together with the other powers of the body." And on p.231 Philo admits that while Sophia's beauty "appears to me in a form more divine than human" it is accompanied by an "insatiable desire" that turns it into a "pernicious and raging poison." It is here that Philo most poignantly expresses a kind of melancholy, even referring to death as something that "would quench my ardent desire and bring rest to my troubled life." And then Sophia ends this discussion by insisting that Philo tell her of the divine origin of love.

consciousness, symbolized by the sun.[158] It is also in this dialogue that Philo expounds on that critical notion, expressed hyperbolically on page 273 as follows: "the beloved takes precedence of the lover, both in excellence and in the cause of love, and is in every way more worthy." This doctrine will need to be amended somewhat when the lover is God and the beloved are His creatures. In that case God's love means "the will to benefit His creatures and the whole universe and to increase their perfection as far as their nature will allow." (p.275). Therefore, this "increase of divine joy and perfection" is only "relative to His creatures" (p.276) and "does not prove any kind of privation in His absolute being" (p.276). It is in this dialogue also that the discussion of the views of the kabbalists is introduced. The dialogue ends with disagreement regarding the proper nature of the love that exists between the two

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[158] Sophia asks why thought should "require the loss of the senses" as thought, unlike sleep, does not require "abundance of natural heat which is required in the digestive processes." She shows herself to be less of a mystic and more of a naturalistically inclined philosopher, who sees no conflict between thought/contemplation and sensory perception, which is not to say that she was a modern empiricist. Philo sees all consciousness coming from God and the purest type, like the imagination requiring the withdrawal from the world of the senses. This fits in with a more mystical, Neoplatonic philosophical orientation. He fails to make the firm distinction between imagination as a prelude to action and thought as a prelude to knowledge that Alfarabi and his followers, including Maimonides, did.

> Philo: The soul is in itself one and indivisible, but by distributing its powers throughout the body and permeating even its surface and extremities, it branches out for certain activities pertaining to perception, movement and nutrition among various organs and divides itself among many divers faculties. In this it resembles the sun which, though one, becomes many in the diffusion and multiplicity of its rays, according to the number and diversity of places on which they fall.

protagonists. Sophia admits that she loves Philo but seems uninterested in a physical relationship and instead dwells on uniting her mind with his. It also ends with the hint that Philo still has something important to reveal regarding the effects of love of human beings. That might be quite significant since Sophia has already expressed her belief that corporeal love has mostly baneful effects. This incomplete and unsatisfying ending leads one to imagine that either something is missing or that Judah Abrabanel (speaking through Philo) was afflicted with the kind of deep melancholy[159] that can never really be assuaged but only dealt with provisionally. Although we cannot say for sure, that latter possibility as not only a

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[159] It has been suggested that Judah Abrabanel, like Ficino and many other Renaissance thinkers, was afflicted by melancholy. Ficino thought that it was a typical malady of scholars, connected to Saturn, the highest planet and the scholar's attempt to become celestial. John Burton cites Judah Abrabanel in what is perhaps the most famous book on the subject of melancholy ever written. I cannot say with certainty that this association is justified from my inspection of the text. However, Abrabanel does describe melancholy and anguish as "the fruit of love" on p.149. He also goes into a lengthy discussion of the castration of Caelus with a scythe by his son Saturn and the subsequent birth of Venus on pp.149-152. He also discusses the alternative myth that it was Saturn's genitals that were cut off and gave birth to Venus. On p.151 he says something quite astounding, especially from a Jewish perspective on procreation: "And this is the meaning of the castration with a scythe: generation in this world originates in destruction." He then goes on to describe Saturn as the destroyer. Saturn was commonly believed to be connected to the Jews. What all this might imply is that melancholy, usually attributed to Saturn, results from the same ontological condition that brings about love and generation. While none of this is decisive regarding Judah Abrabanel's own personality or temperament, it does help to answer a number of questions about his somewhat mysterious nature and regarding why he chose to display his character Philo in such a pitiable light. See Klibansky, Panofsky & Saxl, *Saturn and Melancholy*. For more recent treatments of melancholy see Angus Gowland, *The Worlds of Renaissance Melancholy* and the doctoral dissertation of Alina Feld. For a treatment of melancholy in Spanish late medieval and renaissance literature see Ricardo Castells, *Fernando de Rojas and the Renaissance Vision: Phantasm, Melancholy and Didacticism in Celestina.*

psychological reality but as a statement of an inescapable existential reality is a rather intriguing one. Of course other explanations can be envisioned as well.

Was There a Fourth Dialogue?

It has been widely believed that there was at least one more dialogue that was either never completed or was lost. That is because the third dialogue ends so inconclusively with a request from Sophia and a vague promise of more wisdom regarding love from Philo. It is immaterial to our purpose whether the fourth dialogue was ever written except for the possibility that it could show kabbalistic influence in a more palpable manner than the rest of the book. David Harari believed that he found traces of that fourth dialogue in the work of Giordano Bruno. Like much speculation regarding the life of Judah Abrabanel, some of which appeared in Harari's 1998 doctoral dissertation at Hebrew University, this claim has not been widely examined or evaluated by scholars in the field.[160] We will not base any arguments on such fragmentary and tendentious evidence but it might prove fruitful in the future if it becomes widely accepted.

Love and Intellect

This is perhaps the key concept in the entire book. Its correct understanding may well unlock the rest and reveal the true teaching behind what often appears to be a tangled jungle of medieval doctrines and his own somewhat arbitrarily enunciated opinions. For that reason, I am dealing with it here in somewhat more depth than might have been expected. We have already seen that a distinction is taken for granted by Judah

[160] See David Harari, "The Traces of the Missing Fourth Dialogue on Love by Judah Abravanel Known as Leone Ebreo"

Abrabanel between intellect, desire and will. This is an intuitive distinction that people have been maintaining since ancient times and one that we still make.[161] But his position regarding it sets him somewhat apart from the Jewish/Arabic medieval rationalist tradition. Yet many have not seen here what appears obvious to me and to some others and I acknowledge that we may well be seeing something that is not really there. I also admit that there is a good deal of ambiguity and perhaps even some inconsistency here. I will quote the *Dialoghi* extensively, invite readers to inspect the whole discussion and draw their own conclusions. But first I quote Eugenio Garin.

> The parallel between artistic creation and spontaneous becoming of nature found a powerful expression in Leonardo, after Ficino, but did not manifest itself in a less fortunate manner in Leone Ebreo. He is not a ratiocinating philosopher; he asks not for the syllogisms or the sensate experiences for the secret of things. His is an intuitive vision that seizes the substance of things in the agreement between the love that agitates the human being and the One living in the wholeness of things. His is an aesthetic intuition that gives him impulse to understand the whole as the manifestation of love directed toward a deity that is love.[162]
>
> Essence of the world, animating motor of things, power that maintains everything alive and unites

[161] We now tend to see the will as emerging out of the elementary life process of the individual or the ego. See Roberto Assagiol, *The Act of Will*, pp.6-11.

[162] Eugenio Garin, *History of Italian Philosophy*, Volume 1, p.393

> the whole, this is life-giving love, not geometrizing formula. Reason is not the one opening the doors of the temple of being that is the temple of God. Love joins the individual with the universal and does it not by comprehension but by immersion in the rhythm of things...[163]

Garin alludes here to a world-view that is not very popular among contemporary philosophers. The reason Garin's interpretation often falls on deaf ears is that nowadays many philosophers do not want to admit intuition as a legitimate component of the philosophical arsenal, except in very extreme circumstances when evidence and arguments are totally exhausted and there is still no agreement among rational persons.[164] But it seems to me that once one allows for love to be equal to reason as a principle governing both the good life and the correct understanding of the universe, something changes radically. Either one must admit intuition into philosophy (as we do in the arts) or one must say that works like the *Dialoghi* may be quite valuable and may even contain philosophical material but are really examples of literature and not very good examples of philosophy. Since most modern

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[163] Ibid, p.394

[164] Perhaps a good example of the downplaying of intuition in the area of philosophy is Bernard Crick's denial that Machiavelli was a philosopher. Disputing Leo Strauss' claim to the contrary, Crick finds little in the way of "logical justification." Yet he also readily admits that Machiavelli was "fertile as a theory-maker" and this would be impossible without "some method or typical procedure." See Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Discourses*, pp.49-51. While I do not quarrel with Crick's assessment, it is an example of how such intuitive mental processes are no longer considered a legitimate part of philosophy.

commentators have not (for whatever motives) opted for either the former strategy generally or the latter conclusion in this particular case, they are forced to downplay the intuitive aspect of the work. Another prominent feature of the thought of Judah Abrabanel, which he seems to share with Ficino, is the importance of beauty as an essential external marker of love. Garin perceptively remarks a follows. "The outward appearance of this world, whose essence is love, is beauty." This practically equates love with goodness and the essential nature of things. And he then quotes Abrabanel himself as follows. "Beauty is grace that while delighting the spirit with its knowledge moves it to loving."[165] Here we have a concept that many modern philosophers would have trouble accepting. While most everyone agrees that some kind of knowledge is a necessary condition of real love, the kind of intuitive and sensate knowledge exemplified by Leonardo is rarely accepted as true knowledge by those who consider reason to be superior to love.[166] On the other hand, a broadening of our notion of knowledge, such as Garin was obviously capable of, allows for knowledge to remain necessary for love and also (for humans) dependent upon beauty. And since knowledge cannot be

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[165] Ibid, p.395

[166] See *The Notebooks of Leonardo Da Vinci*, pp.66-67.

> The lover is drawn by the thing loved, as the sense is by that which it perceives, and it unites with it, and they become one and the same thing. The work is the first thing born of the unison; if the thing that is loved be base, the lover becomes base. When the thing taken into union is in harmony with that which receives it, there follow rejoicing and pleasure and satisfaction. When the lover is united to that which is loved it finds rest there; when the burden is laid down there it finds rest. The thing is known with our intellect.

irrational, true love must also be rational even if it does not depend upon syllogisms or other rational arguments.

Behind this discussion of love and intellect, lie two important figures, neither of which are mentioned in the book but both of whom had to be major influences on any Renaissance thinker: Thomas Aquinas and Marcilius Ficino. It might be recalled that for the mainstream medieval Arabic rationalist tradition, will is dependent upon intellect in the same manner as desire is dependent upon imagination.[167] Both Aquinas and Ficino needed to deal with that tradition. Needless to say, behind all of them lie two other thinkers who are indeed prominently mentioned by Abrabanel: Plato and Aristotle. Where does love fit in to the dichotomy between will and desire? To make a long story short, Aquinas was concerned with emphasizing the integrity of the individual soul, both in relationship to God and to its fellow human souls. This does involve some difficulties when it comes to love, in which case two individuals in some sense become one. His answer is that the loving union of two beings is not a substantive union of essence and that such an essential union is actually achieved to a greater extent in knowledge than in love.[168] One can catch a glimpse here of the Aristotelian material or passive intellect, which becomes all things.[169] Ficino, however, is much more hopeful regarding substantive union achieved through love than was Aquinas, especially since he views all such unions to be essentially about union with God rather than simply with one's

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[167] See Averroes, *Middle Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, 322, p.127 (Ivry translation)

[168] See Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, I-II, 26-28.

[169] See Aristotle, *De Anima*, G5. It is not necessary for our purposes to deal with the vexing problem of whether Aristotle speaks here of one intellect or two.

fellowman (or woman).[170] This metaphysical and mystical motif results from the enhanced Renaissance emphasis on human consciousness, which ironically often leads to the losing of that projected sense of self in the objects of consciousness. Harry Berger, Jr. called this the "monologal tendency."[171] But there is also the very real possibility that this results from a new emphasis on the a-rational in man, especially the will and love, the medieval rationalist tie between the former and the intellect now being partially severed.[172]

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[170] See Ficino's *Commentary on Plato's Symposium* (*De Amore*) Speech VI: 13. We will deal separately in the section on Ficino regarding the question whether he and Judah Abrabanel really differed regarding the ultimate felicity of humankind.

[171] See Harry Berger, *Second World and Green World*, pp. 207-211 for a good discussion.

[172] These arational elements in man should not be confused with the body or flesh, though the relationship between the two is of some interest. In the medieval period they were indeed often conflated. It became prominent in the Renaissance, however, to view disharmonious physical forms as expressions of ugly and arational psychic states. Once these two arational elements are fully distinguished from one another it is possible for the demands or desires of the body to be held in contempt even if all arational psychic elements are not. For a good description of early modern individual views regarding the relationship between body and soul see Roy Porter, *Flesh in the Age of Reason*. In particular see pp. 244-256 and his vivid descriptions of how physical forms were viewed as manifestations of spiritual or psychic states.

Nowadays it is conventional wisdom to speak of the "whole person," in contrast to the intellect alone. This is so obvious once one begins to think about it. We often look at ourselves as enlivened and enlightened by arational experiences and we often contrast them to the lifeless and purely intellectual learning that we received in school. Whether we fully agree with that assessment is not the point; it is quite comprehensible to us whether we accept it or not. Such a way of thinking may have been unintelligible to medieval man and barely intelligible to Renaissance man, who was still very much under the charm of Plato and Aristotle; yet it may have actually begun in the Renaissance. It appears to me that Judah Abrabanel was engaging in this "modern" type of thinking, whether he realized it or not, when he emphasizes the love needs of the superbly intellectually enlightened Philo. But if he himself failed to recognize this, can we still view it as a part of his

With this very brief introduction, we can now better understand how and why Judah Abrabanel enters the fray. At the very beginning of Dialogue III we find Philo so apparently absorbed in thought that he fails to recognize Sophia, his beloved. The initial discussion occurs on pp.197-200.

> Sophia: Tell me, then, why you are so preoccupied.
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> Philo: My mind, wearied of worldly affairs, and the necessity of such trivial pursuits, withdraws for refuge into itself.
>
> Sophia: For what purpose?
>
> Philo: You know the end and object of my thoughts.

The answer, of course, is that Sophia is the object of his thoughts. She perhaps already knew of his "passion" but that is a matter of dispute and Philo seems to accuse her of feigning ignorance of it. At any rate, his "mind" was absorbed in contemplation of her "beauty," the image of which is "the constant object of its desire." Something very important must be noted. It is the mind that "desires" beauty. We would nowadays tend to think of the desiring part of the personality as something distinct from the intellect but apparently that is not Abrabanel's view. What now ensues is a discussion of how the active mind can be oblivious of external reality in the same way as when a person is asleep. Indeed, Sophia could only understand sleep as an excuse for Philo not recognizing her. The

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legacy? I have no answer to that question. There are, however, times when subsequent generations can draw out valid inferences from the thought of great thinkers that those luminaries themselves were incapable of doing. This results from the evolution or movement of thought, which was discussed earlier.

two states of sleep and contemplation seem far apart and Philo agrees that they are. Sleep is natural to man and other corporeal beings and restores the "organs of sense and outward motion." Love or "amorous meditation" also deprives one of "sense and motion" but does so "not naturally but violently" and apparently to an even greater extent because Philo advises that if "sleep had been sufficient reason for my neither speaking to you, how much more should this distraction and ecstasy of love excuse me." So sleep and contemplation are "similar in some things and dissimilar in others" (p.201). But Sophia makes an insightful observation.

> It does not seem to me as if he who reflects should lose all feeling in the same way as he who sleeps; and you will not deny that in the ecstasy of love the lover still retains considerable powers of reflection and imagination which are connected with feeling, while sleep entirely robs a man of this faculty, and only that of nutrition remains to him which is divorced from the senses and is found even in plants.

It should be noted that the English translation "lose all feeling" is ambiguous and may not optimally reflect the meaning of the Italian text "*perda i sensi*" (p.175). What we are dealing with here (as the Italian text makes clear) are not emotions as much as sensations. The new English translation renders it: "loses all sensations."[173] Philo corrects her and notes that in sleep one retains the sense of touch and is sensitive to warmth and cold, which is not the case in the kind of contemplative state that he is referring to. But a certain ambiguity remains. Sophia spoke on page 201 of the lover "in the ecstasy of love" ("*ne l'estassi*" on

[173] New English translation, p.174

p.175 of the Italian text). Philo now speaks of one being "rapt in contemplation" (p.203) and losing "all feelings of warmth and cold together with the other senses..." And it becomes clear that Philo is referring to a lover who "rapt in the ecstasy of contemplating that which he loves...has no care nor thought for himself." This seems especially strange since "the essence of the soul is its own activity" and therefore it must be explained by arguing: "its essence is transformed into that object... And it no longer exists as soul, and essence of him who loves, but as the actual form of the beloved. Hence the distraction is far greater in the ecstasy of love than it is in sleep" (p.203). One wonders what kind of ecstasy Sophia was referring to since she obviously does not know of the kind that Philo speaks of. His notion seems akin to being carried away from oneself by music or mystical rapture. Perhaps she refers to a more physical or even sexual ecstasy, one that she obviously deprecates, rejects and indeed shows little appreciation for. Perhaps she speaks not from experience but from hearsay. If indeed Philo and Sophia are thinking of different "ecstasies of love," however, Sophia never admits it and the discussion drifts into a description of the kiss of death, by which Moses, Aaron and perhaps other great figures died and were immediately taken by (or merged with) God. Much more will be said about that subject later on.

What is perhaps most salient in this discussion is the attempt to overcome the traditional conflict between the intellect and the will (love) by invoking the ecstasy of contemplation of the beloved. This ultimately leads to the subject of mystical union with God. From one point of view, love appears to be subsumed here under intellect. Yet once love emerges in man it rebels against the human intellect and urges one to do irrational things. But from another point of view intellect is subsumed under a mystical notion of union with

God. And that mystical union seems to stem from a higher union between God and the First Intellect. And it is that higher unitive reality that preserves the unity of intellect and love in man. Hence, all such occurrences on the human level here below really reflect a cosmic quasi-pantheism, about which we will also have much more to say. Yet even that ultimate metaphysical condition, which we might call cosmic eroticism, seems not to be static at all but pulsating with expansive and contractive motion. This lends Abrabanel's system a dynamic quality far removed from many other metaphysical views.

Can the Human Love of God Coexist with Human Dignity?

It is well known (or at least suspected by many) that people who get carried away by the love of God often end up having contempt for ordinary human life, the good things of this world and even for themselves. The desire to merge with God or at least come into closer spiritual proximity to Him on a higher plane of reality often makes *this* life and *this* world seem to be of little value.[174] I know that this is not a very popular notion in

[174] A related theme is dealt with most admirably by Brian Copenhaver, as regards the conflict between human dignity and occultism and its implications for properly understanding Pico della Mirandola. He argues that Pico has been turned into a Kantian by modern interpreters. He contrasts Pico's hermetic (in the broad sense) sources and contrasts them unfavorably with the simplicity and clarity desired by Descartes. I am not quite sure that modern (or post-modern) philosophy really strives for the kind of simple clarity that would be the antithesis of Pico's (and Judah Abrabanel's) medieval sources. Nor am I confident that contemporary philosophy ultimately promotes human dignity although we have surely come a long way in promoting universal human dignity from a practical ethical and political standpoint. Nevertheless, Copenhaver's point is well taken and we need to think about this a great deal. There is always a tendency to interpret medieval and Renaissance thinkers in an anachronistic fashion and there is no doubt in my mind that much of occultism does indeed

the West today, and especially the United States where religion is often used to help motivate and justify worldly success. Perhaps we are on the verge of a new paradigm in religion and what I am saying should certainly not be misinterpreted as an assertion of universality or inevitability. Nevertheless, it does have certain plausibility and may at least *seem* to be a logical deduction from certain religious conceptions. Some might also view the overall ethos of the medieval period as cohering with this fundamental assumption. It seems that this is an underlying implicit assumption for Judah Abrabanel also but one that he consciously seeks to refute. On page 59 Philo and Sophia state the following opinions about love.

> Sophia: Nay, I wonder rather how love can be praiseworthy that is not governed by reason and prudence; for I thought that therein lay the difference between virtuous love and love wholly wanton and lawless and unrestrained. Hence I am considering of what sort perfect love can be.
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> Philo: You do not understand the point rightly. For unrestraint is not a property of wanton love, but pertains to all great and mighty loves, be they good or bad; the only difference being that, when the love is good, its excess heightens the virtue, when it is evil, excess aggravates the fault. Who can deny that good love may comprise wondrous and boundless desires? What love is nobler than love of God? Yet what is more ardent and

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degrade human dignity. Whether that applies to Pico or Abrabanel is something that needs to be looked at on a case-by-case basis. See Brian Copenhaver, "The Secret of Pico's *Oration* and Renaissance Philosophy."

> boundless? It is not subject to reason, which guides and preserves men, since many for love of God have held themselves of no account and sought to end their lives. Many love God so much that they unlove themselves, even as unhappy men love themselves so much that they cease to love God.

Perhaps, as a literal reading of that test attests, Judah Abrabanel believed that there was a stark choice in life between loving oneself and loving God. But there is further evidence in the book to the contrary. That choice also seems absurd to many modern people in the West who cling to the fond hope that religion will teach them to love themselves.[175] And if they are correct, perhaps it is a legacy of Renaissance thinkers like the one we are discussing since he also indicates on pages 224-225 that there is a happy mean between the wanton love of God and the misery of utterly neglecting Him.[176] Hence if we put

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[175] Love of self is indeed a quite problematic concept and as Abrabanel noted seems not to lead to happiness but to its opposite. Firstly, love of self brings with it all kinds of concerns and conflicts, both with others and with one's own present vs. future wellbeing, not to mention the philosophical problem of reflexive love. Why do I deny myself a pleasure now except to enhance my future wellbeing or that of others whom I love? If it is the former, there is an inherent problem related to the unity of self that most people barely acknowledge but which may gnaw at them nevertheless. If it is the latter, the philosophical problem regarding continuity of human egos is muted somewhat in the afterglow of a self-perceived virtue. Nevertheless, for many people what is needed to reconcile the present self with both the future self and the future wellbeing of others is an overarching cosmic narrative, often involving God. Perhaps that is one reason why religious people tend to be happier, at least according to survey data.

[176] "When the soul is too much inclined towards material and corporeal things...it loses all power of reason...sacrifices its divine intercourse...even its practical life becomes entirely irrational and purely bestial... The soul is then so miserable, being eclipsed from the light of the intellect, that it is as one with the soul of pure brutes..."

these two passages together, what reveals itself is that the "unhappy men" who "love themselves so much that they cease to love God" don't really love themselves at all, at least not as human beings. That is because love of self is a reflection of the divine love and an optimal religious outlook acknowledges both man's love of God and God's love of man. It becomes even clearer on pages 227-228 that the self-love that takes one away from God is really love of the physical, including the body. Once again, Abrabanel indicates that there is a happy mean between two bad extremes.

But Abrabanel also seems to be speaking from experience regarding those who "love God so much that they unlove themselves" and about the other "unhappy" ones who "love themselves so much that they cease to love God." It would appear that if he had to choose between them it would be the former group rather than the "unhappy men," because at least the former are somehow happy (or not unhappy) in their self-hatred while the latter are hardly on a human level at all.[177] We have seen such "religious" types even in our own day, sometimes destroying themselves along with others.

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[177] There are theoretical explanations for why focusing on the self would lead to unhappiness; assuming that humans evolved in groups, those who were concerned with the group's well-being were more likely to survive whereas the completely selfish ones might have been exterminated. Hence the modern cultural focus on the self may to a certain extent be in conflict with basic biologically based cognitive features of the human organism. Perhaps this helps to explain why religion, which seems to include nonadaptive cognitive and behavioral features such as counterintuitive beliefs and unproductive uses of time and/or resources, could be of adaptive value if it increases group solidarity. For a good discussion see Richard Sosis, "The Adapationist-Byproduct debate on the Evolution of Religion." On the other hand, some of the more extreme expressions or repercussions of religiosity might be nonadaptive and even maladaptive, such as focusing on the afterlife to the detriment of this life or adhesion to religious groups that may not be good adaptations to current environments.

Interestingly, however, such an attitude of self-deprecation and desire for self-immolation may not be normally required or exalted by the Hebrew Bible, which often extols the physical creation, says nothing about any other life and apparently even discourages the seeking after Heaven, as in the Tower of Babel story. This can even be viewed as a weakness of the biblical *genre*, especially from the standpoint of modern man, who seems to require some spiritual or contemplative methodology in order to appreciate the things of the spirit. In addition, the Hebrew Bible is relatively silent (or even negative) regarding what many want so very dearly: union with God. On the other hand, it could also be viewed as a somewhat hidden strength as it does not require relinquishing of individuality or intellectual integrity (often so important to modern human beings) in the quest for spiritual fulfillment. And perhaps if there is to be a new religious paradigm, that biblical one (or something similar) may be it. It is perhaps for similar reasons that David Novak has gone so far as to call "the return to pristine unity" a "failed experiment."[178] Judah Abrabanel, who clearly did not consider it a failed experiment, does seem to have been very much aware of this conflict, nonetheless, as the following abridged dialogue (pp. 226-227) will attest.

> Sophia: And it is but fitting that the soul, joining in such perfect union with the divine intellect, should be released from its ties with the body...May God, therefore, make our souls worthy of such a blessed end...But tell me...what fault or affection can it possess which makes it subject to so many?

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[178] See David Novak, "Self Contraction of the Godhead" in *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, p. 314.

> Philo: The cause of so many permutations in the soul is the twin love that resides within it.
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> Sophia: What is the love of the soul and why is it two-fold?
>
> Philo: Since the divine intellect is the seat of the highest and most perfect beauty, the soul, which is but a splendour emanating from it, becomes enamoured of this supreme intellectual beauty from whose lofty source it springs: such is the love of the imperfect female for the male by whom she is made perfect, and such her desire to enjoy perpetual union with him. The soul has yet another love, the twin of the former, and this is for the corporeal world inferior to it (like that of the male for the female), which it desires to make more perfect...It happens that at times the love of intellectual beauty is so strong that it draws the soul to cast off all affection for the body...

How then can one preserve the value of the physical creation and human dignity (including proper care for the human body) in the face of an otherwise overwhelming apprehension of the Infinite? This is obviously a pressing question for those who are not only religious in a conventional sense but also mystically inclined. Abrabanel answers the question by insisting that God is not only the beloved but also the lover and that the beloved is always in a superior position *vis-à-vis* her lover *qua* lover, even when demonstrably inferior to him (pp. 268-276). For example, according to Abrabanel the children and wife are actually in superior positions in the family than are the father, though essentially inferior to him (pp. 269-270). This

may seem an odd attitude in a period in which women and children had few rights and certainly appear to have been relatively unappreciated.[179] It may not even reflect general historical reality but it obviously reflects a certain ideal, of which we are ignorant regarding how widespread it was but which Abrabanel obviously shared.[180] That ideal seems to view love as a means of circumventing an otherwise impenetrable social stratification; by loving a person we elevate him/her to a status that one otherwise might not deserve and certainly would not otherwise possess. The uniqueness of this concept should not be overlooked, as it is not necessarily present even in what we often think of as the representative literature of the period. For example, Pico della Mirandola seemed to ground his conception of human dignity in man's freedom to pursue the good rather than in his being loved by God.[181] This emphasis

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[179] Perhaps that statement of Abrabanel is another partial refutation of Phillipe Ariès' well-known thesis that childhood hardly existed in the medieval period and only really came into being in the 17th century. Or perhaps his view of women and children is idiosyncratic. For a good discussion of the relative neglect of women and children in the Middle Ages see Henri Bresc, "Europe: Town and Country (Thirteenth – Fifteenth Century).

[180] Similar statements regarding honoring one's wife can be found in the *Talmud* (*Sanhedrin*, 76b and *Yebamot*, 65a) though they can be counterbalanced by other admonitions for wives to honor their husbands and for men to avoid conversing with women. What is quite clear is that the role of women in Talmudic literature avoids their degradation as is so common in most traditional societies as well as their complete equality (which is the modern ideal if not the reality). But as usual Abrabanel does not specifically quote the *Talmud*. Perhaps similarly ambiguous discussions of status in the family can be found in Christian literature and Abrabanel does not mention them either. Therefore, this rather bold statement regarding the inferior members of the family *becoming* superior through the action of love, though surely conditioned by traditional views, can perhaps be credited to Judah Abrabanel's own adroit philosophical methodology.

[181] See Harry Berger, Jr., "Pico and Neoplatonist Idealism: Philosophy as Escape" in *Second World and Green World*, pp.189-228 who says the following on pp. 207-208. "From this examination of Pico it seems

of God's love for otherwise insignificant human beings seems to be a somewhat therapeutic one that fits in with the little that we know about Judah Abrabanel — namely the fact that he was a physician and an astrologer. He seems to have recognized that the human love of God by itself is problematic and that man's salvation lies in the recognition that he (she) is also His beloved. Although we cannot examine this conjecture in depth, I will be arguing that the emphasis on inner psychological reality may be one key to truly understanding the thought of Judah Abrabanel.

The major difference between the different kinds of lovers according to Abrabanel is that when the lover is God, He desires not his own perfection at all (since He already has it) but only the perfection of the beloved (p. 275). Yet even that apparently self-evident proposition seems to be in conflict with something that he wrote earlier. On page 271 he wrote: "And since none is more excellent than God, but all inferior to Him, we must say that God moves the highest sphere through love of Himself, and that in God it is more sublime that He should be loved by Himself than that He should love Himself." The adjective "more sublime" might seem to apply to God and would imply that there are degrees of perfection in Him, something that seems heretical from a Maimonidean standpoint. Many of us in our more candid moments might admit that being loved is really more important to us than loving, but ought we to project that apparent weakness on to God? Yet even in this case (when the Lover is God) being loved is ultimately superior to loving, according to Abrabanel. The problem could be

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legitimate to draw some general critical conclusions which I think apply as well to Ficino, to Bruno, and to other thinkers influenced by Florentine Neoplatonism. In brief, it might be said of them that they go up without coming down..."

resolved by insisting that God's motive for loving Himself or for loving His creatures cannot be His own perfection, at least from His internal perspective but in this case the creation of the First Sphere. Or perhaps there is no motive at all involved in such a pure love. Ironically, God's self-love is selfless since He has nothing to gain. Yet from another perspective (that of creator or lover) God is indeed perfected by the perfection of His creation. As Abrabanel observes: "For no father can be happy while his son is imperfect: therefore, too, the ancients said that sinners dishonour, while just men exalt, the Godhead." (p. 182). If this appears to contradict the notion of God's not lacking anything, the reason may be an essential inability to reason about God, something that Judah Abrabanel appears quite willing to do.

Despite our reservations about the logical consistency of this teaching, the message itself seems clear. Only for God does love of self imply unselfish love of others and our love of God should therefore also imply love of other human beings. Love itself tends towards the other but most love is not pure. Our love is normally somewhat selfishly motivated but even if it is not and rises to selfless love of God, He does not allow us to obliterate ourselves because He is both lover and beloved.[182] Hence, human dignity is assured even when a person loves God and wants nothing more than to merge with Him and destroy his or her own annoying individuality, since being loved by God is actually superior to loving Him.

Not everyone will be swayed by this ingenious rationale. Philosophical speculation (at least axiologically) seems to move

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[182] *Dialoghi d'Amore*, pp. 270-273. On p. 275 he gives what is perhaps the best definition of divine love: "the will to benefit His creatures and the whole universe and to increase their perfection as far as their nature will allow."

us in the direction of a more perfect relationship approaching union with God once we acknowledge His existence. The deeply held belief of some is that only God is truly real, valuable and beautiful. One of the most profound and provocative treatments of this subject is "Love and Intellect in Leone Ebreo" by Hubert Dethier, who dwells as few have on the pantheistic tendencies in this work and in much of medieval philosophy as well.[183] This would cohere with the rather extreme attachment to God (from our perspective) of the medieval thinkers. If the universe were really one with God, all other values would rest on a kind of illusion, just as romantic love is often viewed by the more cerebral as a kind of illusion. But if Abrabanel is right, these are at least illusions desired by God and as such ought to be reality for most of us.[184] So (to

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[183] See *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, edited by LE. Goodman, pp. 353-386.

[184] Abrabanel's affirmation of the dignity of the creation goes beyond humankind. He speaks of the universe as the "son" of God, speaks of "paternal likeness" and "divine love for the universe" (p. 459). This seems somewhat at odds with the Judaeo-Christian tradition, which sees nature as at best an edifying example of God's creativity, as in Psalm 19; but God's love and likeness is generally reserved for humankind. Some, such as Dethier, would see this as further evidence of pantheism. The term "son" was, however, sometimes employed by philosophers for a direct creation of God and this was pointed out by Wolfson regarding Philo's use of the term for the intelligible universe. For a good discussion see Moshe Idel, "Judah Moscato: A Late Renaissance Jewish Preacher" in *Preachers of the Italian Ghetto*, edited by David Ruderman, pp. 41-66. Apparently, exaltation of the physical universe was prevalent in some Aristotelian and Averroistic thinkers. John Herman Randall, Jr. went so far as to say: "the older Averroists had been more concerned with the world than with man..." See his introduction to Pomponazzi in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, p. 260. This attitude persisted. For example, Alessandro Achillini, a contemporary of Abrabanel, believed that the human soul by uniting with the active intellect transforms the universe into spirituality and unites it with God. See Eckhard Kessler, "The intellective soul" in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, pp. 495-496. Ficino also described God as loving the world. The object of one's love would seem to have to be real.

summarize once again what Abrabanel clearly saw) if God were not our lover the knowledge and/or love of God might tend to destroy human dignity, as we know it.

Love in Renaissance Philosophy

One of the main stumbling blocks for viewing the *Dialoghi* as a kabbalistic work is its extensive fascination with the reality of mundane human love, even including its more morally problematic aspects. This seems out of place in the kabbalistic *genre*. That is not to say that other spiritually minded people would see an essential contradiction between the physically erotic and the mystical. That having been said, one of our author's main sources, ibn Gabirol, was uncomfortable with love, as we will see. And even a later writer, Robert Burton, who credits Judah Abrabanel as being "the most copious writer of this subject"[185] and goes on to practically rival him in that distinction, finds the need to apologize for "speaking of Love's causes, enticements, symptoms, remedies, lawful and unlawful Loves, and lust itself."[186] While our author finds no such need to apologize, at least one of his characters in the dialogue (Sophia) finds some of the discussions of physical love and lust uncomfortable. Judah Abrabanel, while a major and perhaps *the* major philosophical exponent of this theme of love, was hardly alone in his fascination with it. It was a quite prevalent

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As Hubert Dethier argues, "If love is based on knowledge, the latter in turn can only be of what is; the beloved object must have real existence." See "Love and Intellect in Leone Ebreo," p.385. Yet, human knowledge, while never a complete illusion, can be somewhat illusory as when we know about something while being deluded about what it really is. God, however, cannot be deluded. Therefore, it is difficult to speak of Him loving an illusion.

[185] *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, Volume III, P.10

[186] Ibid, p.8

theme of Renaissance thought. Not too long ago there was a special exhibit at the Metropolitan Museum of Art entitled "Art and Love in Renaissance Italy." Obviously, despite the perennial fascination of human beings with love, that interest was peculiarly validated in the Renaissance. One could speculate regarding the source of this significant departure, not only from Plato but from the medieval Arabic and Scholastic philosophical traditions as well. But this is not the place for such an inquiry. Instead, I will summarize the major thematic issues. Let us begin with what one of our foremost Renaissance scholars wrote.

> Without rejecting sexual and earthly love, Ficino praises above all the pure and celestial love, that is, the mutual affection and friendship between two persons who are dedicated to the contemplative life and hence recognize that their mutual relationship is founded upon the love each of them has for God.... The notion of Platonic love was taken over and adapted by many poets, including Lorenzo de' Medici and Michelangelo. Moreover, Ficino's commentary on Plato's *Symposium* became the fountainhead of a whole literature of love treatises in Italy and elsewhere... The authors of these treatises include distinguished philosophers such as Pico della Mirandola, Leone Ebreo (from whom Spinoza seems to have borrowed his notion of the intellectual love of God), Francisco Patrizi, and Giordano Bruno, as well as famous writers like Bembo and Castiglione.[187]

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[187] Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and the Arts*, p.53.

The Renaissance understanding of the importance of love seems to be related to the Scholastic discussions regarding the respective importance of intellect and will, but with a distinct difference. This does not seem to be a distinction or a problem taken very seriously by Plato. In the *Symposium* he simply takes it for granted that correct *cognitive understanding* of love will lead from the lower love of beautiful bodies to the higher love of beautiful and true ideas and ultimately to the love of God. That Platonic discussion forms the basis for the Renaissance obsession with love. But the Platonic concept conflicts with another notion quite prominent in Augustine and other early Christian thinkers, which intuits that love is connected to the will, and if the latter is diseased the former will be as well and that even the intellect will be thereby impaired. Perhaps Plato, in contrast to later thinkers, had no robust concept of will. While by the time of the *Septuagint*, a stronger interest in the will evidenced itself in Hellenistic thought, it is not altogether clear that it came directly from the Bible. The Hebrew word "*leb*," which literally means heart, can mean either will or intellect and the word "*yezer*," sometimes translated as "will," means urge or desire. The word for the verb "love" in the Bible (*ahab*) is equally ambiguous and it is not always clear whether it means unreflective delight or conscious consent. The distinction between the two does become quite evident, however, in the famous later correspondence between Abelard and Heloise.[188] Like some medieval thinkers, Marsilio Ficino (1433-1499), perhaps the most influential Renaissance philosopher, believed that the will's love is superior to the

[188] Is it illicit or ignoble desire that defiles a person or the conscious consent to such desires? See *The Letters of Abelard and Heloise*.

intellect's vision, as the former provides a more complete and satisfying relationship to God.[189] This is related conceptually to his reworking of Neoplatonic emanation theory to include a voluntary act of will and love on the part of God. This parallelism between God's love for man and man's love for God is a departure from some previous Neoplatonic schemes that emphasized the necessary emanatory relationship between God and the creation. But his view of the matter also departed somewhat from the traditional Christian concept of the damaged or diseased will,[190] which seems to be somewhat muted in Renaissance philosophy. A number of Christian thinkers noted this problem.[191]

But even if it were possible to reconcile Christian dogma, the Renaissance exaltation of love and the Platonic view of love as weakness, another problem still remained. The significance of will/love must be reconciled with another medieval view of the intellect coming down to humankind via higher spiritual entities. That concept, which may have its provenance in Alexander of Aphrodisias via Arabic philosophy, would militate in favor of intellect (over will/love) as the superior faculty. This might also challenge the significance of the Christian doctrine of a diseased will as the result of original sin. If will (love) is an inferior faculty, its wretchedness would be of much less concern as long as the superior intellect was not

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[189] See Marsilio Ficino, *Opera Omnia*, p.663.

[190] While the Christian concept of original sin may have its origins in a statement in *Genesis* VI: 5, has parallels in the *Talmud* and even in later rabbinic thought such as the Renaissance rabbi Leon Modena, it is Christianity that specifically centered the problem of original sin in the will.

[191] Opposition to the Platonic and Renaissance theories of love was most intense in circles under the influence of Savonarola or the Protestant reformers. For a fuller discussion see Jill Kraye, "Moral Philosophy" in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, pp. 356-359.

corrupted. But then, as now, there were thinkers who questioned the supremacy of intellect.[192] Hence we find humanist thinkers such as Erasmus and Cervantes somewhat suspicious of placing all of ones bet on intellect, since intellectual perfection cannot guarantee a proper and pure love.[193] These rather complicated arguments also seem to have been absorbed by Judah Abrabanel; yet he also persisted in the Judeo-Arabic tradition of considering the intellect to be the highest human faculty. In this he shows himself to be a loyal son not so much of his father as of the entire Jewish philosophical tradition. Yet as we will see, that loyalty is perhaps more formal than substantive at times. He takes the Renaissance obsession with will and love at least as seriously as he does his own philosophical tradition, which stressed the supreme value of the intellect, and it places him in a rather difficult situation.[194] Although the conflict between will and

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[192] One earlier 14th century thinker, Coluccio Salutati, seems to have wavered on the subject of the superiority of the will vs. the intellect. His problem seemed to be reconciling the dignity of man with original sin. His original solution was the more typically medieval one of exalting reason but he then moved to a philosophy of will. See Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness: Humanity and Divinity in Italian Renaissance Thought*, volume 1, pp. 51-102, 196-197, 400.

[193] "But what benefit is there from love that is blind? Without charity, knowledge puffs up... But each one calls for the assistance of the other, and joins with it in a friendly union." See Erasmus, *Preface to Augustine's City of God*. Compare this with Cervantes' satire, *El Licenciado Vidriera*. When the protagonist is accused of wickedness for insulting an otherwise innocent woman of Jewish ancestry ("Brother Glass Licenciate...you have more of the knave than the madman about you") he replies: "No se me da un ardite, como no tengo nada de necio." ("I don't care a jot for that provided that I have nothing of the stupid person about me"). See Cervantes, *Novelas Ejemplares*, p. 229 and Forcione, *Cervantes and the Humanist Vision*, pp. 225-316 for a good discussion.

[194] Nowadays this would not be as difficult a situation to be in and would cohere with all that we now know about the relationship between reason and emotion. Since David Hume pronounced that reason is the slave of passion,

intellect is muted in the *Dialoghi*, it is constantly present as is Abrabanel's desire to reconcile the more traditional Jewish philosophical view with that of Ficino and other Renaissance thinkers. Perhaps the main conflict between these world-views concerns beauty and imagination as wellsprings of love in contrast to "the good" (along with the truth) as revealed by the intellect. What are the respective values of these contrasting approaches and how are they to be reconciled?[195] This problem of the intellect vs. the will/love can only be resolved on a much higher mystical level of union with the divine.

Mystical Union

Judah Abrabanel argued for love's origin in the divine reality but, as we will see, his solution is to postpone the problem of intellect vs. will still further by saying that the ultimate relationship to God is beyond both. Some, however, find that conclusion to be unsubstantiated in his philosophy.[196] This is

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philosophers have been far less insistent upon the rigid separation of the two in actual human functioning, in contradistinction to their segregation in formal logical argumentation. More recently still, brain science has revealed the crucial role of the Thalamus in the relying of emotional material from the Limbic System to the Cerebral Cortex, where rational calculations are made. Today we tend to speak of the Thalamo-Cortical System, which integrates rational and emotional decisions. The notion that goodness consists wholly in rationality, after the horribly contrary evidence of the Nazi era, perhaps ought now to be consigned to a museum of discarded ideas. Recent studies of psychopaths strongly suggest emotional deficits rather than intellectual ones as the root cause. See S. Campanella, M.E. Vanhoolandt and P. Philippot, "Emotional deficit in subjects with psychopathic tendencies as assessed by the Minnesota Inventory-2: and event-related potentials study" *Neuroscience Letters*, Volume 373, Issue 1.

[195] For an excellent study of how Ficino achieved this reconciliation, see Rocío del la Villa Ardura's introduction (*estudio preliminar*) to Ficino's *De Amore*, pp. XX-XXXVIII.

[196] One of the best discussions that I have seen is by Alfred Ivry, who sees quite correctly the tension between intellect and love in Leone Ebreo. This

the case despite the fact that Abrabanel claims intellectual truth to be essential, yet ultimately inferior to a correct love of God. That love, according to Abrabanel, culminates in something that is actually quite different from love, as ordinarily conceived.[197]

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is personified in the two partners in the dialogue: Philo (love) and Sophia (wisdom). On the surface, it appears that love has the upper hand but as Ivry points out the truth of the matter is more complex. Ivry also sees that for Ebreo intellect is indeed the highest human faculty. Hence the highest kind of love involves the intellect. Ivry concludes, therefore, that Abrabanel never really transcended the intellect as he claimed to have done. I cannot completely agree with that but I can see how one could easily read Abrabanel through an Averroistic rather than a Renaissance lens and this may be the result of Abrabanel's own tendency to obfuscate. See Ivry's "Remnants of Jewish Averroism in the Renaissance." As examples of Abrabanel's ambiguity, on p.21 he says that intellect "alone among the parts and powers of men escapes the hideousness of death." Nevertheless, on p. 447 he also seems to allude to the self-transcendence of intellect in union with God through love.

> "Knowledge without love is of good things which are not beautiful and therefore not desired... All other knowledge, which is of good and beautiful things, either has love or desire as its end...or else it is itself the end of desire, and such is the actual enjoyment of food when we partake of it. There is no doubt that the latter, to wit, the actual enjoyment of food, is the most perfect knowledge we have of it... Thus desire and love are none other than the way of imperfect knowledge leading to perfect and unitive knowledge."

Here Abrabanel seems to be likening ordinary knowledge and love as they both imply a separation between the subject and object. But the "perfect and unitive knowledge" (the metaphor for which is the actual enjoyment of food) while certainly deserving the name "knowledge" transcends ordinary knowledge just as it transcends love.

[197] Obviously, both Judaism and Christianity stress love of God and one's neighbor. The emphasis in the *Dialoghi* seems to be on ecstatic union as the culmination of human love, whether it be love of God or love between a man and a woman. What we generally think of as pure unselfish love (sometimes called *agape*) seems mostly confined to God and even there we sense a strange quandary regarding whether God's love for man and the world might perhaps be based on His need for His creation to be good or even perfect.

What he obviously seems to be alluding to is mystical union between man and God.[198] We will be discussing this in much greater depth in a later chapter. Sexual union symbolizes this union: "l'atto coppulativo de l'intima e unita cognizione divina...E quello è l'ultimo atto e beato fine." This emphasis on the union of the lover and the beloved in an act of enjoyment such as eating or sexual union appears to me to be a kind of spiritualized Epicureanism.[199] It reveals a deep antinomy in

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Yet Abrabanel also speaks of a post-union state of non-union in which the human intellect is enlightened and becomes practically angelic. This state, while not elaborated upon, might also allow for something like pure unselfish love. This will be further discussed later on.

[198] After a long and difficult discussion regarding the heavenly spheres, the intellects associated with them, Aristotle's view, the view of Averroes and other Arabic philosophers, Abrabanel comes to the following conclusion (pp.186-187).

> S. So you deny that the other motors roll their heavens to achieve their own perfection...(as Averroes says)?
>
> P. I do not deny it. On the contrary, I tell you that they desire union with God, so as to consummate their perfection...And therefore it is that Aristotle says, that this Godhead is their supreme end, and not, as Averroes holds, their own perfection immanent in them.
>
> S. And is it for a like reason that the felicity and ultimate end of our human intelligence lies in union with God?
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> P. Assuredly: because their ultimate perfection, end and true felicity, rests...in their elevation and union with the Godhead.

[199] This would be an unusual but by no means an unheard of influence in the Renaissance. Kristeller was of the opinion that Valla espoused a "Christianized Epicureanism." See Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and its Sources*, p. 31. Cosma Raimondi was a follower of Epicurus, describing his philosophy as more realistic than Stoicism and closer to Christianity since the latter justifies belief and behavior by a blissful afterlife. For the influence of Epicurianism in the Renaissance see Jill Kraye, "Moral Philosophy" in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, pp. 374-386. Also see Eugenio Garin, *History of Italian Philosophy*, volume 1, pp.193-202. Regarding the text itself, Judah

Abrabanel's thinking between the primacies of intellect vs. that of unitive ecstasy. His Iberian intellectual tradition valued the former but his Italian milieu may have preferred the latter. He resolves it by declaring the intellect to be the subject undergoing mystical union and placing that union at the very summit of all intellectual effort. Yet the attainment of that unity also seems to transcend what we normally mean by intellect, even though Abrabanel may never have actually admitted it. This will be treated in greater depth in the chapter on mystical union.

The Origin of Love

This will also be discussed in much greater depth in a later chapter but it constitutes the metaphysical capstone of the entire treatise. Obviously, God is desired in a Platonically erotic sense by all other beings (not necessarily consciously) because of their neediness and relative lack of being. That is nothing new but it prompts a rather complex and even conflicted discussion regarding love and desire. What is novel is the notion that God reciprocates the love of His direct inferior, which one might call the "supreme intellect" or "supreme beauty" and this gives birth to something new, which in turn loves God and He reciprocates that love as well. Hence, love brings forth creativity and new creations. But unlike some other systems, God remains in the forefront and is not replaced by subordinate intellects. There are problems, of course. One

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Abrabanel at times seems to reject pleasure in general but a closer inspection reveals that he is not consistent in the use of the term. For example, on page 332 of the new English translation after Sophia asks why he makes a distinction between love and appetite since the purpose of both is "enjoyment," Philo answers as follows. "It is true that the end of each of them is pleasure, but beautiful pleasure is the end of love, and unbeautiful pleasure the end of appetite."

must distinguish between the love of a child not yet born or even conceived and the love of one that has been born. One must explain why it is that God cares at all about the creation if He lacks nothing. These questions bring forth a theory of the circles of love. Apparently, what comes around goes around. There is a great deal of dynamism in the system — much more than in the medieval emanationist schemes that it derives from and depends upon. This may be an area where Judah Abrabanel truly lends something creative and original to the centuries long attempts to integrate Moses and Plato.[200]

Perhaps most interesting of all is Philo's love for Sophia, which at the end of the third dialogue he attributes to her "rich endowment" and the fact that her soul is "inclined to wisdom." This native endowment and "natural beauty" is considered by Philo (Judah Abrabanel?) to be more attractive than actual wisdom, which "consists in learning and familiarity with divers doctrines, and it is like artificial beauty."[201] This extolling of natural endowment over accomplishment is an astounding doctrine from a Jewish point of view since Judaism tends to stress action over natural inclination.

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[200] It is well known that Ficino and Pico della Mirandola both believed that Plato had learned from Moses; it was a common belief that may have been originally proposed in Christian thought by Eusebius. But Ficino also alludes to Hermetic influence on Plato. The idea of Mosaic influence on Plato may even go back farther in Hellenistic literature. But if Plato had studied the Bible, it would most likely have required a Greek translation prior to the *Septuagint*. Not all Renaissance scholars believed it likely and Giannozzo Manetti (who took a more historical and literal approach) rejected that belief. See Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness*, vol. 2, p. 587.

[201] See discussion on pp.463-465.

Summary

In this introductory chapter I have attempted to acquaint the reader with what I consider major aspects of the thought of Judah Abrabanel. This might suffice for a superficial overview but it is unlikely to be very satisfying. If you are still confused please remember that this (paraphrasing Winston Churchill) is only the end of the beginning and certainly not the beginning of the end. There are a great many additional subjects that we must discuss before we can really understand the book. Even that which we have already discussed needs to be re-emphasized and many of those subjects will be revisited later in the book. Some will even be discussed more than once under various general categories. In a sense, this process of repetition mirrors the *Dialoghi* itself, which often appears somewhat less systematic and organized than what one might expect or desire from a philosophical work. This perhaps betrays its quite ambitious purpose: to discuss God, the universe and man. That is something that cannot possibly be an easy task. It will not be approached in a straight line either. It may even involve us in inconsistencies, both apparent and real. It resembles the circles of love, which go round and round. But that circular movement may also be a spiraling process of transcending at least some of those inconsistencies. I would ask the reader to patiently keep that in mind. But before we discuss some of those more difficult hermeneutical problems it seems to me to be worthwhile to briefly describe prior Jewish literature and Judah Abrabanel's relationship to it.

Chapter II: The Background of Jewish Thought

Much of what I will have to say in this chapter might appear elementary to specialists in Judaica. But this book, while specifically about the relationship between the *Dialoghi d'Amore* and Kabbalah, may be of interest to a wide range of readers. This chapter is certainly not meant to be an adequate history of Jewish thought, however. Nor is the *Dialoghi* a very good representative example of Jewish thought. For reasons that will be subsequently laid out, the question of the Jewishness of the book may be of import as regards our more specific quest. In order to place the relationship between the book and Jewish literature in some sort of perspective, we will therefore need to look at the history of Jewish thought. The underlying and unresolved question regarding the Jewishness of the book, while ostensibly a factual one, might require a normative or prescriptive assumption in order to allow us to answer it. Obviously, this dispute would not have arisen if the book in question has not appeared exceptional in comparison with most other Jewish literature of the period. That would be rather apparent to any reader of the book. But Judah Abrabanel was most certainly a Jew and the scion of a very prominent Jewish father and family. He was also quite obviously a proud, self-proclaimed follower of Moses. If it turns out that despite those affirmations he was really more of a general philosopher than a Jewish one, such a determination can only be made by first understanding the main themes of Jewish thought. Even then, we might not know enough or have thought enough about it to answer the question whether such a universal philosopher could also be an authentically Jewish one. Or if it does turn out that this is really a normative question we may have to leave it

unanswered. At any rate, it would be impossible to understand this work without some foundational knowledge of Jewish intellectual history including the history of Kabbalah, which will be provided specifically in the next chapter. For those aforementioned reasons and for the benefit of those readers who may lack that background of knowledge I offer this discussion.

Perhaps many people's definition of what is or is not "Jewish" is too narrow in terms of the entire history of Jewish thought. Scholars nowadays make a firmer distinction than they previously did between Rabbinic Judaism and what came before historically. It might also be possible to make distinctions between themes that are not only "Judaic" (in the broad sense in which Boccaccini uses that word) but that also have characterized the Jewish people historically and could be called "Jewish" and themes that are more specifically rabbinic.[202] Therefore, there may be historically Jewish themes that some no longer think of as being specifically Jewish. That is a tentative proposal that we cannot fully explore here but it is surely true that some think it perfectly intelligible to describe Jewish people, places and literature as being "not very Jewish" without

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[202] Gabriele Boccaccini suggests a distinction between "Jewish" and "Judaic." According to that distinction, anything pertaining to "the monotheistic religion of YHWH" is "Judaic" while "Jewish" refers to "the people, history, and culture of ethnic Jews." See *Roots of Rabbinic Judaism*, pp. 34-35. Under these definitions, Christianity is Judaic but not Jewish. While I am sympathetic to this distinction, it does raise some interesting questions regarding Jewish identity that we will not be able to fully explore. Why would it be that such very different ethnicities as Indian Jews and Polish Jews are all "ethnic Jews"? It would seem to have something to do with religion but a purely religious criterion, according to Boccaccini's view, might have to be Judaic and not Jewish. I feel confident that for definitional purposes such problems could be resolved by citing certain historical facts regarding Jewish identity in different cultures. Arriving at universally binding definitions is not an easy matter and I will continue to use "Jewish" in the remainder of the book.

really defining what they mean by it. Is it possible, for example, for a synagogue or a religious Jewish person to be "not very Jewish"? Obviously, there are some factual phenomena that are being referred to in such judgments even if we might object to them or to the terms being used.

The question of "Jewishness," like many definitional problems, may ultimately be resolved by a value judgment based upon some basic intuition but like all such judgments it is best performed with as much knowledge of the facts as is feasible. Such value judgments are not normally regarded as being part of the academic enterprise. Nevertheless, academic jargon becomes artificial and confusing when it deviates too much from popular usage. A perusal of traditional Jewish literature will perhaps yield some intuitive understanding of what writings qualify as "Jewish," or at least do so under certain conventional or popular definitions. Knowing what those conventions are would allow one to either accept them or propose a broadening or narrowing of them

I intend to tease out certain motifs that would be particularly relevant to the intellectual background of the *Dialoghi d'Amore*, as possibly a work of *specifically* Jewish philosophy. Some other essentially Judaic themes have become so widely accepted in Western and Islamic civilizations that they hardly need to be mentioned since anyone brought up in one of those cultures might have been influenced by them: for example, monotheism, the primacy of morality, a non-cyclical view of history, creation, God's continued presence in history, divine mercy and wrath, man created in the image of God, religious law, etc. These universal themes (which many people might no longer consider "Jewish") have sometimes even been viewed as the main contribution of Judaism to world

civilization.[203] There is no doubt that they also constitute an essential part of Jewish tradition but, oddly enough, they are sometimes de-emphasized by traditional Jews in favor of more particularistic concerns. The main theme that I want to discuss, therefore, is universalism vs. particularism, which has received

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[203] We now suspect, however, that many of the themes that are prominent in the Bible and were once thought unique to it (such as historical progress) can, at least according to some interpretations, be found in other ancient cultures. Nevertheless, such blanket generalizations often contain some truth, especially as regards prominence, influence, etc. For example, see Max Weber, *Economy and Society*, volume 1, p.418.

> In the Yahweh cult, the most important instance in the history of religion, there evolved at least a first approach to universalistic monotheism...In this case, universalism was a product of international politics, of which the pragmatic interpreters were the prophetic protagonists of the cult of Yahweh and the ethics enjoined by him. As a consequence of their preaching, the deeds of other nations that were profoundly affecting Israel's vital interests also came to be regarded as wrought by Yahweh. At this point one can see clearly the distinctively and eminently *historical* character of the theorizing of the Hebrew prophets, which stands in sharp contrast to the speculations concerning nature characteristic of the priesthoods of India and Babylonia.

Also see Karl Jaspers, *The Future of Mankind*, p.125.

> By biblical religion, the Jews once opened Western eyes to the depths from which we have been able to live despite all evil, from which the assurance of God has made human dignity impervious. It is the Jew in his overwhelming power of suffering and love, his indomitable absoluteness, his assurance of God, who speaks out of Jesus even on the cross, with the psalmist's words, "My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?" With the Old Testament and with the New, which is almost entirely their work, the Jews brought Christianity into the world, joining the Greeks and Romans in laying the foundation of the West — the firmest and deepest part of the foundation, which carries the whole.

a great deal of attention in recent Jewish thought.[204] This stems from the obvious fact that the Jewish people have almost always

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[204] This should not be confused with conscious interest in the cultures or literatures of others. We know that a fairly large segment of Jews took a lively interest in Greek culture in the Hellenistic period and therefore might be viewed as less particularistic in that regard than the Greeks, who took almost no interest in the cultures of others. In fact, the Bible was the first "barbarian" book to be translated into Greek and the only one that they took much of an interest in at all. In a sense this proves the strong universalism of biblical literature. See James Sanders, *Torah and Canon*, pp. 1-3. It also might explain a great deal regarding the relative indispensability of the biblical literature in terms of the evolution of Greco-Roman civilization, since that literature was the only such foreign literature that could shake that civilization at its roots.

A quite blatant example of Jewish particularism is the following. We know that the Canaanites were particularly despised by the ancient Israelites because according to the Bible both Abraham and Isaac made great efforts to ensure that their children did not marry one. There was also a quite explicit divine curse placed on Canaan because of the sin of his father, Ham. But whom did the sons of Jacob marry? The Bible is largely silent regarding that. According to Rashi's commentary (*Genesis* XXXVII: 35) Rabbi Nehemiah opined that they married Canaanite women. Rabbi Judah, however, (according to Rashi) told a different story. Each of the sons of Jacob had a twin sister (never mentioned in the Bible) and they married them (presumably excluding Joseph and Judah whose marriages are explicitly described). The extremely strange nature of this story begs for an explanation. Unfortunately, the English translation of Rashi's commentary is inaccurate and reflects a later opinion (perhaps that of Nachmanides). If we look at *Midrash Tanhuma*, p.237, we find the midrashic source of Rashi's commentary. This story of course provoked a great deal of controversy in the medieval period. How could they have married their twin sisters, something that is not only prohibited by the Torah for Jews and even prohibited to non-Jews by the Noachide laws, as transmitted by Jewish tradition? Nachmanides provided a solution. They married one another's twin, who were merely stepsisters or as we would say "half-sisters" since there were four mothers involved and one father. Noachide law does not prohibit marriage with the daughter of one's father who is not also the daughter of one's mother. Now why would such an elaborate tale be told if the only purpose was to explain how the sons of Jacob did not marry Canaanites? It would have been so much simpler to merely assume that they (like their father and grandfather) married women from other ethnicities (most likely from related clans or tribes). The answer I believe lies in a mythology of origins. Jewish tradition often even extols the virtues of those

been a quite small minority relative to the other peoples around them with little chance of becoming a majority. They were quite often harassed and threatened and needed to focus upon their own particular survival. In addition (and perhaps more significantly) they believed themselves to have been uniquely chosen by God.[205] This belief eventually evolved under

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sons of Jacob, despite the quite explicit biblical accounts of their many misdeeds and even their own father's condemnation of many of them. Perhaps the marrying of one's twin (or at least one's half sister) is a way of preserving the purity of the Jews. Nowadays we would consider this a rather extreme (and unhealthy) form of racism but we must attempt to view it in the historical (and mythological) context, especially in the absence of modern genetic knowledge. It is also possible that the marriage of twins account is a recapitulation of the mythology of Adam and Eve, who were (according to some midrashic accounts) born as two faced and then split up. If that is the case, then the mythology of racial origins is wedded to an even more fundamental anthropological mythology.

[205] There are three biblical Hebrew words that denote communities, which are often interchangeable but have somewhat different connotations: *amim, goyim, umim* (plural forms). For example, in *Deuteronomy* XXVIII: 64-65 *amim* and *goyim* obviously refer to the same collectivities. All three can refer to either the Jews or the nations. The first is peculiarly associated with the Jewish people, however, and was translated in the singular into Greek as *laos* (meaning perhaps a human community on its most basic level) and into English as "people." The second, originally referred to geographical units (described in *Genesis* 10) has the connotation of a collectivity of people that can be mobilized and mostly refers to non-Jews. In *Deuteronomy* it refers only to Gentiles. It was translated in the singular into Greek as *ethnos*, into Latin as *gens* and the English "nation" but also as "Gentile." Eventually, certainly by the time of the *New Testament*, it became practically synonymous with "non-Jew," as did the original Hebrew word in Jewish parlance. The third word (*umim*) is less ubiquitous and significant and, despite its likely derivation from "mother" is also often translated as "nation." Although the meanings of these words are rather fluid (especially in the Psalms) and their common translations stemming from the *Septuagint* and *King James Version* somewhat misleading, it could be said that the singular word *am* has a distinctive connotation of intimacy and only it is inflected in the Bible as "My people" or "His people." Hence, the "ethnocentrism" of the Jews (a poor word given its association with gentiles) originally seems to have stemmed from the perception of an intimate relationship between God and His people and therefore transcends normal

rabbinic Judaism in quite characteristic ways even if there were always less representative opinions. What the purpose of that "chosen-ness" is may ultimately be the most important question but we will be primarily looking at less philosophically deep attitudes and beliefs that stem from historical or sociological conditions. Therefore this theme is not quite so relevant to Christianity and Islam, both of which, under the influence of Judaic values and ideas regarding exclusive religious truth, attempted to convert others to their ways of thinking and quite often succeeded. Indeed, the very success of those other religions and the resulting need to differentiate themselves from them may partially explain the eventual de-emphasis of universalistic concerns by traditional Jews.[206]

There are some who believe that Judaism can and ultimately will become as universalistic as any other religion but history so far has not borne that out. Of course, almost anything can happen in history but our task here is merely to describe facts and not to prognosticate. When we speak of Jewish particularism we are not speaking pejoratively nor are we extolling it; we are simply stating a fact.[207] I do believe,

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cultural, linguistic, racial, political and ethnic boundaries. See Joshua Fishman, et al, *The Rise and Fall of the Ethnic Revival*, pp.3-15 for a good discussion.

[206] Admittedly, the matter is a bit more complex than can be treated feasibly here. For example, the Jews achieved a great deal of success in proselytizing in the Roman Empire, but we are not quite sure regarding the degree. Nevertheless, it was during that period that some of the most virulent anti-gentile utterances emerged in the Talmud. The subsequent success of Christianity was barely acknowledged in the Talmud; some say that it was the elephant in the room that no one chose to speak about but that motivated many of the other discussions anyway.

[207] Nor am I attempting to explain that fact in terms of genetic consanguinity, ancient geographical proximity or ancient political affinity. Indeed, it seems to me that most attempts to understand ancient patterns of social organization fail to one extent or another and even more so do they fail to

however, that such a fact (like most things) can be problematic when it is taken to an extreme. Regarding the three levels of biblical, midrashic and kabbalistic writings, Moshe Idel states: "In all three *corpora*, the national struggle of the Jews with the gentile nations is the paramount factor in shaping many of the Jewish discourses."[208] I think that is a very fair statement of fact regarding Jewish intellectual history.

There is one other theme that also interests me in this context and it is to be found quite consistently in Jewish texts: God's justice in this world.[209] I am not suggesting that other religious traditions are not concerned with it (because they surely are) but simply that it is an obsession with Judaism to a degree not necessarily present in the other Abrahamic religious communities and perhaps explains why the accompanying doctrine of free will is so much stronger in Judaism than in those other religions. Justice and accountability only make sense if one assumes the freedom of the will. I will not deal with Eastern religions, as it would take us much too far a field and because they lie outside of the cultural context of the book that we are dealing with. .

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explain something as complex as the survival of the Jewish people as a more or less coherent unity. See Henry Sumner Maine, *Ancient Law* and Ferdinand Tonnies, *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft* for the classical expression of the first type of explanation. For an up to date assessment see Steven Grosby, *Biblical Ideas of Nationality*, particularly pp. 8-26.

[208] Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, 136

[209] From a psychological perspective, it is easy to see how this theme can be either causally or meaningfully connected with the previous one. Oppressed people (other things being equal) are likely to have a heightened sense of injustice and a corresponding need to see such injustices corrected. Needless to say, however, they do not in their treatment of outsiders always live up to their own moral outrage at injustices committed against them by others. But that very observation of dissonance when they do not live up to such expectations might seem to prove the rule.

No citing of specific texts can actually prove this, of course, but it seems to me that Judaism has been exceedingly concerned with justifying God's actions in the world and its adherents are typically quite dissatisfied with any attempt to impugn it. I have found through personal experience that religious Jews are generally quite dissatisfied with any explanation that implies any arbitrariness on the part of God. This view is instantiated in the tendency to view such figures as Abraham and Moses as inherently righteous even prior to their encounters with God. That is not to say that there are not other lesser strands in Judaism, which allow for such arbitrary divine actions. Christians, on the other hand, quite often view God's choice of Israel as an arbitrary one and as a model for their own undeserved relationship with God. Muslims also seem to me to have less of a problem with a notion of the inscrutability and arbitrariness of God's decrees. This disparity may stem from the psychological need to justify a favor that has been bestowed upon oneself, which might be endemic to a community that has always considered itself chosen.[210] In few other traditions, for example, do we find the founder (Abraham) imploring (and even politely insisting) that God act in a just manner.[211] It will be interesting to see how Judah Abrabanel deals with this question and we will be looking at this later on in the chapter.

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[210] I readily admit that more philosophically inclined religious Jews may be quite adept at ignoring or bypassing this self-justificatory tendency. But Judaism is not basically a philosophical religion and the concept of chosenness has an affinity to certain other popular religious motifs.

[211] "Far be it from You! Shall not the Judge of all the earth deal justly?" *Genesis*, 18:25 (New JPS translation) p. 29

The Biblical Background

Judah Abrabanel, unlike his father, was not primarily a biblical exegete. But it is good to start at the beginning even if we cannot give it all the attention that it deserves. Surely, Judah Abrabanel absorbed a great deal of knowledge and interest in biblical studies from his father even if he veered off in a somewhat different direction. The problem of universalism vs. particularism will be applied to the biblical writings.

We cannot really speak of one biblical background, however, since the various books of the Hebrew Bible each have their own particular orientations. In general we can perhaps say that *Genesis* and the wisdom literature (*Proverbs, Job, and Ecclesiastes*) appear to be quite universalistic, as do the books of *Ruth* and *Jonah* (at least according to one reading of the latter).[212] *Genesis*, for example, often treats Gentiles in a very positive light (i.e. Eliezer, Abraham's overseer, Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, Abimelech, a Gentile priest). Of course a constant underlying background of *Genesis* is the pagan nature of human civilization, yet it rarely if ever explicitly deals with questions of religion and culture. For that reason perhaps the more rigid divisions between human societies are not as apparent there. Those questions become much more prominent in the other books of the *Pentateuch* and also in some other biblical literature. Yet even in the latter four books of the

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[212] Jonah was a prophet of God who disobeyed God when told to prophesize to Nineveh, a traditional enemy of Israel. How is this possible? Perhaps Jonah really worshipped both God and Israel. Or perhaps he was not a prophet in the exalted sense that we mean when we speak of the literary prophets of the Bible. The former is obviously problematic though it might allude to an ancient ditheism. The latter goes against Jewish tradition in including *Jonah* as a prophetic work. In any case, the moral of the tale is fairly obvious: God's will and commandments supersede any communal affiliations or affections.

Pentateuch there is a curiously universalistic theme involving not only fair treatment of but also love of the stranger or sojourner. This theme is often associated with the remembrance of the fact that the Israelites had themselves been strangers or sojourners in Egypt. Perhaps this is the reason that the retelling of the story of Israel's enslavement and liberation from Egypt is the foundational quasi-historical event in Judaism. We will have much more to say about the treatment of the stranger (*ger*) in the next section.

The book of *Proverbs* is hardly particularistic at all, never even specifically mentioning Israel, the Sabbath or the dietary laws. Its admonitions could plausibly be addressed to anyone and it never mentions any special revelation to the Jewish people; but it does indeed warn against strange or foreign women. The book of *Job* is also addressed to everyone and many of the rabbis even concluded that Job was not a Jew at all. The book of *Jonah* represents a bit of an enigma. The real hero (God) is quite universalistic in His desire to allow the city of Nineveh to repent but his supposed prophet, Jonah, appears to be so driven by hatred for the Assyrians (a traditional enemy of Israel) that he even disobeys God's command![213] The most particularistic strand (even approaching quasi-racism) is the book of *Ezra* with its doctrine of the holy seed and the specific condemnation of physical unions with other peoples.[214]

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[213] As I alluded to previously, there are other possible readings of *Jonah* but this seems to be the simplest and most traditional one.

[214] *Ezra*, 9:2. Perhaps the origin of the term "holy seed" lies in the much more ambiguous concept in *Isaiah*, 6:13, where no mention is made of any kind of impurity regarding physical intermingling of seed. This strange teaching of Ezra may have become somewhat normative as it became associated with the restoration of the Jewish people. See James A. Sanders, *Torah and Canon*, p.51. "It is not at all stretching the evidence to suggest that until Ezra worked his wonder, fragmentation and disintegration had reached advance stages in the several Jewish settlements throughout the

The other books are somewhat of a mixed bag containing many universalistic and particularistic elements. *Exodus*, for example, begins the process of emphasizing the significance of the Jews as a people with a special relationship to God. That relationship does not necessarily translate into self-congratulatory attitudes, however. For example, the prophetic literature is generally obsessed with the sins of the Jewish people, which could be called either particularistic or universalistic, depending upon one's view, but is certainly not self-congratulatory. In Deutero-Isaiah we find a very interesting statement where the prophet calls his mission to the Jews a small thing and his other role of "light to the nations" an even more important function.[215] This illustrates the strong messianic element of prophetic Judaism, which takes quite seriously God's promise to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob that they would be a blessing to *all* the nations of the world. While we will not discuss messianism intensively, it should be noted that it is an essential element in both Christianity and Judaism and in Western civilization in general, to an extent perhaps not seen in other cultures.

Regarding God's justice in the world, a theme related to messianism but broader in its extension, it is surely a major theme in *Genesis*, where God continuously justifies His actions

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world." Regarding the prohibition of foreign wives, there is a debate regarding whether they were considered morally or ritually defiling. I cannot take a position on this or whether that distinction is valid for the period in question. There is evidence that Gentiles were not then considered ritually impure. Nevertheless, if the problem is a moral one it still rests upon moral principles that we today would consider racist and immoral.

[215] *Isaiah*, 49:5-6. Whether this servant is the same as the "suffering servant" in *Isaiah* 53 and whether it is Israel itself or a particular Jewish prophet (or messiah) is irrelevant to the question of particularism and universalism.

in relationship to man and the world that he has created. The notion that He might simply do as He pleases with His creation does not seem to be fully operative there, even if we would consider some of His punishments rather draconian by modern standards of ethics or child-raising. In other biblical books, however, there is far less of an attempt to justify all of God's actions, which is not to say that the theme of God's justice is not operative in them. The omission at times of specific justifications for God's actions creates interpretive problems, no doubt, which come to a head in the book of *Job*. But taking an overview, which of course includes the prophetic literature, the notion of a just God seems to remain a major and fairly consistent biblical theme.

Something else needs to be said about the prophetic literature, though we will not be able to pursue it. While it does not declare a complete break with the previous books of the Bible or generally reject the laws of Moses, at times it appears somewhat inconsistent with the teachings of the latter or even appears to promulgate new revelations, as when Jeremiah speaks of a "new heart." Two additional obvious examples are the general prophetic opposition or discomfort regarding the sacrificial cult and, alternatively, some new teachings of Ezekiel regarding rules of the priesthood. Ezekiel's teachings, therefore, appear to be the most obviously innovative but perhaps not the most profoundly so and his use of the term "new heart" may not be as radical as that of Jeremiah. Obviously in a religion founded upon the notion of a divine revelation, such inconsistencies (like those in the *Torah* itself) present a major problem.[216] Rabbinic Judaism quickly

[216] I will not be discussing the actual provenance of the biblical literature not am I qualified to do so. It is largely irrelevant to my purpose here, which is more concerned with how Judaism was historically perceived rather than

attempted to deny these discrepancies or allow for hermeneutical resolution of them as in the first sentence of *Pirke Aboth* (*Sayings of the Fathers*) where a direct unbroken transmission of teachings from God to Moses to Joshua to the Elders to the Prophets and finally to the Men of the Great Synagogue is asserted.[217]

The Talmudic Literature and Rabbinic Judaism

One should perhaps make a distinction between the Talmud and Rabbinic Judaism. That is because many scholars now view Rabbinic Judaism as really taking hold of the Jewish people in the early Gaonic period (7th century C.E).[218] The reason why this is significant is that other types of Judaism survived the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem and may well have exerted an influence upon subsequent Jewish thought even if they were condemned or ignored by the rabbis. The best example of condemnation is Karaism and of ignoring the best might be Hellenistic Judaism. Be that as it may, the *Mishna* and the *Gemara* remain the founding documents of Rabbinic Judaism (as a particular type of Judaism) just as the *Bible* remains the founding document of all types of Judaism as well

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with what really happened. Many scholars of Second Temple Judaism now believe that the Mosaic *Torah*, even if it had already achieved its approximate present form, did not really become normative till the Maccabean period. This might well explain many of those anomalies. They also argue that priestly dominance was a general theme and even dissenting groups like the Essenes were basically priestly, even though they rejected the Temple cult. It has also been proposed that the Essenes and similar groups that focused their attention on the Enochic literature required messianic type redemption because they believed that the evil in this world was caused not by man but by rebellious angels, demons, etc. See Gabriele Boccacini, *Beyond the Essene Hypothesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eeedmans, 1998).

[217] See R. Travers Herford, *Sayings of the Fathers*, p.19.

[218] See Michael Satlow, *Creating Judaism: History, Tradition, Practice.*

as Christianity, despite the fact that the latter has its own distinct founding document (the *New Testament*) as well. There is no evidence that Judah Abrabanel was a great Talmudic scholar. Nevertheless, all pre-modern Jewish philosophy was aimed at a social group that was dominated by rabbinic thought, lore and law. Therefore, the *Talmud* constitutes an important background of his thinking, even if it often fails to appear specifically in his writings. Some Talmudic discussions simply became a part of normal Jewish culture and belief. As we will see, however, some of his opinions clearly emerge more specifically out of Talmudic discussions and related rabbinic literature. Some of this literature may have its roots in the Second Temple period but its actual redaction occurred from around 200 C.E. (the *Mishna*) to approximately 500 C.E. (the *Gemara*). The dominance of the rabbinic world-view definitively spells the end of prophecy (by declaring Malachi the last prophet) and the beginning of intensive study of the previous revelations in order to infer new meanings or approaches or to reject older ones. It also spells the end of priestly dominance.[219] And it has a geographic component as well. This latter fact was impressed upon me in a conversation with Ariyeh Edrei who has recently asked the question why the early rabbis ignored the Western Jewish Diaspora and instead

[219] Although the rabbis took over spiritual leadership from both the prophets and the priests they attempted to incorporate both types of religion into their own version of Judaism. Although this cannot really be proven, it seems to me that the priestly concerns, often centering on notions of ritual purity, continued to predominate. If that is indeed the case, Rabbinic Judaism has much in common with both Sadducean and Essene type Judaism although their emphases and specific versions of the story were somewhat different. To hypothesize a radically different type of Judaism that might have prevailed prior to the Hellenistic period is not my concern since even if it existed it left few traces in Jewish thought and would not have influenced Judah Abrabanel except in so far as it infiltrated gentile thought (or perhaps Kabbalah), which will be treated in later sections.

looked to the Eastern one. While Judaism would recrudesce in the West later on under rabbinic influence, that early rabbinic preference would set a stamp on rabbinic Judaism.

There is a great deal of universalism in the *Talmud* but anyone who comes across it for the first time after having already encountered the biblical literature might be somewhat surprised by its quite apparent particularism.[220] Perhaps the best example of this is the rabbinic transformation of the word "*ger*" to mean proselyte rather than stranger.[221] It should be recalled

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[220] Whether this particularistic strategy was deliberate or not is something regarding which I am not capable of opining. The answer would depend partially upon the extent of their knowledge of more universalizing ideologies such as Neoplatonism or Christianity. This has become a controversial topic and some such as Daniel Boyarin have opined that such knowledge was available to them. See his *Socrates and the Fat Rabbis*. This is somewhat analogous to the question regarding whether the rabbis of the Talmud were conscious reformers or simply reacting unconsciously on the basis of preferences and memory rather than ideology. It is also no secret that some modern Jews have regarded the revolt against universalism as meritorious. For example, some have accused Leo Strauss of this. See William H. F. Altmann, "Disturbing Proximity." At any rate, those particularistic and anti-universalistic tendencies cohere with some aspects of postmodernist thought.

[221] The original meaning of the word "*ger*" is not quite as simple as often supposed and neither is the Greek word "*proselytos*" by which it is rendered most of the time in the *Septuagint*. A close reading of the Bible shows that the word has a rather broad gradation of meanings and is even used in regards to the Israelites, Abraham and Moses. Even as regards the non-Jew who dwells amongst the Jewish people it can refer to men who are circumcised and those who are not. In general it denotes one who is somewhere in between a complete foreigner (*nochri*) and a home-born citizen (*ezrach*). In most cases the *Septuagint* uses "*proselytos*" (derived from the verb "approach") to translate "*ger*" but in a minority of cases it uses "*paroikos*" (settler) and in even fewer cases it uses a new Greek word derived form an Aramaic term ("*gioras*"). The word "*proselytos*" probably did not mean only a proselyte at the time of the *Septuagint* but, like "*ger*", seems to have had a whole range of meanings. For a good discussion of the meaning of these terms, including their use in Philo, Josephus and the *New Testament*, see Geoffrey Bromiley, *The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*, Volume 3, pp.1005-1011and Martin Goodman, "Jewish

that the *ger* according to the Bible was to be accorded quite extraordinarily kind treatment. This Talmudic focus on the Jewish people alone seems quite understandable given the suspected function of the *Talmud* as one of forging diverse strands of Judaism and the Jewish people into a unified religious community, especially after the destruction of what had been its earlier unifying institutions: the Temple and its sacrificial cult. Yet even in some of its more particularistic utterances, the *Talmud* betrays an essential universalism, for example in the perceived need to justify the election of Israel.[222] This may reflect the existence of even more particularistic *genre* that were rejected, some of which we have lost contact with but with which the rabbinic group did battle. For example, some of the apocalyptic literature that did not make it into the canon such as the *Book of Jubilees* is incredibly particularistic, even to the point of considering Jews and gentiles essentially different and the latter incapable of conversion to Judaism.[223] There are also examples of pseudepigraphical literature that are more universalistic in nature than much of the *Talmud*. It should not surprise us if Judah Abrabanel had some access to Jewish inter-testamental literature such as ben Sirach, Philo, the books of the Maccabees, etc. He does not mention them, however. Therefore, we cannot simply assume that he was influenced by

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proselytizing in the first century," pp. 53-78. What is quite clear however, despite the perplexing ancient meanings of these words, is the extreme narrowing of the meaning of the word by the rabbis to mean official converts to Judaism. This error has been corrected by many modern Jewish translations of the Bible but persists in the more right-wing ones.

[222] See B.T. *Abodah Zarah*, 2b. As distasteful as that *midrashic* fantasy regarding all the other nations rejecting the *Torah* (because they insisted on retaining their particular immoral practices) is, it is based upon a universal moral conception. A truly particularistic ethos would not require any moral explanation whatsoever for chosenness.

[223] For a good summary see Martha Himmelfarb, "Jubilees and Sectarianism."

them, the way we can regarding his father's influence or Ficino, who influenced almost everyone in Renaissance Italy, whether directly or otherwise. Those possible but doubtful early Jewish influences will therefore be ignored. But one can never ignore the *Talmud*, since it is the foundation of rabbinic Judaism to perhaps an even greater extent than the Bible.

Some have characterized the Talmudic ethos as the sanctification of life and the world through observance of law.[224] There may also have been other more hidden agendas in the *Talmud*, which might explain certain particularistic biases. For example, there was the challenge of Christianity as a Jewish sect along with other non-rabbinic strands of Second Temple Judaism as well as later Christianity as a Gentile phenomenon. No matter what the apparent historical causation, however, there are many observers (both Jewish and non-Jewish) who view the transition from universalistic to particularistic as one that was either divinely ordained or at least implicit in the notion of a chosen people.[225] One more historical fact should be noted: exile from the Holy Land. There were actually three such exiles, the Assyrian, Babylonian and the Roman. But it was the latter that resulted in a permanent theme of sin, exile and hoped for redemption that would lend a new essential flavor to Judaism. In keeping with the emphasis on God's just actions in this world, which will be dealt with separately, the standard

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[224] See Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, Volume 3, p.153: "The Mishna evokes an exemplary a-historical situation, in which the diverse acts of the sanctification of life and man are accomplished according to duly legislated models."

[225] See Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, volume 2, p.276: "Israel was chosen by Yahweh; it was *his* people. Hence the Jewish people constituted a historical reality sanctified by the will of God... Hence the first duty of the Jewish people was to maintain its identity intact, even to the end of history; in other words, always to remain at the disposal of God."

teaching became the assertion that the Jews had been exiled from their God-given homeland because of their sins. After what had appeared to be a very successful (and perhaps paradoxical) exile in Iberia, this theme would re-emerge with even greater vigor after the calamitous events of 1391, 1492, 1497 and 1506.[226] It became a preoccupation of many 16th century Jewish writers. Some blamed rationalism for the sinful neglect of the religious commandments of the *Torah*, which had led to yet another exile.

There is a very interesting statement attributed to Rabbi Akiba in the *Mishna*, which I will repeat on a number of occasions because it illustrates concepts that became somewhat normative in Judaism while at the same time suggested some concepts that remained controversial.

> He used to say: Beloved is man in that he was created in the image [of God]. Greater love was proved to him in that he was created in the image of God, as it is said (Gen. IX. 6): — In the image of God made He man. Beloved are Israel in that they are called sons of God. Greater love was proved to them in that they were called sons of God, as it is said (Deut. XIV. 1): — 'Sons are ye to the Lord your God'.
>
> Beloved are Israel in that there was given to them a precious instrument. Greater love was

[226] The first was the date of large-scale massacres and conversions in Spain, the second the expulsion from Spain, the third the forced conversions in Portugal and the fourth the massacre of many of those New Christians in Lisbon.

> proved to them in that there was given to them the precious instrument whereby the world was created,[227] as it is said (*Proverbs* IV: 2): — 'For good doctrine I give you, forsake not my Torah.'[228]

What is normative in this? It is the respect for all human beings as created in the image of God, despite the claim that the Jewish people have an even more intimate relationship to God that is best symbolized by a more familial type of love. What is controversial? It is the extraordinary claim that the *Torah* is not just a book of revealed laws and teachings and does not merely pre-exist the creation of the material world, but is also an actual *instrument* of that creation. That latter notion might even justify what might otherwise seem to be an unjust situation: the eternal election of Israel. Along with ancient Talmudic legends that the other nations of the world rejected the *Torah*, this notion of *Torah* as both a metaphysical instrument and metaphysical reality might elevate Israel as the recipient of it to a higher ontological status than those other nations.[229] Hence, the

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[227] *kili hemdah shebo nibrah ha'olam*. Another possible meaning is: precious vessel within which is created the world. The Hebrew word *kili* most often means vessel in biblical Hebrew but could also mean instrument.

[228] The translation is from R. Travers Herford, *The Ethics of the Talmud: Sayings of the Fathers*, p. 87. In actuality, the verse means: forsake not my teaching. The word "Torah" had not yet been applied specifically to the Pentateuch at the time that *Proverbs* was written.

[229] The essential connection between the Jewish people and the *Torah* was perhaps first enunciated in a systematic or philosophical manner by Saadiah Gaon. After a while it became fashionable to identify Judaism with certain specific beliefs and practices, all of which were viewed as emerging from the revelation on Mount Sinai. Others, however, place the emphasis more on the people itself, as did Yehudah Halevi in the medieval period and Franz Rosenzweig in the modern one. While many today reject the identification of Judaism with either orthodoxy or orthopraxis and also with strict

elevation of the *Torah* to a divine instrument of creation is an essentialistic teaching as it elevates the Jewish people to a higher anthropological level than other human beings because only they have full access to the *Torah*.[230] This extraordinary saying of Akiba also justifies another rabbinic methodology: *Midrash*. The midrashic method allows for an extraordinary range of interpretive freedom but at the same time it centers on certain accepted themes; perhaps the most prominent of them being the election of Israel. The notion that *Torah* is not only a specific literary tradition (albeit divinely revealed) but also a

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ethnicity, it is often difficult to escape completely from any (or all) of those three commonly used definitional criteria, even if only as markers of family resemblance. For example, Menachem Kellner rejects all three in favor of membership in and identification with the past and future of the Jewish people, as did Franz Rosenzweig. See Kellner's *Must a Jew Believe Anything?* for an excellent discussion. But even if we desire to follow Kellner on this path, we would still need to define the Jewish people itself by something other than purely ethnic, behavioral or doctrinal characteristics. And the notion of the Jewish people then becomes a bit of an ontological mystery, as perhaps it should. In a recent book, *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism*, Kellner attempts to resolve this problem by an astute interpretation of Maimonides. Ironically, the answer (according to Maimonides) to this puzzle regarding who is really practicing Judaism may eliminate the vast majority of Orthodox Jews, who continue in the proto-kabbalistic beliefs that Maimonides rejected. Whether Kellner approves of this conclusion is somewhat irrelevant but I am sure almost everyone will see some sort of problem here. This subject, of apparently never ending confusion, may be quite relevant to Judah Abrabanel. If we take him to be a student of Maimonides yet also a mystic, it might be that he is supplying one more possible solution to this perennial dispute.

[230] Claude Stuchinsky in a private conversation referred to the anthropology of Akiba as "essentialistic." It certainly seems that way to us. Of course the way modern people interpret these sayings can't be the same as the way it was meant in an ancient context. The notion of a common humanity was far less developed then. There would have been no way of describing a person divorced from his or her religion or people. In a sense, such essentialistic anthropological views can become quite grotesque in a more individualistic environment.

shadowy metaphysical reality and instrument of creation, allows for such interpretive freedom. And the underlying theme of the Jewish people as the center stage of creation (perhaps due to their possession of the *Torah*) allows for even more interpretive freedom. It may therefore come as no surprise that much of rabbinic interpretive methodology is traced back to Rabbi Akiba.

The particularism of the Talmudic tradition, however, is perhaps best illustrated not by a specific *Talmudic* passage (since one can find many contrary opinions within the *Talmud*) but by a very interesting commentary on the *Torah* by the most influential Jewish biblical commentator: Rashi, who lived in France in the 11th century and was also a very great Talmudic scholar. He quite seriously asks what to some might appear today to be an outrageously simple-minded question. What is the need for the book of *Genesis*? That first book of the Bible, which contains such incredibly rich and seminal spiritual insights into the universe and the human condition (i.e. creation, humanity as the image of God, sin, Abraham's relationship to God, human familial relationships comprising both love and betrayal), appeared at first blush to be insignificant to him. How is that even possible? This reminds us of Foucault's question alluded to in the introduction regarding how it is that some thoughts are impossible to think in some historical periods. Yet for many Orthodox Jews today that question of Rashi is still not an impossible thought (or at least they do not acknowledge it as such). Rashi was such a faithful student of the *Talmud* that the theme that was of overarching religious importance to him was the hundreds of divine commandments directed solely to the Jewish people and he could find none of them in *Genesis* that were not better explicated in the later

books of the Bible.[231] Rashi's answer to his own question, surprisingly, is perhaps even more particularistic than the question itself. The importance of *Genesis*, he opines, is to show the nations of the world that God created and therefore owned the world, had indeed promised the land of Israel to the Jewish people and therefore they cannot contest that claim! Rashi might perhaps not have taken Akiba's words to be literally true regarding the *Torah* being the instrument of creation or he would not have even bothered to ask that question. If the *Torah* is supernal divine wisdom with a metaphysical purpose, and not simply a human guide, how can you question the need for any part of it? Or perhaps he interpreted that ancient statement in an even more particularistic fashion than Rabbi Akiba had originally intended it. Rashi, for example, interpreted the Hebrew word for "in the beginning" (*bereishit*) as referring to the *Torah* and the Jewish people. The biblical word "*reishit*" can mean either beginning or headship. Therefore, perhaps the world was created not only by *means* of the *Torah* but also for the *sake* of the *Torah* and its observance by the Jewish people![232] We must admit that without an encyclopedic knowledge of the *Talmud* it is impossible to know to what extent this particularism is essentially Talmudic and to what extent it is a medieval interpretation. I suspect it is both to a certain extent but that is not really so crucial for this study. Despite the fact that Judah Abrabanel was heir to a somewhat more universalistic Sephardic philosophical version of the

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[231] He thought that perhaps the *Torah* should have begun with *Exodus*, XII: 1. See his very first commentary on *Genesis* and the words "In the beginning," p.1.

[232] See the very next commentary of Rashi. It is of interest that Judah Abrabanel interprets the same verse as meaning: "With wisdom God created the heavens and the earth" and attributes this interpretation to the "ancient Chaldeans" (p.419). This interpretation seems to have originally come from *Proverbs*, 8:22. It can also be found in the *Zohar* (Soncino edition, p.13).

Jewish tradition, this quite particularistic aspect of the Rabbinic tradition must be kept firmly in mind.[233] It appears to be a fundamental prejudice that may in some ways not be very different from the mythologies of many primitive tribes and many other ancient nations even though it is wedded to a marvelously universalistic ethos that spread throughout the entire world. It will follow Judaism wherever it goes and will need to be dealt with by all subsequent Jewish thought, if it is to qualify as real thought. It will coexist with much more universalistic concerns and that coexistence of apparently conflicting and irreconcilable elements will produce yet more Jewish philosophical and other types of thought regarding the nature and purpose of the *Torah* and the Jewish people.[234]

A Brief Overview of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages

It would be unnecessary and presumptuous to attempt to provide the reader with a survey of the Jewish philosophy of the

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[233] Modern Jews are quite fond of quoting a saying from the *Talmud* to the effect that the righteous of all the nations have a place in the world to come. Of course, that saying, along with an even more universalistic one in the *Mishna* is a constituent part of Jewish literature and tradition. But other far more particularistic ones are also aspects of that tradition that should not be ignored or denied. Some of the more extreme ones come out of the kabbalistic tradition. For example, a disciple of Michael Balbo proclaimed: "The nations of the world that spurned the Torah of Moses, peace be upon him, did not want to receive the yoke of the kingdom of heaven upon them. And God will not have mercy on their souls by transmigrating them, but they will immediately descend into hell." This quotation comes from Paris ms.800, fol.47a. The translation is by Brian Ogren and can be found in *Renaissance and Rebirth*, p.86

[234] See p. 31 of the *Dialoghi* where Abrabanel subsumes the biblical injunction to love one's neighbor as oneself (traditionally interpreted as either applying to only Jews or to all neighbors) under Aristotle's extolling of a particular type of friendship based upon virtue.

Middle Ages as it has been done so well by others. I will provide as part of the bibliography some of the classic works in the field. Some general motifs, however, must be pointed out in order to achieve an adequate understanding of the medieval background and the relationship between philosophy and Kabbalah in general as a foundation for attempting to understand the more specific relationship between the *Dialoghi* and Kabbalah.

Jewish medieval philosophy was primarily a phenomenon of the Iberian Peninsula, and to a much greater extent than was medieval Muslim philosophy (which came first and from which it descended). This indicates the possibility that it was provoked by the cross-fertilization of cultures and religions that characterized *Al Andalus* (Muslim Iberia). There is also some evidence that Muslim philosophy was originally provoked by similar cross-cultural elements in the Middle East. Such philosophical questioning as the result of cross-cultural fertilization may even be a general pattern. Much later, Christian Scholasticism in Europe was sparked by interaction with the Islamic and Arabic worlds. Of course there were examples of earlier philosophical thinking among medieval Jews outside of Iberia: the most notable example being Saadiah Gaon, who is generally considered the father of medieval Jewish philosophy. Nevertheless, philosophy as a strong movement or orientation in Judaism really took root among the Iberian Jews and only among them and their offshoots (such as the Jews of Provence) in the Middle Ages. There is one possible major exception to that generalization and even there the presence of Iberian Jews might have been decisive: Italy. In the Renaissance, Italy took the place of the Iberian Peninsula as the center for Jewish philosophy and some of that fertility may have been a result of its own native philosophical tradition as

well as other influences, including Jewish exiles from Spain. All of the Jewish medieval philosophical thinkers were influenced (directly or indirectly) by Muslim thinkers such as al Kindi and Al Farabi. Needless to say, all medieval philosophy (Jewish, Christian, Muslim) was influenced quite explicitly by Plato and Aristotle. Less explicit but evident nonetheless was the influence of such later Gentile philosophical thinkers as Plotinus, Themistius and others. To the extent to which those philosophers viewed contemplation to be the ultimately superior end for humankind, their influence on medieval Jewish philosophy blunted the force of messianism and brought Judaism closer to pagan philosophical ideals.[235] This brings us to a very important aspect of medieval Jewish philosophy as it developed in Spain and Portugal. Gentile influences were generally neither eschewed nor denied. In fact, Maimonides (generally considered the greatest Jewish medieval philosopher) *only* cites Gentile philosophers as those from whom one can learn anything philosophical of great value.

We will be inspecting three Jewish philosophers in much greater depth later on but for now it will suffice to note what I consider an important motif and one that stands out from the general background of prior Jewish thought. This great interest in the wisdom of the Gentiles is something that had not always been fully appreciated in Jewish thought (often restricted to merely practical matters such as astronomical calculations or medicine) and can only be appreciated by looking at it in contrast with previous intellectual trends stemming from the Talmudic literature.

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[235] For a good discussion see Gershom Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism*, pp.24-26.

Much of that earlier literature (some of it technically part of the *Talmud* and some not) could be broadly called *Midrash*. It deals not so much with legal matters as it does with stories that seek to explain poorly understood or problematic aspects of the Bible. Much of that literature is fantastic by modern rational standards and hardly appears to be an adequate rational explication of something that requires explanation. Whether it provides deep understanding is a more subjective judgment that must be approached on a case-by-case basis. Nevertheless, much of that literature possessed great antiquity and was venerated accordingly. This is obvious by the degree to which Rashi (in the 11th century) accepted and even embraced so much of it as an acceptable explanation of the biblical text. Interestingly, the philosophical movement in medieval Judaism often rejected (quietly or otherwise) many of the more problematic *Midrashim*. This is obvious in Maimonides as well as in Abraham ibn Ezra, the greatest Sephardic biblical commentator. It even extended to thinkers like Nachmanides, who was profoundly influenced by Kabbalah and was not really known as a great philosophical thinker. At the famous disputation at Tortosa he proclaimed that Jews are not bound by their religion to believe all of the *midrashic* literature. A good example is the theme of the pre-existent *Torah* and similar doctrines that had been alluded to in the *midrashic* literature. They were similar to the Muslim doctrine of the eternal *Koran*. In general, the medieval Jewish philosophers did not really accept all those doctrines or they interpreted them non-literally.[236] That was a well-known rationalist view in Spain, which even the kabbalist Nachmanides paid lip service to. We will see, however, that

[236] For a good discussion see Harry Austryn Wolfson, *Repercussions of the Kalam in Judaism*, pp. 87-123.

such phantasmagoric literature as well as a virulent particularistic bias eventually comes back in full fury with the kabbalists of Spain.

In my treatment of the three Jewish philosophers who seem to be of greatest influence upon Judah Abrabanel I will not attempt to be comprehensive. Instead I will include within the discussion areas in which Abrabanel incorporates their views, departs from them or rejects them entirely. That relationship to the thinking of Judah Abrabanel is the primary purpose of this section.

Solomon ibn Gabirol

He was a major influence on Judah Abrabanel. Firstly, his poetry was well known in the Sephardic Jewish world. His philosophy, on the other hand, was transmitted mostly through the Christian Scholastics, who debated his peculiar views widely and intensively. As we will see, there was undoubtedly a third channel by which those views came to be known by Judah Abrabanel: his own family. As a poet ibn Gabirol exhibited normal human passions but as a philosopher and moralist he advocated their strict control. So too, his extant philosophical work deviates radically from his poetry. The latter is quite particularistic regarding his people, in the case of his religious poetry and regarding himself in his secular poetry. But his philosophical work, as far as we can tell from what remains of it, is perhaps more universalistic than that of any other medieval Jewish philosopher. Given the corresponding nature of Judah Abrabanel's philosophical writing, it makes perfect sense that ibn Gabirol would have been a model. The two are also congenial regarding their interest in astrology and areas of human functioning related to astrology. This affinity

can perhaps be sensed most strongly in ibn Gabirol's ethical work, *The Improvement of the Moral Qualities*. In that book he shows a strong interest in the human body and its relationship to the heavenly bodies just as Judah Abrabanel does in the *Dialoghi*. Both view the human being as a microcosm of the universe, as did many of the ancient thinkers from Plato, Aristotle, Philo of Alexandria through to the Neoplatonists.[237] Although they lived in entirely different times, both ibn Gabirol and Judah Abrabanel were in a broad sense Neoplatonists. But in another area, his orientation differs markedly from that of Abrabanel. Like Maimonides, ibn Gabirol did not exhibit an exceedingly high opinion of romantic love in *The Improvement of the Moral Qualities*. There he likened such love to lust and considered all human loves to be problematic, except for the love of God, though he did approve of those other loves that emerged from the latter. In contrast to his extreme distrust of romantic love he had only praise for mercy and compassion. There are surely words of Judah Abrabanel that echo that distrust of human carnal love but the fundamental orientation of the works seem different and Abrabanel's philosophy seems far more comfortable with the physical world. Yet the metaphysical theory of ibn Gabirol seems to be a major philosophical justification for Abrabanel's remarkable philosophy of love, even if the two may not be entirely compatible. This is of interest, as it appears that the metaphysics of ibn Gabirol is used to support the mystical psychology of Judah Abrabanel. The metaphysical system of ibn Gabirol is a complicated mix of monistic and dualistic elements that allows for a substantive

[237] For a good discussion of the microcosm/macrocosm idea and its relationship to astrological thinking, philosophy, hermetism, etc. see George Boas' article "Macrocosm and Microcosm" in the *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*.

connection between God and all other realities at the same time as it strongly differentiates those realities on the basis of form. It may therefore (with some interpretation) allow for multiple types of relationship to God, including both loving and cognitive ones. But as we have previously stated, for Abrabanel the ultimate relationship to God is beyond both will (love) and intellect.[238] Perhaps historical circumstances explain the more overtly mystical tone of Judah Abrabanel. This will be dealt with in a later chapter.

Ibn Gabirol was not an extremely well known thinker among Jews in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. In fact, his philosophical writings had been largely forgotten by the Jews, who continued to revere him as one of the great medieval Hebrew poets. In the Christian Scholastic world he had been known as Avicebron (or Avicebrol) and was believed to have been an Arab philosopher and possibly a Christian Arab. Abrabanel calls him "our Albenzubron" but despite the strange twist on the name and some equally strange twists on his doctrines, there is no doubt that this reference is indeed to Solomon ibn Gabirol.[239] So the Abrabanel family (and perhaps

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[238] This more experiential approach to God that some might term "mystical" seems to go beyond the explicit writings of either ibn Gabirol or Maimonides; both allude to it but never really describe it with as vivid an analogy as Abrabanel does. What Abrabanel calls the intellectual love of God may appear at first blush to be similar to the Maimonidean concept. But Maimonides, while he uses the term, seems to mean something decidedly more intellectual and less experiential or emotional than does Abrabanel, who dwells not only on the longing for the beloved but its actual fulfillment in the union of copulation. Even ibn Gabirol's poetry does not seem to reach that explicit attempt to describe the ultimate union of man and God.

[239] See p. 290 of the *Dialoghi* where Abrabanel mentions "our Albenzubron" and "*De Fonte Vitae*", an obvious Italian version of the Latin *Fons Vitae* (ibn Gabirol's metaphysical treatise) that was also written in dialogue form, albeit

some other Jews) seem to have known the true identity of Avicebron and we can conjecture that he might have been a significant topic of discussion within the family. We can infer this because the father and son both attribute quite interesting (and at times conflicting) views to ibn Gabirol.[240] Perhaps his thought was more intriguing than it was comprehensible! Let us first briefly describe his actual metaphysical views, as we understand them today.

In the thought of ibn Gabirol, the one eternal God is bifurcated into two descriptions. The first is the Divine Essence, which is quite simply indescribable but perhaps comes close to Plato's "Form of the Good." The second is the Divine Will, which more closely resembles the God of the Bible but perhaps also resembles the God of Aristotle. This may seem strange since the God of the Bible is quite different from the God of Aristotle. One is a living personal God and the other is the form of the universe (in a sense). But both in their own ways are the sources of the things of this world, *as we know them*, whereas the Neoplatonic or Platonic God is far beyond any cognizable reality and therefore must produce emanations in

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a much more one-sided type. The fact that the author of that book was Jewish had been largely forgotten in the late Middle Ages, even though Solomon ibn Gabirol continued to be known in the Sephardic Jewish world for his poetry. The uniqueness and originality of ibn Gabirol's philosophy and the peculiar similarity of the names leaves no doubt that this is ibn Gabirol (Avicebron to the Scholastics).

[240] We may need to amend the earlier conventional wisdom regarding how widely ibn Gabirol was known to be identical with Avicebron in the Middle Ages. There is some evidence that some other Jewish scholars knew of it. For brief discussions see Moshe Idel, "The Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations of the Kabbalah in the Renaissance," n.165, p.238 and Shlomo Pines, "Medieval Doctrines in Renaissance Garb? Some Jewish and Arabic Sources of Leone Ebreo's Doctrines," n.30, p.393, both in *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, edited by Bernard Dov Cooperman.

order to be at all comprehended or related to, as occurs in Neoplatonic schemes. The Divine Will of ibn Gabirol is just such a hypostasis and is the source of all the forms just as the Aristotelian God as the form of the universe is also the source of forms. It should be especially noted, however, that this metaphysical system places a personalized Divine Will over both Form and Intellect. This may indeed allow for a higher metaphysical role for love. In medieval thought love and will are often categorized together. The Divine Essence, however, is also the source of spiritual matter for ibn Gabirol, which is the spiritual substance underlying all of reality. Hence for him, the universe is in a sense divine as its substance emanates from the Divine Essence on the one hand and is formed by the Divine Will on the other. Nevertheless, this might not really be called pantheism since God is never identified with corporeal reality but only as its ultimate source. Much more will be said about this problem anon.

In many philosophical systems that stem from Plato and Aristotle it is a truism that God can love only Himself because nothing else could be worthy of divine love or even divine knowledge. As it was often conceived, in loving Himself God also loves all other things. But that truism must not have been entirely adequate for Judah Abrabanel (despite his affirmation of it) perhaps because he recognized love is really always the love of a particular other. Instead of confining the divine love to such an intradivine process, he used ibn Gabirol's metaphysical system as a way of showing that divine love pervades the entire universe, even on the highest metaphysical level. He even seems to have drawn out of that system something that its author himself had not. It is true that ibn Gabirol used semi-erotic imagery at times to describe metaphysical events. And in both thinkers there is an ambiguity

regarding which gender represents or symbolizes the more profound metaphysical substance. But the *Dialoghi* is thoroughly eroticized in a manner that ibn Gabirol's writings are not. Abrabanel may never have explicitly said that the Divine Will loves the Divine Essence or vice versa but he did say that God is both lover and beloved and (more significantly) God loves both the first intellect and spiritual matter. This should not perhaps be taken quite literally since in other places he says that it is "divine formality" which consorts with chaos or matter (p. 283).[241] And this leads us to the important assertion of Shlomo Pines that Judah Abrabanel seriously misunderstood (or even misquoted) ibn Gabirol.[242]

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[241] Terms such as "divine formality" are somewhat ambiguous as they could refer to God Himself or to some form-conferring entity that is not God but is a hypostasis and therefore in some sense divine. On page 284 Philo says: "God is neither formed, not has He form, but is supreme form absolute from which chaos and all its parts take their form." Yet he then goes on to say that God "produced from himself the single substance and imperfect mother" (meaning chaos). Since chaos lacks form, its original production must be from something either formless or beyond form (divine essence). It then obtains form from the Divine Will (divine formality) via universal form.

[242] This is the phrase in the *Dialoghi* that Pines most strenuously objected to: "if they are composed of matter and form, they receive their form from their common father, the most high God, and their substance and incorporeal matter from Chaos, their universal mother, as our Albenzubron asserts in his book, *De Fonte Vitae*; hence, they too will surrender up each of their parts to their parents in the fifty thousandth year, to wit, substance and matter to Chaos, who then receives back her own from all her children, and intellectual form to the supreme Godhead, its father and giver." Pines goes on to say that the part describing the doctrine of form and matter in ibn Gabirol is more or less correct; but regarding the "interpretation" it is irreconcilable with ibn Gabirol's real views. "The implication is that Ibn Gabirol adhered to a dualistic theory according to which Chaos co-exists with, but is separate from, the Supreme God...it cannot be reconciled with the doctrine of the *Fons Vitae*, in which Ibn Gabirol not only posits the derivation of both Matter and Form from God, but, at least in V, 42, appears to assume that the former has a more direct connection than the latter with the Divine Essence. This difference is of so radical a nature that — in spite

The aforementioned assertion stems from three of views of Abrabanel as understood by Shlomo Pines. Firstly, Pines accused him of calling spiritual matter "chaos."[243] Secondly, he is accused of asserting that chaos is eternal. Thirdly, according to Pines, Abrabanel seems to state that the forms of the incorporeal entities participate in God the father while the incorporeal matter of those substances participates in the universal Mother, which is called chaos and is eternal. On the other hand, it is generally (and correctly) believed that ibn Gabirol held spiritual matter to be at least as close to the divine substance as are the forms. If such spiritual matter comes from chaos and is superior to form (which comes from God) there is clearly a problem. These four contradictory assertions are a major challenge but we should note that other thinkers, such as Philo of Alexandria, have also been accused by some of believing in an eternal matter while other interpreters have vehemently denied it. As we have already seen, it was indeed

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of the many contradictions occurring in the extant text of the *Fons Vitae* — it seems highly improbable that the phrase under discussion could have been found in some version of this work." See "Medieval Doctrines in Renaissance Garb? Some Jewish and Arabic Sources of Leone Ebreo's Doctrines," *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, pp. 372-373. Of course, Abrabanel does not actually assert that he is quoting the *Fons Vitae*.

[243] A note regarding the Greek term "chaos" seems appropriate. It has been traced back to Hesiod (*Theogony* 116) by George Sarton and its original meaning was space. One must be careful, however, not to confuse it with more modern concepts of space. It was used by Paracelsus to refer to air and was eventually changed into our word "gas." See *Six Wings: Men of Science in the Renaissance*, p.112, 276n. As used by Judah Abrabanel, it refers to intellectual, heavenly, and earthly realms that have yet to be formed, in other words to a kind of pre-spatial continuum analogous to but not identical to the modern concept of space. This seems more in keeping with Plato's view in the *Timaeus* than with Ibn Gabirol who uses the Hebrew word for continuum (*meshech*) to refer to *spiritual* matter in the *Keter Malkhut*. That word was also used in medieval Hebrew for physical matter and corresponded to the Arabic word *maddah*. For a discussion see *The Kingly Crown*, pp. 21-25, 138-240, 153.

the belief of Abrabanel that Plato believed in an eternal matter or chaos. He must also have known that this was one of the unapproved theories of creation of Saadiah Gaon, who also used the term "Mother."[244] He may have been attempting to reconcile ibn Gabirol with Plato. Let us look closely at the relevant passage on pages 289- 290.

> Philo: Since Chaos is the eternal mother, we hold that she conceives of the eternal and omnipotent father, God, eternally, that is an infinite number of times in succession, bringing forth the lower world every seven thousand years and the heaven, with all else that suffers renewal, every fifty thousand years.
>
> Sophia: how do intelligent souls, angels, and pure intelligences fare in this corruption of the world?
>
> Philo: If they are not composed of matter and form and have no part in chaos, they find themselves disembodied in their own essence, occupied in contemplation of the divinity. Again, if they are composed of matter and form, they receive their form from their common father, the most high God, and their substance and incorporeal matter from Chaos, their universal mother, as our [teacher] Albenzubron

[244] See Harry Wolfson, *Repercussions of the Kalam in Jewish Philosophy*, pp.129-132 for a good discussion.

> asserts in his book, *De Fonte Vitae*; hence they too will surrender up each of their parts to their parents in the fifty thousandth year, to wit, substance and matter to Chaos, who then receives back her own from all her children, and intellectual form to the supreme Godhead, its father and giver. These Forms are preserved in the splendour of the exalted Ideas of the divine intellect until they return again in the creation and generation of the universe. For Chaos, once more becoming pregnant of the divinity, gives birth to material substances informed by all the ideas; in the lower and corporeal world, where they are subject to successive generation and corruption; in the heavenly corporeal world, subject to circular motion but not to continual generation and corruption; and in the intellectual world, incorporeal and motionless and neither generable nor corruptible. And at the end of the cycle everything is again dissolved, returning to its original parents, even as I have told you.

It is interesting to note that Judah Abrabanel, like his father, and contra Maimonides, held the heavenly realm to be composed of corporeal matter. He refers to God as "Father," a somewhat traditional religious appellation but not a technical metaphysical one. Perhaps he is actually referring to the Divine Will, a hypostasis from the Divine Substance in the metaphysics of ibn Gabirol, and one quite in keeping with the traditional Jewish concept of God. Does that mean that Judah Abrabanel believed "Chaos" is really separate from God? Admittedly, the

term "Chaos" as referring to a fecund Divine Essence might appear to some to be feminine or even fickle. Abrabanel might not have wanted to refer to God as chaotic, feminine or as a mother (because of tradition, his own prejudices and/or fear of persecution) so he referred to universal (prime) matter in that way but in my opinion we cannot definitively conclude that he viewed spiritual matter as eternally separate from God, though it surely is (or appears to be) on a lower ontological level.[245] In fact at a much later point in the book (third dialogue, pp.450-451) he refers to "chaos" and "first matter" as "the least perfect of the eternal substances," "least of all being," "farthest removed from the highest perfection of the Creator" and "pure potentiality." This later quotation certainly lends credence to Pines' claims and also the possibility that Abrabanel might have contradicted himself. I will now quote an earlier part of the *Dialoghi* (pp.284-285), which I hope will substantiate my more nuanced view.

> Philo: Because it is necessary that the formless should precede the formed. If, Sophia, you see a wooden statue, do you not judge that the wood was first without the form of the statue which now informs it?

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[245] For the complete context of the assertion that Judah Abrabanel misunderstood ibn Gabirol, see Shlomo Pines, "Medieval doctrines in Renaissance Garb? Some Jewish and Arabic Sources of Leone Ebreo's Doctrines." I suspect that there may be a connection between that assertion and Pines' attempt to impute kabbalistic views to Judah Abrabanel. Ibn Gabirol's metaphysics is ultimately monistic while the kabbalistic ones tend more towards dualism. According to ibn Gabirol, prime matter is an emanation from the divine essence and, therefore, is sometimes difficult to distinguish from the latter. It is feminine in contrast to the masculine universal form. Judah Abrabanel sometimes does refer to God as feminine and mother, at least according to my interpretation. But some might think he is referring to another entity. See the *Dialoghi*, page 124 and my discussion of the origin of love in chapter ix.

Sophia: Yes, certainly.

Philo: Chaos, therefore, must have existed without form before the creation of the world: for the presence of form in the world proves that it was created in time and made anew, while the formlessness or stuff of which it is made proves, not a temporal beginning, but age-old eternity. It follows, therefore, and must be conceded that as the informed world has been made anew, so formless chaos can never have been new, but has existed from eternity. This, then, is the reason of that saying of the ancients that nothing can be made out of nothing... As, therefore, the informed world is made anew, so formless chaos must be created from eternity by God.

Sophia: Although I will grant you that chaos has existed from eternity, I will not therefore concede that it was created by God.

Philo: You must concede it; for chaos is formless and imperfect, and a creative cause must be assigned to it which shall be all-embracing form and perfection, just as chaos itself is universal formlessness and imperfection. And this creative cause is God.

Sophia: But if God has form, He must therefore be formed and created anew, which is absurd.

Philo: God is neither formed, nor has He form, but is supreme form absolute *from which chaos and all its parts take their form*. And the world together with every part of it was made and

> formed from both. Divine formality is its father, and its mother chaos, both from eternity; *but the perfect father produced from himself the single substance and imperfect mother*, and from both are made and formed anew all the worlds, their children, in which matter is combined with paternal formality... (Italics are mine)[246]

I will now quote the Italian version (p.242) of the last paragraph and readers who so desire may investigate its probable meaning. It seems obvious to me that "single substance" (*sola sustancia*) is synonymous with "imperfect mother" (imperfetta madre) or universal matter and stands as feminine counterpart to "divine formality" (*divina formalità*) or universal form.[247] The word "both" (*ambi*) refers to divine formality and chaos, both of which are from "eternity" but it only mentions "single substance" or "chaos" as produced "from himself" (*da sé*), referring to the "perfect father" or "divine formality." Yet there does seem to be a misunderstanding (or at least imprecise language) here since matter (in ibn Gabirol generally, though not always) does not emerge out of universal form but out of the divine substance.

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[246] Oddly, Pines uses this very quotation to describe chaos as "an inferior Principle that is coeval with the deity." This is quite possibly wrong as regards Judah Abrabanel's statement unless what Pines meant by "deity" is the Divine Will, rather than the Divine Essence and even then he was quite possibly wrong since Abrabanel does not really make explicit the distinction that ibn Gabirol had made and the latter at times described the Will as being instrumental in the production of universal matter. See Shlomo Pines, ibid. p.374 and n.38, p.394.

[247] The new English translation also uses "single substance" and renders "divine formality" as "that divine form." (p.233). In note 94 on p.400 Pescatori cogently advises that: "*Formalità* expresses the meaning of being the origin of all the forms." We do not normally speak of God as having a form or if we do we must mean something other than the normal use of that word.

> Filone: Dio non è formato né ha forma, ma è somma forma in se stessa; *dal quale il caos e ogni parte sua participa forma*: e d'ambi si fece il mondo formato e ogni parte sua formata, il padre de' quali è quella la madre è il caos, ambo ab aterno. *Ma il perfetto padre produsse da sé la sola sustanzia, imperfetta madre,* e d'ambi son fatti e formati di nuovo tutti li mondani figliuoli, quali hanno con la material la formalitá paterna... (Italics again are mine)

It would appear from this passage that matter or chaos ("the imperfect mother") emerges out of God (just as ibn Gabirol taught) and Pines was fooled by the admittedly imprecise and misleading terminology of Judah Abrabanel, which confuses the divine substance with the divine will (or even with universal form). Furthermore, judging from the aforementioned quotation from the third dialogue, Abrabanel did differ from ibn Gabirol on the ontological status of universal (first) matter but not to the extent of considering it uncreated. Another support of my view is the fact that Ficino stated in the *De Amore* (I: III) that there are three types of chaos just as there are three created worlds: angelic mind, soul of universal matter and physical matter. While we can't say with certainty that Abrabanel followed Ficino in that view, it might explain his loose terminology regarding chaos.

If I am right, Abrabanel's insight, which he indeed derives from ibn Gabirol's metaphysics, is roughly as follows. Some aspects of the universe (material) come from the Divine Essence and others (formal) from the Divine Will. This is true

even on the highest incorporeal levels of reality. These elements are attracted to one another precisely because of the separation of those divine elements and it is this love or attraction that makes the world go round, so to speak. So this apparent bifurcation of God into Will and Essence allows for genuine love to pervade the universe. T.A. Perry expressed it as follows.

> Beyond this original, intrinsic love, God also loves extrinsically. In loving Himself, God also desires to reproduce His beauty. Thus, God has two loves: the first toward Himself, the second toward His images or creatures. The crucial role here is played by the divine intellect, which in addition to loving God in perfect contemplation, also contains al the Ideas or patterns of creation. Now whereas the Intellect in its first love is female, in its love toward the creatures it is active or male. The same process is now repeated at the lower level. The divine Intellect no longer contemplates God but rather its own self, and from this contemplation a female entity is produced, again on the pattern of Adam and Eve. This female element is Chaos or Prime Matter. These two, alternately conceived as male and female, Prime Form and Prime Matter, or Intellect and Chaos, are the original parents of creation, and from their mutual love all generation occurs.[248]

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[248] T.A. Perry, Erotic Spirituality: *The Integrative Tradition from Leone Ebreo to John Donne*, p.20

In contrast to Pines' essentially dualistic assessment, I would argue that the system (whether ibn Gabirol's or Abrabanel's version) veers more towards the monistic and that in reality there is still something spurious about all of these separate spiritual entities that love one another, since ultimately God is One and the merciful Divine Will, which creates the universe (by conferring form), is nothing other than an expression of the incomprehensible Divine Nature (from which also comes matter or chaos). But this brings us back to our original conundrum, briefly discussed in the introduction, regarding love of God and human dignity. On the one hand, we are happy to find a philosophical grounding for human dignity and the value of this world but on the other hand we suspect that ultimately in this philosophy only God is truly real and this is all a kind of trick or illusion. Yet this would be an illusion that is the will of God and one could surely bet one's life on it for without it one really would have no life of one's own.

There is another aspect of ibn Gabirol's thought that I would like to comment upon as it leads to a similar view of Judah Abrabanel as well as in some other Renaissance thinkers. In his small book on ethics ibn Gabirol associated the various qualities of the human soul with the various senses. He asserts that: "the first and foremost of the senses is that of the eye, since its position with regard to the body is like that of the sun to the universe."[249] What is the significance of this exaltation of the visual sense? He goes on to discuss the other senses and their associations. While the sense of sight is associated with the intellect, the sense of hearing is associated with love, compassion and the other emotions. The sense of touch is the lowest one and associated with gross physical matter. Since

[249] See Solomon ibn Gabirol, *Improvement of the Moral Qualities*, p. 35.

physical matter by itself is inert,[250] that latter sense is the furthest from apprehending the form and any movement resulting from that sense is more vegetative than it is sensible, as the vegetative soul is united with the essence of corporeality.[251] The sense of sight, on the other hand comes closest to perceiving the form without corporeality and the sense of hearing is intermediate. Interestingly, it is the sense of hearing that seems most exalted by traditional religion.[252]

Maimonides

Abrabanel (like all philosophically inclined Jews) had immense praise for Moses Maimonides, who most firmly placed the stamp of philosophical thinking upon Judaism. One must fully appreciate this iconic status of Maimonides in order to appreciate Judah Abrabanel's unwavering support for him, despite the fact that his own father had criticized Maimonides at times. Although Judaism did not always accept Maimonides' particular philosophical views, it did (sometimes begrudgingly) eventually learn to tolerate his rational methodology and fully embraced his rather strict insistence upon the incorporeality of God. That latter belief became the cornerstone of Jewish philosophical thought as it is of almost all philosophical thought and Judah Abrabanel is nothing if he is not a philosopher. We really do not know exactly why he felt the need for such an exaggerated support for Maimonides, especially since there

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[250] See Solomon ibn Gabirol, *Fons Vitae*, III, 43, p.163

[251] See Ibid. third treatise, 48, pp. 170-171. He attributes to the vegetative soul the powers of growth and procreation and to the sensible or animal soul the power of movement. Hence, sexuality (at least in its more basic aspect) is still a vegetative function. Nevertheless, many of the behaviors and the ideation surrounding the sexual act involve the animal and even the intellectual souls.

[252] *Improvement of the Moral Qualities*, p.73

were other Jewish philosophers whom he hardly mentioned at all. We know that amulets and astrology, both of which were condemned by Maimonides, were popular.[253] Judah Abrabanel seems to have been in favor of the latter but completely silent about the former. Plato was replacing Aristotle, Maimonides' favorite philosopher. Abrabanel was quite explicit regarding his own preference for Plato but despite that preference he still insisted on a sympathetic reading of both Aristotle and Maimonides. He may even have been following Maimonides in referring to Aristotle as "the Philosopher" despite Abrabanel's obvious preference for Plato.[254] Maimonides was controversial everywhere in Europe, though perhaps less so in Italy than in other places and not necessarily among kabbalists.[255] There is another possible explanation for his obeisance to Maimonides. He had been popular (or at least influential) among certain Christian Scholastics, such as Thomas Aquinas. Given Abrabanel's obvious reluctance to reference Christian sources, Maimonides might in a sense have been a proxy for them. There might also have been a hidden message that Jews ought to be at least as open to philosophy as their Christian neighbors. Unlike his father, who wrote for Jews, was sometimes critical of

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[253] See Elliot Horowitz, "Families and Their fortunes: The Jews of Early Modern Italy."

[254] Much of the Christian and Muslim medieval world referred to Aristotle as the "philosopher" and Abrabanel may simply have been following that tradition, despite the Renaissance preference for Plato. See p.31 of the *Dialoghi*.

[255] Moshe Idel documented the popularity of Maimonides and the *Guide* among mystics and kabbalists. See "Maimonides *Guide of the Perplexed* and the Kabbalah." There are 15th century manuscripts documenting opposition to Maimonides in Italy such as *Minchat Kenaot* (Jealous Offering) by Abba Mari ben Moses Astruc of Lunel, who lived in the 14th century. The manuscript that I am referring to was copied by a Mordecai ben Avigdor in Mantua in 1458 and was formerly a part of the Montefiore Library, acquired from the Halberstamm collection.

Maimonides and was less imbedded in philosophy, Judah Abrabanel rarely if ever explicitly criticizes Maimonides' methodology. In fact, he seems to have little but praise for him and his opinions (explicitly), except perhaps on one important metaphysical issue regarding the Active Intellect.[256] Yet we see a number of subtle but quite important differences between these two thinkers.

It will be recalled that according to the Arabic philosophical tradition, human reason is a kind of overflow from God, via the Active Intellect, which confers dignity and worth on human life. This tradition can be traced from the ancients to al Farabi, Avicenna, and Averroes and then through most of the major medieval Jewish philosophers, including of course Moses Maimonides. It was not an altogether cold, unfeeling doctrine of human flourishing, however. Firstly, that philosophical tradition was imbedded in a Middle Eastern culture that emphasizes warm family and group ties. Secondly, imbedded in that tradition seems to be an assumption that proper intellectual endeavors can purify the will and produce a pure intellectual and spiritual love.[257] Nevertheless, we do not

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[256] This important question regards the unity of God and the Active Intellect, which Judah Abrabanel affirms and Maimonides emphatically denies. This has important philosophical consequences because Abrabanel's belief seems to undercut Maimonides' claim that God cannot be known or described, except in negative terms. That claim, however, also seems inconsistent with other statements of Maimonides. But this is a topic for specialized Maimonidean scholarship regarding which we cannot do full justice here. See the *Dialoghi*, pp. 183-184 for Abrabanel's insistence that the Active Intellect is God.

[257] For Maimonides the connection between love for creation and knowledge of God lies in that knowledge really being of God's actions and ways (one of which is loving kindness). For a good discussion see James A. Diamond, *Converts, Heretics, and Lepers*, pp. 70-71. The question of love as an emotion or as a purely intellectual state is a complex one that we cannot do full justice to here. There is a possibility that the elimination of emotion was

find in that tradition much explicit discussion of divine love or the divine origin of love, and particularly absent is human romantic love. In fact, the concept of a passive divine overflow, which characterizes both emanation and human knowledge, actually seems inconsistent with love, as we know it, and ignores the active nature of the will.[258] And, as we have already seen, early Jewish philosophers, such as ibn Gabirol, may have even viewed romantic love as a passive affliction, akin to lust.[259]

We see this somewhat austere and severe intellectualist tendency in both of the early medieval Jewish philosophers to whom Abrabanel was primarily indebted: ibn Gabirol and Maimonides. Ibn Gabirol, however, was an emotional poet and an imaginative person. That somewhat stern, unemotional attitude is much more prominent in Maimonides, who roundly condemned activities such as drinking parties or music and desired to keep sexuality to a minimum, as those activities might interfere with the intellectual faculty. In fact it is difficult not to interpret this austere approach as essentially a kind of moralism with intellectualism used as a justification. After all, it is not entirely clear that such pleasurable physical activities in moderation really do interfere with the intellectual faculty. Maimonides even went so far as to call the sense of touch (and

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held up as an ultimate virtue by certain philosophers. This involves conjunction with the Active Intellect but might also involve intense pleasure involving the apprehension of spiritual entities and even God. For a good summation see Howard Kreisel, *Maimonides' Political Thought*, pp.136-150 and particularly note 55 to chapter four (p.310).

[258] This philosophical doctrine of passive overflow is not consistent with the biblical one of God caring for humankind and the rabbinic one of God loving the Jewish people. This may be a root cause of the perennial distaste for philosophy among religious Jews, punctuated by short periods in which philosophy and religion were united.

[259] See Solomon ibn Gabirol, *Improvement of the Moral Qualities*, p.68.

perhaps taste) a carnal disgrace and claimed that Aristotle had said the same.[260] That austere moralism of Maimonides is hardly present at all in Judah Abrabanel who freely refers to ancient Greek myths, which from a Jewish (or Christian) moral perspective can only be considered disgusting and that Maimonides never would have explicitly referred to at all but merely would have alluded to. All in all, we can say that Judah Abrabanel, despite his veneration for and lip service to Maimonides, does not follow him to the logical conclusions of his world-view and constructs his own, based primarily on love.

It is true however that Maimonides used the Arabic word for passionate love (*'ash*) to describe the intellectual love of God but it is so hedged in by rather grim ascetic prohibitions that no one could really mistake the two phenomena. For example, Maimonides prefers silence to the more traditional Jewish effusive praises of God, one of his many views that Judaism could not follow. He does employ an erotic metaphor, the kiss of God, to discuss the merciful death of Aaron, Moses and Miriam.[261] But like the intellectual love of God, this

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[260] This seems to go beyond the depreciation of that sense by ibn Gabirol in *The Improvement of the Moral Qualities*. See Moses Maimonides, the *Guide for the Perplexed*, II: 36. It is not really clear, however, that Aristotle meant the same exact thing in the *Nichomachean Ethics*. The disgrace could be interpreted as pertaining to self-indulgence or the prizing of sensual pleasures rather than a normative statement regarding the sense of touch itself. See the *Nichomachean Ethics*, III: Ch. 10, 118b.

[261] Ibid. III: 51. Interestingly, one Talmudic source for this belief (Baba Batra, 17a) includes Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Miriam as having died by the kiss, even though the Bible only explicitly speaks of Moses as having been taken in that way (*'al pi adonay*). Whether that phrase really means "by God's mouth" is another matter about which I am not competent to opine. It also includes a phrase that by a stretch of the imagination could include Aaron's death by the same means. It says nothing similar about the death of Miriam. Assuming from ambiguous biblical language that they had everything a person could have and want, and that the angel of death had no power over them, the rabbis inferred that the patriarchs also died in that

metaphor seems not to refer to ordinary human life but only to what one might call a limit situation (death or transcendence of ordinary life).[262] Furthermore, Maimonides seems to interpret it as the love of man for God at the time of death ("in the pleasure of this apprehension due to the intensity of passionate love.").[263]

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exalted manner. Regarding Miriam, it was explained that such explicit language could not be used regarding a woman (since God is masculine and it would encourage scoffers). Another Talmudic source (*Moed Katan*, 28a) says nothing of the patriarchs, however, and only mentions Moses, Aaron and Miriam. I thank Isaac Sassoon who informed me of that latter source. The kabbalistic sources seem not to distinguish at all between the deaths of all six, nor does Pico della Mirandola. See Chaim Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism*, pp. 154-156. Maimonides (for reasons unknown) restricts this high status of death to the "perfect" and specifically to Aaron, Moses and Miriam. Perhaps he thought that such perfection was impossible for those who lived pre-Sinai. Judah Abrabanel restricts it even further to Moses and Aaron (p.205) in one place but allows for "others" on p. 226. This perhaps indicates that Abrabanel's source is Maimonides rather than a kabbalistic one and that he was not quite confident in the rabbis' implication regarding Miriam, even though Maimonides clearly accepted it. On the other hand, ibn Latif, a kabbalist influenced by ibn Gabirol, considered a kiss to be the prelude to union with the Active Intellect. See Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (p.528 in EJ, vol.10). This is a possible kabbalistic/philosophical source of Abrabanel's view. An alternative explanation is that Abrabanel only accepted the literal biblical text, which would exclude Miriam, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob but might allow Aaron into that exclusive group who died by the kiss.

[262] This ambiguous state between life and death may be significant as regards Hermetic teachings. We saw that Judah Abrabanel took an interest in Enoch (who was said to have become the angel Metatron), Elijah (who ascended to heaven) and John the Evangelist (who was also said by some to have never really died). Brian Copenhaver has pointed out a basic contradiction in Hermetic writings regarding whether rebirth must occur after bodily death or not. See his *Hermetica: The Greek Corpus Hermeticum and the Latin Asclepius*, p.87. Paul S. MacDonald also discusses this in *History of the Concept of Mind*, p.112. One very significant feature of the Hermetic writings is the ascent and rebirth of the individual being, an intellectual process that culminates in actually becoming a god. Such a world-view combined with a monotheistic theology would explain those aforementioned examples and might also inevitably lead to the concept of union with the one God, more of which will be discussed later on.

[263] Ibid. III, 51, p. 628

But Judah Abrabanel sometimes extols taste, copulation and romantic love (at least symbolically and perhaps even literally) in a circular manner that clearly defies the Judaeo-Arabic philosophical tradition, which stressed a one-way process of emanation from the superior to the inferior and an inferior love (or desire) going back the other way. The superior person, according to Maimonides, requires and desires solitude.[264] The notion of requiring and actively seeking the love of an inferior seems somehow foreign to Maimonides' philosophy even though he was clearly extremely shaken by the death of his younger brother. Maimonides does, however, include in the *Guide* an account of the superior person's devotion to his inferiors, perhaps as a consequence of spiritual perfection.[265] For Maimonides a person's problems or sufferings can be resolved only by his own study and efforts with the help of God and not usually by others. In fact as Maimonides' treatment of the *Book of Job* in the *Guide* and his extolling of the views of Elihu reveals, what people ordinarily see as their own good is not usually that at all and the true goodness revealed by God is hidden and often comes in the guise of natural peculiarities like the Leviathon.[266] All in all, one could say that Maimonides was quite distrustful of human nature and perhaps the best way to understand his apparently conflicting religious and

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[264] For an analysis of the conflict between various interpretations of human perfection and a summary of the work of others see Howard Kreisel, "*Imitation Dei* in Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*."

[265] Ibid. III, 54. This has occasioned the need for explanation as most of the book concerns man's love for God and not for his fellow man. In other parts of the same chapter Maimonides insists that the more or less perfected person will always be thinking of God even when immersed in worldly affairs. The giving himself over to love of others seems strange therefore and has been explained as the result of perfection and immersion in God. Nevertheless, this is not consistent with the need for the love of other human beings.

[266] Ibid. III, 23

philosophical views involves the perceived need for a somewhat subtle political governance of the masses.[267] Judah Abrabanel does not speak in such a manner and instead attempts to incorporate spiritual enlightenment with the normal desires of human beings, even while warning against the purely carnal pleasures. Philo (Abrabanel's ostensible protagonist, playing the profound and superior philosopher) professes to being smitten by a woman (Sophia) throughout the book and hardly seems ashamed of it.[268] Not only does he love an inferior being but actively seeks her love in return in order to rid himself of his suffering. Hence love of the superior for the inferior is a consistent theme in the *Dialoghi* and, unlike the *Guide*, not something that requires explanation.

Maimonides, very much in the Arabic Aristotelian tradition, heaped scorn on imagination[269] even though (paradoxically) he considered it a key to political, prophetic and persuasive discourse. Judah Abrabanel sees real cognitive value in the imagination as in the following dialogue on p.266.

> Sophia: Has man, perchance, another faculty, besides those of sight and hearing, with which he can apprehend the beautiful?
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> Philo: The cognitive faculties, which are more spiritual than sight and hearing, have an even greater knowledge of the beautiful.

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[267] For an excellent discussion and solution to these problems see Howard Kreisel, *Maimonides' Political Thought*.

[268] It is possible, of course, to interpret all romantic allusions in the *Dialoghi* as literary devices and metaphors for the philosopher's love of wisdom. Undoubtedly they are that. Nevertheless, there is no attempt to de-legitimate romantic love and it may even attempt to connect such love to human dignity and even to God.

[269] He even goes so far as to call it the "evil inclination." (The *Guide* II: 12).

> Sophia: Which are these?
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> Philo: The imagination and fancy, which arranges, distinguishes and ponders the things of the senses, and discerns in many other sources grace and beauty, moving the soul to love and delight.[270] And indeed we speak of a beautiful fancy, a beautiful thought, or a beautiful invention.

Again on p.316 we find Philo telling Sophia: "Imagination should not be a stumbling-block to reason in such as you, Sophia." ("*La fantasia non bisogna che impedisca la ragione ne le tali come te, o Sophia*" in the Italian, p.267). And Sophia replies by requesting "an example, that my imagination may be better appeased."(p.316). This may be a rather significant departure from Maimonides, who was far more suspicious about fantasy and Judah Abrabanel may concur with the more traditional Platonic view that evil originates in matter, rather than in an inferior cognitive faculty (imagination). On page 209 Philo even offers the view that the "eternal forms" in the divine intellect (symbolized by light) illuminate not only the human intellect but the human imagination as well.

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[270] The new English translation (p.220) renders this: "the delight of love," and the Italian text reads: *dilettazione amorosa* (p.227). Shortly afterwards (p.220 new English translation) Philo states: "Thus, the soul is moved by the grace and beauty that it receives spiritually through the medium of sight, hearing, imagination, understanding, and intellect. And this grace that delights the soul and moves it to love is found in the objects of these faculties by reason of their spirituality, and not in the objects of the other faculties of the soul, on account of their material nature." In other words spiritual delight is mediated by imagination as well as the other faculties listed and then moves the will to love the objects of those faculties. First comes the delight and then comes the love. So you could have delight without love but you can't have love without delight.

Judah Abrabanel is also bolder at times than Maimonides is in openly challenging traditional religious beliefs. This does not necessarily reflect core beliefs but might be a result of their varying positions in the Jewish community. Maimonides, aside from being a philosopher, was a religious authority and Judah Abrabanel was not. For example, both Maimonides and Abrabanel discuss the same three opinions regarding the relationship between God and the world, although they describe them and order them differently. Abrabanel orders them as follows. The first is that of Aristotle, who considered the world to be eternal. The second is that of Plato, who considered matter or chaos to be eternal but the world to be created in time. The third is that of the "faithful" who believe that everything (other than God) was created in time. While Maimonides appears to reject both Plato and Aristotle,[271] Abrabanel boldly dismisses the traditional opinion of religious faith (the faithful) in favor of Plato.[272] As we will see, he

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[271] I wrote: "appears to reject Plato and Aristotle" because an inspection of his arguments and his other opinions raises doubts regarding his real position. While it is quite possible and even probable that Maimonides entertained novel and even disapproved views regarding divine providence and creation, I agree with Davidson and many other Maimonidean scholars that he remained very much a supporter of the rabbinic tradition. I see no real contradiction between those two assertions. Just as he rejected many of the *Midrashim*, Maimonides also rejected some of the propositional claims of the rabbis even as he supported and even intensified their legal and moral strictures.

[272] "We place a different interpretation upon the text. The expression "in the beginning" in Hebrew can mean "before"; therefore you may say, "before God created and separated the heaven and earth" (i.e. the terrestrial and heavenly world) from chaos, the earth (i.e. Chaos) was empty and void...Thus did the spirit of God, which is synonymous with the supreme intellect filled with the Ideas; which being communicated to gloomy chaos, create

inherits his interpretation of Plato from ibn Gabirol (or at least believes that he does).

In Maimonides a radical opposition to Hermetic writings is to be found in the *Guide*, III: 29. He appears to have been aware of these writings in Arabic, many of which have been lost but some of which are being re-discovered.[273] As we will see, Judah Abrabanel was far more open to such influences than was Maimonides but there is still no discernible trace in the *Dialoghi* of the Hermetic penchant for talismans and other "practical" means of summoning spiritual assistance. It is actually possible that Judah Abrabanel shared Maimonides' distaste for and condemnation of much of what today would be called interest in the occult, even if he, unlike Maimonides, was a believer in the *theory* of astrology.[274] We have become

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> light in it, drawing out the hidden substances, and enlightening them with Ideal formality." (p. 295).

This "Platonic" interpretation is offered as the opinion of Neoplatonic philosophers, astrologers and kabbalists. The "supreme intellect filled with the Ideas" seems to be equivalent to ibn Gabirol's universal form as an emanation of the Divine Will as evidenced by the term "Ideal formality." It is not Plato as an authority figure but Plato as the personification of reason that he prefers to some of the teachings of religion. This raises an interesting question. Was he primarily a philosopher or a religionist? In my view he was primarily a philosopher who filled in the gaps of his knowledge with revealed religion. Therefore, I find it somewhat perplexing that Herbert Davidson should describe him as "somewhere towards the right on the issue of reason and revelation." See "Medieval Jewish Philosophy in the Sixteenth Century" in *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, p. 118.

[273] See Fabrizio Lelli, *Hermes Among the Jews* for what is perhaps the most up to date treatment of this subject.

[274] Maimonides' opposition to astrology may not have been unique, as witnessed by the writings of Jonathan ha-Kohen of Lunel. See Herbert Davidson, *MosesMaimonides*, pp.494-495. But by the time of Judah Abrabanel it would have been difficult to find such critics. Even a hundred years later, Snatorio Santorio's opposition was considered unusual. For a good discussion of that period, see Daniel Boorstin, *The Discoverers*, pp.370-375.

accustomed to a rather wide range of beliefs in the medieval rationalists, many of whom combined a variety of influences and "irrational" beliefs that might seem incompatible with science and philosophy and few were quite as austere in that regard as was Maimonides.

This brings me to another very important difference between the two thinkers. This is perhaps one of general perception. Maimonides is one of the most hotly contested thinkers, as regards his real but hidden positions on a number of issues such as providence, creation, etc. Some modern commentators even question whether Maimonides really believed in a personal God beyond the confines of the natural world.[275] It would seem that modern scholars sometimes view him as being even more heretical than did his medieval opponents. All of these rather extreme hermeneutic positions seem to stem from a statement of Maimonides in the introduction to the *Guide* that any contradictions found within it will be significant and not unintended and may be the result of the need to conceal esoteric doctrines. Using that statement as an ironclad major premise requires a great deal of (and perhaps excessive) faith in the perspicacity of Maimonides. They are useful conjectures, however, especially given his strong interests in law and science. This has led some to think that his ostensive religious views were at times really justifications of his positions in those other areas. Perhaps such extreme interpretations also stem from the psychological and ideological needs of the interpreters. Be that as it may, it is difficult to imagine that such extreme and even anachronistic views could ever be applied to Judah Abrabanel. On the contrary, there is a

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[275] See Herbert Davidson, *Maimonides: The Man and his Works*, pp. 391-402 for a good discussion of those more radical interpretations.

tendency to overlook the more puzzling and problematic aspects of the *Dialoghi*. Of course there are many interpretive problems in the *Dialoghi*, as there are in many philosophical texts, but the emphasis of Judah Abrabanel in the *Dialoghi* is so much on the personal and mystical and so little on the scientific and legal that such naturalistic interpretations are practically inconceivable. Instead, the major interpretive problems seem to center on pantheism vs. theism.

Maimonides, as already mentioned, was an opponent of astrology, which he viewed as a pseudo-science and one that raises undesired questions regarding free will. His opposition to astrology was unusually strong for a medieval thinker. While Judah Abrabanel sometimes raises questions regarding the traditions of the astrologers he may have actually taught the subject and there seems to be a tacit assumption in the *Dialoghi* that astrology is a valid form of knowledge as when Sophia (p.292) states: "This agreement with astrology is no mean proof." On page 220 Philo uses the calculations of the astrologers as a metaphor for a very important teaching regarding the relationship between the human soul and the intellect and how the body disturbs that relationship. "And as when the moon is full and in opposition to the sun, the astrologers say that its aspect is one of maximum hostility to the sun, so when the soul draws all the light which it receives from the intellect to its inferior part turned towards the body, it is in opposition and hostile to the intellect, and completely cut off from it."

Regarding pantheism, Maimonides was an extreme opponent but Judah Abrabanel has been interpreted by many as having strong pantheistic tendencies. Most notably, Abrabanel says explicitly that the Active Intellect is indeed God while he

believes that Maimonides denies it.[276] In fact, that denial that God can be equated or identified with any other being is a linchpin of Maimonides' philosophy.

Finally, the rather extraordinary intolerance of Maimonides (a matter that has not received sufficient attention)[277] seems not at all present in Judah Abrabanel. We

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[276] I make no claims regarding what Maimonides' real position was. Some argue that Maimonides had a non-ontological notion of the *Shekhina* and that might also apply to the Active Intellect. I am only dealing with Abrabanel's perception of Maimonides' views. Seymour Feldman argued that in the third dialogue (pp.415-422) Abrabanel reneges on that earlier claim that God and the Active Intellect are one. See his "Maimonides – A guide for Posterity," p.348. I think the evidence for this claim is ambiguous. It is true that Abrabanel seems to backtrack on his earlier adamant insistence regarding the unity of God and the Active Intellect. Nevertheless, he continues to speak of a very close connection between the two. He also alludes (p.115) to the belief that some medieval Aristotelians ("Peripatetics... Avicenna, Al-ghazeli, and our own rabbi Moses") desired to follow Plato in his distinction between God and everything else including the "first intellect" but did so "imperfectly." On p.418 Abrabanel states that he follows Moses and Plato rather than Aristotle in this matter. "Plato, however, having learnt from the ancient fathers in Egypt, had a wider vision, even if it did not avail him to behold the hidden source of supreme wisdom or highest beauty; and the latter he made to be the second beginning of the universe, depending on the most high God, the first cause of all things." As I understand it, Abrabanel is arguing against conceiving God as "supreme wisdom or highest beauty" as he believed Aristotle had done. But he is not arguing that "supreme wisdom or highest beauty" is not essentially God (but simply that there is more to God than that). Interestingly, he seems to believe that "Al-ghazeli" was an Aristotelian, Plato learned about God from "the ancient fathers in Egypt" (Hermetic tradition?) and Moses, in contrast to Plato, actually beheld "the hidden source of supreme wisdom." He implies that his own knowledge of these things is superior to that of Maimonides, who only understood it "imperfectly."

[277] Many Maimonidean scholars stress the universalism of his teachings and they are not without foundation. They likewise stress his support for proselytes and his emphasis on beliefs rather than ancestry. All this is true and in comparison with later kabbalistic literature Maimonides's teachings may not seem racist or intolerant. Nevertheless, some of his positions on women, slaves and non-Jews strike the modern reader as quite intolerant. Of course we cannot not judge people from the past in an anachronistic fashion

do not find dismissive references to the unlearned and superstitious or discussions of whom one ought to kill (heretics) as in the *Mishneh Torah* or whom one may kill with impunity (primitive people without advanced religious views) as we do in the *Guide for the Perplexed.* We also do not find equally intolerant discussions of justifiable compulsion of good behavior or the acceptable motivations for such behavior in God's eyes, as we do in Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah.*[278]

Isaac Abrabanel

It would be interesting to compare the father and son and we will attempt to do that to a certain extent. Isaac Abrabanel died in 1508, long before the *Dialoghi* was published but during the time that it was most likely being composed. Unfortunately, Judah Abrabanel never mentioned his father in the *Dialoghi.* Does that mean that hr did not consider the views of his father

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and blame them for not being as tolerant as we are. Nevertheless, some of the intolerant opinions of Maimonides seem not to be dictated by either his environment or the Talmudic tradition. This sometimes leads to suspicions that that they cannot be taken at face value.

[278] An obsession with idolatry and heresy and the accompanying intolerance associated with such an obsession is a difficult charge to make against the person usually considered the greatest Jewish philosopher and I do not make it lightly. Menahem Kellner has referred to Maimonides as the main initiator of the concept of heresy in Jewish thought. See his *Heresy in Jewish Thought.* Many other Maimonidean scholars, however, have been reluctant to openly admit this. For example, James A. Diamond attributes Maimonides' quite negative fascination with Elisha ben Abuya to a deep reading of the rabbinic text and an understanding of the real dangers of such heretical views. See *Converts, Heretics and Lepers*, p.59. Likewise, David Hartman viewed it as emerging from deep epistemological and logical commitments. See *Maimonides: Torah and Philosophical Quest*, pp.130-134. Sarah Stroumsa attributes it to a knowledge of and concern for heresies in the Muslim world. See "Elisha ben Abuya and Muslim Heretics in Maimonides' Writings." There is no doubt Maimonides thought heresy was dangerous and most likely was acquainted with contemporary pernicious examples. Ironically, he himself was later accused of heresy.

to be important? Is it possible that they were not deeply aware of one another's work? Those would be very difficult propositions to assert. More likely, he could not publicly disagree with his father where clear differences existed. And perhaps they were not really as different as they appear on the surface.[279] The father was the more public figure and the son seems more radical. But perhaps since both were controversial living figures, it was wise to avoid any additional controversy. At any rate, we will be focusing somewhat more on the father than most previous discussions of Judah Abrabanel have done.

To call Isaac Abrabanel a philosopher may be a misnomer or may not be, depending upon ones view of philosophy. On the one hand he certainly knew a great deal about philosophy and was obviously an original thinker. On the other hand he was to an extent an opponent of philosophy as it had emerged in the Iberian Peninsula. Hence he occupies a position somewhat analogous to Judah Halevi and al Ghazali. And he, like them, is usually included as a religious philosopher. After all, criticism of philosophy can be a quite legitimate part of the philosophical project. In recent years we have been blessed with three original and insightful treatments of Isaac Abrabanel by Eric Lawee, Seymour Feldman and Cedric Cohen Skalli. But the latter scholar has provided us with by far the most up-to-date summary of the scholarly literature on the subject.[280] Everyone who is interested in the subject

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[279] Quite often, differences in writing styles and in expressed philosophical or religious views are to be attributed to the audience. For example, Isaac Abrabanel has a mostly Jewish audience while his son's might have been primarily Gentile. This might explain his father's messianism and the complete lack of it in the son. See Rachel Elior, "Messianic Expectations and Spiritualization of Religious Life in the Sixteenth Century," p.284.

[280] See Cedric Cohen-Skalli, "Discovering Isaac Abravanel's Humanistic Rhetoric."

should at least read his article in the *Jewish Quarterly Review* and its summary of the previous treatments of Abrabanel. But one commonplace theme stands out. Almost all commentators from Jacob Guttman to Benzion Netanyahu, whether sympathetic or not, detected something in Isaac Abrabanel that was alien to the Jewish philosophical tradition. Cohen-Skalli has also suggested that in order to understand Isaac Abrabanel one must understand the "deliberate and ongoing rhetorical *construction* of his image."[281] In many ways Isaac Abrabanel was the type of thinker and doer that a modern person can relate to. In my humble opinion, however, the father was not as original or profound a thinker as the son. But that assessment is admittedly based upon my own values and prejudices. It may also not take fully into consideration the important methodological breakthrough of Cohen-Skalli. It is possible that the hidden things are more important than that which has been revealed. At any rate, we can perhaps use the father in order to better understand the son although some may not agree with that methodology.

In many ways Isaac Abrabanel was far superior to his son. We know much about the former and little about the latter and perhaps for good reason. Isaac Abrabanel was certainly not what one thinks of as a typical intellectual but perhaps was more of a man of action.[282] He had a very wide range of talents

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[281] Ibid. p.94

[282] Isaac Abrabanel is sometimes given the title of rabbi but in reality he was a businessman, politician and diplomat (in the broad sense of those words). He was also quite learned and prolific in his intellectual endeavors. Most likely he did not suffer much from the melancholic malady that Robert Burton in *The Anatomy of Melancholy* viewed as the lot of the typical scholar, bereft of the normal companionship and diversions that vivify the average human being. Whether his son Judah might have so suffered is an open question but surely some of the more personal references in the *Dialoghi* would be at least consonant with such a hypothesis.

and interests and a boldness of thought that may have spawned his son's equally extraordinary display of originality. And regarding influence on his son, we can be more or less certain that it was immense. Yet it is not readily apparent! Despite their enormous respect for one another, there seems to have been a fairly serious generational gap between the two, which shows itself in their styles.[283] No one, for example, could ever have suspected that the father converted to Christianity as they had regarding the son, although he (like his son) knew much about Christian thought and did show himself *capable* of writing pure philosophy, relatively unaffected by his religion. We have seen that Judah Abrabanel imbibed the spirit of Italian Christian humanism to a much greater extent than his father had assimilated Iberian Christian culture, which he surely mastered but from which he was always somewhat alienated. Recent literature on Isaac Abrabanel, like that of Cohen-Skalli, Moshe Idel and Eric Lawee has stressed the humanistic elements and influences as well as the influence of Hermetic and Platonic ideas on both him and his son.[284] Since this is not a book about Isaac Abrabanel we will not attempt to decide between the more traditional treatment of him (which is creatively renewed and updated by Feldman) and the more or less revisionist ones but we can perhaps say this with some assurance. Isaac Abrabanel was a Jewish thinker writing for Jews, most of who were not philosophically inclined or even knowledgeable. Judah Abrabanel was a philosopher, who happened to be a Jew, writing for philosophically minded people of all religious orientations.

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[283] This has also been suggested by Seymour Feldman. See *Philosophy in a Time of Crisis: Don Isaac Abravanel: Defender of the Faith.*

[284] See in particular Moshe Idel, "Kabbalah and *Prisca Theologia* in Rabbi Isaac and Yehuda Abravanel's Writings."

In contrast to some other medieval Jewish philosophers, Isaac Abrabanel did not see the necessity or even the virtue of turning Judaism into a logically consistent set of beliefs based on axioms of faith, self-evident principles, etc.[285] But if he had to choose a core belief that supports the entire system it would likely have been creation.[286] He accepted Maimonides' arguments for the temporal creation of the world by divine decree while agreeing with him that it cannot really be demonstrated. Like Maimonides perhaps, he may not have been completely comfortable with that position. But unlike Maimonides, who promulgated a complicated hodgepodge of arguments that continues to baffle scholars, Abrabanel resolved his doubts by positing an almost infinite series of concrete worlds, which had existed prior to ours. Unlike the bulk of medieval Jewish philosophers, he denied the living or rational nature of the heavenly bodies and attempted to concentrate those qualities in God and humankind. This reveals a rather ascetic and severe quality of his world-view, which expresses itself in his critique of culture as well.

In his commentary on *Genesis*, Isaac Abrabanel (plausibly) argues against the ultimate value of civilization and for the concentration on the perfection of the relationship between man and God, without the distractions of material civilization. This may indeed have been the original biblical orientation (in a time of pagan idolatry) but one that seemed destined to fall by the wayside. His extreme critique of both

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[285] The evidence for that claim is admittedly somewhat ambiguous. On the one hand, he appears to have been somewhat in favor of Maimonides' attempt to systematize Judaism but was also critical of that attempt. See Menachem Kellner, "R. Isaac Abravanel on the Principles of Judaism."

[286] For an excellent discussion of the primacy of that belief in Abrabanel's thought see Menachem Kellner, *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought*, pp.186-195.

politics and culture, practically unprecedented in post-biblical Jewish thought and more extreme than most Christian thought, reveals the boldness of his thinking. But as profound and original as that world-view was, it could never function as a practical or even theoretical guide for human thought and action. It is more of a limiting concept, which could point out where we have gone too far. It is perhaps more evident now than it was in his day that the Jewish people were always profoundly influenced by neighboring cultures and that even the attempt to avoid that in the present requires, ironically, that the influence of other (perhaps unknown) previous non-Jewish cultures becomes even more powerful. It is somewhat likely that Isaac Abrabanel was aware of this fact. A case in point is Kabbalah, which we now know to have been profoundly influenced by non-Jewish ideas. This leads to the suspicion that Isaac Abrabanel's attitude towards non-Jewish culture and Kabbalah may have been far more nuanced than it is usually given credited for being. It is quite possible that his strategy as a leader of the Jewish people, and not simply as an intellectual, was to juggle various influences, Jewish and Gentile.

In order to assess Isaac Abrabanel's attitude towards Kabbalah completely, we would have to look at all his voluminous writings but it is evident from learned discussions of his work that this might yield some conflicting opinions. His views on this subject seem not to be entirely consistent. In contrast to some of his more foundational views, regarding Kabbalah he turns out to be a rather complex thinker who may well have changed his views over time.

In an early work written while still in Lisbon in the 1460's entitled *Ateret Zekenim* (Crown of the Elders) he expresses admiration for the kabbalists but this should be placed

in some perspective. One of the purposes of the work was to interpret the revered Maimonides in such a way that he could be viewed as somewhat more traditional than the more radical Aristotelians who claimed his mantle. This turns out to be a major motif in Maimonidean studies. Since Maimonides is such an iconic figure, both traditionalists and radicals would like to enlist him on their respective sides. The biblical passage that in a sense forms the foundation of Isaac Abrabanel's work is *Exodus* XXIV: 9-11. That passage makes the rather astounding assertion that not only Moses but his brother Aaron and 72 elders of Israel beheld God, saw sapphire pavement under His feet, and ate and drank. This has always been one of the more difficult biblical passages to interpret, not only because of its language, that suggests an allegorical meaning, but also because in other places the Bible declares that one may not see God and live. Some rabbis had argued that the elders did something wrong (perhaps eating and drinking) and deserved to die. Maimonides argued that they acted hastily and incorrectly, perhaps attributing corporeality to God.[287] One

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[287] See Moses Maimonides, the *Guide,* I: 5, Friedlander translation, p.18-19.

> But "the nobles of the Children of Israel" were impetuous, and allowed their thoughts to go unrestrained: what they perceived was but imperfect. Therefore it is said of them, "And they saw the God of Israel, and there was under his feet," etc....the purpose of the whole passage is to criticize their act of seeing and not to describe it. They are blamed for the nature of their perception, which was to a certain extent corporeal—a result which necessarily followed, from the fact that they ventured too far before being perfectly prepared. They deserved to perish...
> The nobles of the Children of Israel, besides erring in their perception, were through this cause, also misled in their actions; for in consequence of their confused perception, they gave way to bodily cravings.

should remember that this was also one of Maimonides' biggest complaints against some rabbis of his own time, who seemed to think that God was corporeal and/or could be perceived through the senses. One should also keep in mind that Maimonides had cautioned readers not to be overly harsh in their condemnation of such faulty judgments as long as they do not lead to bad actions.[288] Isaac Abrabanel certainly concurs with that latter admonition but in so doing disagrees with Maimonides' willingness to condemn the elders. Interestingly, Abrabanel is willing to disregard not only Maimonides but also much earlier rabbis and defend the elders in the light of his own exegetical skills. Yet he turns the tables on those rabbis (including Maimonides) by accusing them of repudiating tradition in favor of their own reasoning, which by the way is exactly what Abrabanel was doing! But in order to do this he invokes yet another scriptural verse (*Deuteronomy* V: 3) as well as rabbinic utterances that sometimes allow for later inferior authorities to be given superior knowledge to earlier more authoritative ones. As frequently happens in Jewish scholarship, however, the arguments soon turn on what exactly Maimonides meant: something that was not entirely clear just as it is not entirely clear what the elders had really seen. Without going into philosophical details (Isaac Abrabanel indeed shows a subtle knowledge of them) he finds a way to support Maimonides' rebuke of the elders and at the same time absolve them of any grave sin but merely of a philosophical error and imputes an

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Later, however, in I: XXVIII (pp.37-38) he gives a more nuanced interpretation, accusing the elders or nobles of seeing prime matter and believing it to be God.

[288] Ibid, p.19: "It will do no harm, however, if those who are unable to comprehend what we here endeavor to explain should refer all the words in question to sensuous perception, to seeing lights created (for the purpose), angels, or similar beings."

even graver sin to the followers of Maimonides, who were far to quick to judge. But the root cause of their judgments was their overemphasis on rational philosophical thought and their lack of appreciation for what far exceeded that in majesty and power: prophetic vision. It is from this introduction that Abrabanel first deals with the wisdom of the Kabbalah.

Why did Moses need to spend 40 days on Mount Sinai? This question allows Isaac Abrabanel to infer that there were lessons to be learned of various kinds and also allows for a qualified support of kabbalistic teachings. Unlike the philosophers who deny any ability to discuss or conceptualize God, the kabbalists have real knowledge of Him, like Moses and the elders did. He even invokes the *Sefirot* (the ten kabbalistic bifurcations of God). Perhaps the kabbalists believed that those *Sefirot* really were God but from a more philosophical perspective they could also be viewed as something less than God. This is a question that Abrabanel boldly attempts to answer. The kabbalists, including perhaps their greatest spokesman Nachmanides, had insisted that the *Shekhinah* (God's immanent presence or glory) was indeed God but Maimonides had insisted that it was a created being (albeit one of incredible majesty). Abrabanel comes down in favor of the philosopher and against the kabbalists. The ultimate message of this youthful work (which Abrabanel himself would perhaps come to deprecate somewhat later on) was that despite their possession of real knowledge, the kabbalists must not be allowed to be the ultimate interpreters of it and it must be subject to rational critique. It will turn out however, that in his later writings that subtle knowledge of philosophy is obscured

somewhat for reasons that we can only speculate about.[289] It turns out that the arguments in his early work define his later attitude towards Kabbalah, which Eric Lawee describes as combining "outward deference with wide-scale indifference and hints of misgivings."[290]

Given Isaac Abrabanel's initial ambivalence towards both philosophy and Kabbalah, things must have changed considerably once he moved to Italy. Unlike the situation in Iberia, he (and his son) found that in their new environment philosophy and Kabbalah were no longer rivals but allies. Yet he never declared himself a kabbalist (which might have actually been prestigious in Italy) and indeed even disclaims any esoteric kabbalistic knowledge in his later writings. Furthermore, he does not make copious use of kabbalistic theories in his biblical commentaries though there are isolated mentions of the *Zohar* and other kabbalistic sources.[291] Isaac Abrabanel remained ambivalent about both philosophy and Kabbalah, despite an obviously acute interest in both.

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[289] Such speculation turns out to be a rather easy, though quite fallible, matter. Perhaps the expulsion from Spain turned Abrabanel's focus from the wisdom of the Gentiles (philosophy) back to the original Jewish wisdom of the *Torah*. If so it places him in a very interesting situation vis-à-vis his son, who seems to have not only reverted back to his father's original orientation but to have exceeded him in it.

[290] See Eric Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance Toward Tradition: Defense, Dissent, and Dialogue*, p.81and pp. 59-82 for an excellent discussion of these questions regarding Isaac Abrabanel, Kabbalah, Jewish tradition and philosophy.

[291] Ibid., especially pp. 156-157, 207-210, 284. As Lawee points out, Abrabanel tends to use Kabbalah as a foil against philosophy but he might have been "quietly" influenced by it more than he admits. What is quite refreshing in Lawee's analysis is the acknowledgment of ambivalence, doubts, hidden agendas, etc. vs. the more normal assessment of unmixed positive regard for Kabbalah.

Regarding his son, the prior analysis may reveal something very interesting that could be applied to him also. As one who was primarily known as a biblical exegete and not necessarily as a deep esoteric thinker, it seems quite in keeping for Isaac Abrabanel to appear ambivalent towards Kabbalah, even if he really was a true believer in it.[292] One might have expected such a hidden esoteric belief system to come to full fruition in the son, who felt no compunctions about claiming all kinds of hidden secrets about God and the universe. Yet that expectation is never explicitly met. Judah seems to have remained faithful to his father's actual ambivalence regarding Kabbalah, even as he (unlike his father) enthusiastically embraces philosophy and other aspects of Gentile culture. In fact he even intensifies his father's outward deference towards Kabbalah and replaces it with outward skepticism.

Some Stylistic Differences Between Judah Abrabanel and the Prior Three Thinkers

We have already discussed some important philosophical differences between Judah Abrabanel and Maimonides (whom he revered nevertheless). But there are some stylistic differences that are also important. Maimonides probably never would have used a dialogue with a woman, never would have discussed romantic love (or copulation) as a metaphor for religious concepts in the manner that Abrabanel did. He certainly never would have explicitly described pagan myths or

[292] Julius Guttman had denied the innovative nature of Isaac Abrabanel's work, which would be consonant with a non-critical acceptance of kabbalistic claims. Netanyahu stressed Isaac Abrabanel's role in the Jewish rejection of rationalism and attributed it to his mysticism. As we have seen, more recent scholarship questions that presumption in both respects. For a summary, see Cedric Cohen-Skalli, "Discovering Isaac Abravanel's Humanistic Rhetoric."

homosexuality, unless absolutely necessary. The two philosophers inhabit vastly different intellectual spaces and this could be encapsulated in the all too hackneyed comparison between the medieval and Renaissance worlds. Regarding ibn Gabirol, there is less of a stylistic contrast, especially since that philosopher was also a poet. They share an interest in astrology and exhibit a more tolerant, universalistic attitude. But when ibn Gabirol specifically discusses romantic love it is almost entirely negative, in contrast to his positive evaluation of mercy and compassion. Judah Abrabanel's treatment of love is far more nuanced. Regarding his father, Judah Abrabanel shares an obvious interest in Christian Scholasticism and in later humanistic writings. His writings show much less of an interest in biblical texts and in the Jewish people than does his father.

Some Elements of the Prior Jewish *Genres* in the *Dialoghi*

We have seen that Isaac Abrabanel was somewhat skeptical about Iberian Jewish philosophy and its Arabic forebears, falling back instead on an almost fideistic attachment to the Bible. I will reiterate the claim that if Isaac Abrabanel had wanted or been able to construct an internally consistent religious philosophy, it would have been founded upon the free creation (by love/will) of the universe by God. While some (most notably Maimonides) viewed creation as allowing for revelation, and while Isaac Abrabanel seemed to follow Maimonides in that regard, it is not at all clear to me that Judah Abrabanel does. Rather than focusing on the logical ramifications of creation, he seems to focus instead on the logical presupposition of it and in a sense attempts to plumb the depths of the creative act in order to find its root principle: love. It should perhaps not surprise us then that like his father, Judah

Abrabanel also took refuge in a-rational principles, if not in the same a-rational methodology.

But we have also seen that Judah Abrabanel is much more the explicitly dedicated philosopher than was his father. He tries valiantly to reconcile the Renaissance obsession with love with the Judaeo-Arabic obsession with intellect but in the end he fails (in my estimation). And that failure may indicate the need to usher in yet a new philosophical theory. In this regard it is quite possible (if we accept the new humanistic interpretation of Isaac Abrabanel) that both father and son looked forward to that which neither could openly express. The following round of dialogue on pages 57-59 should at least make that aforementioned failure abundantly clear.

> Sophia: How can you say that true love is born of reason? For I have heard that perfect love cannot be controlled or restricted by any reason; and therefore it is called unbridled, because it will not be guided by the bridle of reason, nor be decked therewith.
>
> Philo: What you have heard is true. But though I said that such love is born of reason, I did not say that it was restricted or directed by reason. Rather I say that, after it has been produced by reason and knowledge, love, once born, no longer submits to the orders and rule of reason which bore it; but recalcitrates at its parent, becoming, as you say, so ungovernable as to harm and injure its votaries. For he who truly loves another, unloves himself; which is against all reason and duty. For love is charity, and should begin at home; but we disregard this,

> loving others more than ourselves: a noteworthy thing! ... So you need not wonder that perfect love, though born of reason, is not subject to reason.
>
> Sophia: Nay, I wonder rather how love can be praiseworthy that is not governed by reason and prudence...
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> Philo: You do not understand the point rightly. For unrestraint is not a property of wanton love, but pertains to all great and mighty loves, be they good or bad...

One of the practical consequences of the love vs. intellect controversy is the attitude of the philosopher towards human beings and ordinary human life. Intellectuals who prize the intellect above all other things often seem rather remote from those more pedestrian human concerns. Yet that obsession with intellect is in another sense irrational and sometimes appears more like a disease than a classical, harmonious well-rounded life; in other words it resembles the "unrestraint" of love! T.A. Perry characterizes Judah Abrabanel's position as follows.

> Further, in spite of Leone's clear intellectualistic bias, the thrust of his thought is integrative rather than dualistic: intellectual contemplation is probably beyond our powers and, at any rate, distracts us from our human duties in this world. This allows Leone to develop a positive theology of human action in which normal sensual pleasures, sexual love, and such lower faculties as fantasy have a legitimate and necessary place in the universe. The error consists not of using

> and enjoying such things but rather of their disproportionate use and enjoyment.[293]

While there are some claims in that statement that I might quibble with, the conclusion seems right. Despite Abrabanel's theoretical depreciation of the physical, he appears quite at home with those pleasures and fantasies. In that respect he may be an unusual religious philosopher.

Particularism and Universalism Revisited

It should be quite obvious to anyone who reads the *Dialoghi* that there is hardly a trace of particularism in it if one defines that term in a manner that I consider to be of some significance. Let us first consider what I am *not* referring to. Judah Abrabanel clearly states that the teachings of Moses contain the answers to certain quite vexing religious and philosophical questions and that the wisdom of Plato and others has its etiology in biblical prophecy. So an assertion of the truth of Judaism is obviously not what I mean by "particularism." Even if a person were to believe that certain truths were revealed to the Jews and to no one else that would not quite rise to what I mean by particularism, even though it would surely qualify under other definitions.[294] What I do mean by that term is an

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[293] See *Erotic Spirituality: The Integrative Tradition from Leone Ebreo to John Donne*, p.74. I would disagree, however with the statement that in Abrabanel's view "intellectual contemplation is probably beyond our powers."

[294] Such a belief in Jewish exceptionalism would be problematic from an epistemic standpoint as well as from an ethical one. It would either be quasi-racist in nature or it would confound our normal bias towards methodological individualism. Assuming that at least some Gentiles are as cognitively fit as most Jews, why would it only be possible for the Jews to receive the revelation or benefit from it? The only possible answer to this that I can think of would be some mystical notion of the Jewish people as something like a separate Intelligence that bestows knowledge only upon

all-consuming concern for the Jewish people and a corresponding depreciation of the value or relevance of other peoples or a belief that only the Jews could possibly have received the revelation from God. The following examples of a lack of such particularism apply to the *Dialoghi* but not necessarily to his extant poetry. He never mentions any difference between the Jewish soul and that of the non-Jew.[295] He shows no particular or extraordinary concern for the welfare of his own people. Not only does he not mention the ancient exile of the Jews from the Holy Land but does not even mention the quite recent one from the Iberian Peninsula or the suffering of the New Christians under the Inquisition. This must raise serious questions in the context of Jewish thought and especially for those who consider it a work of Jewish philosophy, who must ultimately address this issue. It will be revisited at the end of this chapter. On the other hand, Judah Abrabanel surely makes a great effort to integrate his universalistic teachings into prior Jewish philosophical, biblical and (possibly) kabbalistic ones. This is itself an important feat, comparable to the greatest of the prior Jewish philosophers such as Philo, ibn Gabirol and Maimonides. Interestingly, however, he fails to fall back on the more literal universalistic teachings of the Hebrew Bible, at least explicitly. He seems to prefer philosophical sources such as Plato or at least Platonic interpretations of biblical themes. This may well be in keeping with his non-literalist orientation and his Jewish medieval

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those who identify with it. Such a notion might indeed have been a possible one for Judah Abrabanel but I have not found it in his writings any more than I have found racist leanings.

[295] Such assertions are common in Jewish (particularly kabbalistic) literature. For example Yohanan Allemano asserted: "there is a great difference between the souls of the sons of Israel and the souls of the rest of the nations." (Jerusalem ms.8° 598, fol.122a) The translation is by Brian Ogren and found in *Renaissance and Rebirth*, p.204.

philosophical heritage. There also seems to be a conspicuous absence of *explicit* Talmudic references and/or interest in the mechanics of observance of Jewish law, ritual impurity, or even, for that matter, a philosophical justification of the ritual laws. The latter omission is especially perplexing in a Jewish philosopher. But of course Judah Abrabanel was a Jew and I have no objection to calling his book "Jewish philosophy" as long as we keep these rather peculiar and distinctive features in mind.

Perhaps of even deeper concern as regards the Jewishness of the *Dialoghi* is the relative absence of some of the strategies that were employed by other Jewish Renaissance writers to maintain a Jewish flavor in their writings. I quote Alexander Altmann regarding Judah Moscato.

> What introduces a Renaissance flavor into the medieval texture of this position is Moscato's fondness of syncretistic etymologies. Since Hebrew was the original language of the human race, he found it quite natural that, as he believed, many Hebrew words survived in the other tongues. This belief helped to restore a sense of universal human kinship that the consciousness of Hebrew singularity might have been apt to undermine. Hence the search for words common to many languages, while assuming the primacy of Hebrew, tended, at the same time, to create, to create a bridge between the cultures. It was the counterpart to the intellectual syncretism that permitted Christian Renaissance philosophers to defer, in all innocence, to the pagan deities, and that made it

> inoffensive in Moscato's eyes to follow the Platonists and Pico in calling the first hypostasis in the process of emanations by the name of the "Son of God"...It seems that Moscato's excursions into the nebulous region of etymology owed some stimulus to the treatise *Dor ha-Pelaga* written by his friend David Provencal, one of the three Provencal brothers whom dei Rossi described as the "upholders of Tora" (*tofsey ha-Tora*) in Mantua (*Imrey Bina*, p. 146). In this well-intentioned work, more than two thousand Hebrew words had been collected that were said to be found also in Greek, Latin, Italian and/or other tongues.[296]

What Altmann is pointing out here, it seems to me, is the need that other syncretistic Jewish Renaissance thinkers felt to pepper their discourse with bounteous Jewish language and particularistic flavor. This psychological/social need and the resulting Jewish flavor are not very prominent in the *Dialoghi*, although admittedly Abrabanel does at times wander into the origins of words in ancient Hebrew.

The Problem of the Cycles

This is not a specifically Jewish theme. Nevertheless, I have included it in this chapter because it does appear in prior Jewish literature and most importantly in Isaac Abrabanel. Without going into great detail, it certainly appears that Judah Abrabanel's concept of a universe alive with both affection and reason and his complete absorption into Renaissance culture are

[296] See Alexander Altmann, "'Ars Rhetorica' as Reflected in Some Jewish Figures of the Italian Renaissance," p.116.

rather extreme repudiations of his father's much more austere and traditional world-view. Yet, in other respects, including the subject under discussion, there is a great deal of similarity between the two thinkers, as one would of course expect. And it could very well be that they were not nearly as far a part as they appear. Both hold that successive worlds are destroyed and then after a forty nine thousand year cycle the whole universe returns to chaos. These beliefs might seem to be of kabbalistic origin but perhaps are not necessarily so. They are also, for example, to be found in the philosopher and astronomer Abraham bar Hayya.[297] It does seem that Isaac Abrabanel relied to a certain extent upon Kabbalah and often based his beliefs upon Nachmanides. The numbers six and seven, however, are of somewhat more universal significance in mythological proto-scientific thought[298] and will also be discussed more fully later on. Another similarity is their shared interest in ibn Gabirol. I would now like to concentrate on their somewhat contradictory interpretations of his metaphysics.

Isaac Abrabanel believed that the spiritual angels or separate intellects proceed directly from God and therefore are not destroyed at the end of those forty nine thousand year cycles but return to God. This is still in keeping with his tendency to reduce spiritual forces to man and God since human souls will also return to God, though they may not last on earth for more than six thousand years. Perhaps they continue to exist throughout the forty nine thousand year cycle in some

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[297] See Abraham bar Hayya, *The Meditation of the Sad Soul.*

[298] For example, aside from the biblical seven-day week, the ancient world had seven planets, Rome was built on seven hills, there were seven ancient wonders of the world, etc. Six was the basis for the Babylonian and Egyptian number systems and the number 360 was the conventional Egyptian year, which was in turn a multiple of twelve and 30, both multiples of six.

disembodied state. Even so, he expresses a lack of comprehension as to why the heavenly bodies should outlast human beings.[299] But, strangely, he uses as a support for that contention a quotation from ibn Gabirol's epic poem *Keter Malkhut*. Judah Abrabanel seems to believe that prime matter is eternal and on page 282 he affirms both that belief and the curious proposition that the world is both "temporal and eternal." I take this to mean a distinction between an ideal reality and the physical one. He also discusses the destruction of the worlds on pp.288-292 and he explicitly links this discussion to kabbalistic tradition at the end. On page 290 he specifically discusses the problem of the angels and gives two possible answers to the question. One answer is that of his father, but without any support from ibn Gabirol. That answer is predicated on the assumption that the angels are not composite beings of form and matter. The other answer, which he prefers, is that the angels are indeed composite beings (as ibn Gabirol believed) and therefore are only dissolved with the rest of the creation. His proof text is also ibn Gabirol's metaphysical work: the *Fons Vitae*. We now know, of course, that on this issue it was Judah Abrabanel who interpreted ibn Gabirol correctly. But I would now like to point out a corollary of that belief that involves a possible inconsistency between his emphasis on the value of the individual and his view regarding the ultimate fate of individual human life.[300]

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[299] *Mif'a lot Elohim*, pp.168-169

[300] It has been previously opined by Seymour Feldman that Judah Abrabanel's notion of immortality is of the "Aristotelian-Averroist" type and compromises the more traditional belief in personal immortality. See "The End and Aftereffects of Medieval Jewish Philosophy" in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, edited by Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman, pp. 426-427. As usual Judah Abrabanel may have been taking certain views for granted that might reduce this appearance of

If Judah Abrabanel really believed that the individual angels were destroyed (returned to God) with the cyclical destruction of the universe, what does that tell us about individual human immortality? Obviously, human beings are also composed of form and matter yet many would consider them even more perishable than angels. That might mean that humans too will pass away at the complete end of the cycle.[301] This resembles the Buddhist view that even the gods eventually perish. Perhaps from that perspective of perishability the interpreters of Averroes were right after all and individual immortality is a myth! Judah Abrabanel never actually says this, however. And we surely do not find here any explicit approval of a "double truth" theory that would allow for a belief in individual immortality on religious grounds while denying it on philosophical principles. The mainstream of medieval Jewish philosophy (along with Muslim philosophy) had focused on the relationship between the human soul and the lowest of the separate intellects, the Active Intellect. Ibn Gabirol, however, seems to have believed that if there were indeed an Active Intellect it would be the highest (10th) of the separate intellects and the only one not conjoined with a heavenly body. Judah Abrabanel (like Augustine) thought that God Himself was that Active Intellect.[302] He may have developed those ideas

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inconsistency. For example, he may have assumed a view of the individual soul similar to that of Ficino.

[301] In the *Keter Malkhut* ibn Gabirol speaks of the saintly human souls proceeding to a place right under Universal Matter, which Judah Abrabanel considered to be eternal. This is an even higher place than that of the angels, which emerge from the tenth sphere of Intellect. Judah Abrabanel does not appear to comment upon this, however.

[302] This is made clear in the first dialogue on page 45: "I will only say that those who meditate most on God, affirm — and I agree — that the Active Intellect, which gives light to our power of understanding, is God Most High." See the Miranda dissertation, page 986 for a good discussion.

in connection with a somewhat prevalent Renaissance philosophical view. He even attributes that same view to Averroes.[303] This reading of Averroes is not accepted by most modern scholars, however. The identification of God with all His emanations and/or creations would later be developed into an exceedingly radical theory by Spinoza, who, as it turns out, had a copy of the *Dialoghi* in his library.

Despite Judah Abrabanel's valiant attempt to ground human dignity on divine love and even if in his view human beings can exist on earth for thousands of years (and their souls for even longer), he may possibly have considered all of creation (with perhaps the conspicuous exception of chaos) to be a kind of fiction[304] and ultimately eternity and all other qualities of Being belong to God alone.[305] This would indeed

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[303] See p. 184 of the *Dialoghi* and p. 158 of the new English translation.

[304] I would caution the reader that "fiction" is not a bad word. What most of us call the "real world" is the narrative of human interests and personalities that very much resembles fiction. It is certainly not the real world of physics or chemistry. Aristotle in the *Poetics* recognized that drama imitates life but we from a more complete perspective might reverse that order. We surely accept the view that human personality and its ensuing narratives constitute the basis for both "reality," as ordinarily understood, and fiction. That is not to endorse the blurring of the distinction between reality and fiction but only to expand the "scientific" view of reality and view fiction as more relevant to the "real" world than is often supposed. For a good discussion see Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning*, chapter 2.

[305] I have endeavored to distinguish the Judeo-Christian view of reality from other religious views that do not take the world and humankind quite so seriously. If only God is ultimately real and the created world is a fiction, it is still God's fiction and a very serious and important one indeed. Perhaps divine fiction is actually a quite honorific title because if there is a God, what else could reality possibly be? The difference from other works of fiction is that God's creations have a warrant that other fictions don't necessarily have. They are not mere fancies but somehow based on God's own being, even if they are a pale reflection. Of course, man's dominion over nature gives him the ability and right to alter God's creation to a certain extent. This is difficult to reconcile with a quasi-pantheistic view unless one considers the relationship between man and God to be very close indeed. Nevertheless,

be in consonance with what some have described as his quasi-pantheistic views. But this is merely a conjecture on my part and in fact is militated against by his expansive concept of divine love, which might well preserve all such "fictions" for eternity.[306] Perhaps, however, he had relatively extravagant metaphysical beliefs that even went well beyond what he dared to express.

God's Justice in This World

An area that is almost totally ignored in the *Dialoghi* is divine justice in this world.[307] Therefore there is no apparent need to describe how it influenced the *Dialoghi* and I have dealt with it last. Why then should we concern ourselves with it at all? There is the need to deal with its absence, given its prominence in Jewish literature.[308] This glaringly omitted theme relates not

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Abrabanel's quasi-pantheistic world-view seems to ultimately lead to a view of God being not only the One but also the All.

[306] This problem had also been noted by Netanyahu (p.134) regarding Isaac Abrabanel, from whom Judah most likely received this idea of the destruction of the human souls after forty nine thousand years. For an excellent discussion, see Brian Ogren, *Renaissance and Rebirth*, pp.121-138. Isaac Abrabanel was influenced by kabbalistic motifs and the belief in metempsychosis, which might have been his way of dealing with this problem. Judah Abrabanel, under the influence of his father and therefore at least indirectly by kabbalistic notions, seems perhaps to have seen the need for a new and simpler explanation. Not only does he not mention metempsychosis but stresses God's love for the unique human being, rather than the more abstract, impersonal, yet complex, notion of return of the human souls to God. Judah Abrabanel's notion of union with God seems to be based more upon the phenomenon of mutual human love, albeit modified in order to accommodate the asymmetrical relationship between man and God. This will be discussed in much greater depth later on.

[307] This may be related to the lack of a strong theodicy in the *Dialoghi*. Although there are allusions to the association of evil with carnality and ignorance, there is no concerted effort to deal with the ultimate origin of evil.

[308] I do not mean to suggest that there is a normative Jewish view on this subject. There are even books in the Hebrew Bible such as *Ecclesiastes* and

only to the fate of the Jews but also to historical events in general. The failure to deal with it is almost incomprehensible in a Jewish philosophical text even though some other Jewish philosophers also failed to give it great prominence, most notably ibn Gabirol.[309] But even he alluded to this problem on pp.45-49 of the *The Improvement of the Moral Qualities* as well as in some of his poetry. God is supposed to be supremely just in Jewish thought, yet the world does not really appear to be ruled strictly in accordance with justice.[310] Even some of the specifically described acts of God in the Bible do not appear to be completely just. One such act that has perplexed Jewish thinkers is the "hardening of the heart"[311] of Pharaoh and his

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Job that question divine justice in this world and there are certainly quite nuanced Talmudic discussions of it as well. What can perhaps be said with assurance is that there is a deeply ingrained default assumption in Judaism that God rules the world with justice or at least ought to do so. At times this underlying assumption requires explanation and at times it may elicit outright denial.

[309] In this respect ibn Gabirol probably reflects non-Jewish influences in his philosophical work. Aristotle, for example, while clearly accepting the need for material goods in order to achieve human flourishing, apparently was unconcerned about the grossly inequitable distribution of such goods in this world. Plato with his doctrine of reincarnation could more easily justify such apparent injustice. The Stoics denied that material fortune contributed essentially to human happiness, despite their quasi-materialist metaphysics. The Gnostics, on the other hand, denied the goodness of creation altogether and therefore required no explanation for the apparent injustice in it.

[310] This can be resolved by assuming that all events (except perhaps those caused by human agency) are caused by God and that all of His actions are just *by definition*. But that would not give us any new information or understanding and would turn what appears to be a substantive claim regarding God's justice into a tautological one. A better, and indeed more common, approach has been to justify these things by reference to the world to come.

[311] There are really three separate verbs used to describe this event and the "heart" meant his mind or will. But no matter what the specific mechanisms used to prevent Pharaoh from repenting or adapting to God's will, he was still punished for something that clearly was designed by God. It is my sense that Christian biblical commentators are not so concerned by this as

subsequent punishment. And there is the explicit statement of God in the Bible that he would visit the iniquities of sinners upon their children up to the third or even fourth generation, something that on the surface appears quite unjust.[312] Jewish thinkers generally have felt a need to comment upon this and attempt to resolve it to a degree.[313] One could of course argue

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are Jewish ones, who frequently go to great lengths to deny it or in some other way to justify God's actions. Both traditional Jewish and Christian commentators, however, tend to agree that these punishments were decreed by God and not a result of chance or purely natural causes.

[312] See *Numbers*, 14:18. This may refer to the collective retribution for individual sin or the consequences of the latter, both of which admittedly are problems related to strict justice. The Hebrew word *avon* need not mean "sin" but may mean punishment for sin as in *Genesis* IV: 13. There are some who say that such unjust retribution only is promised and only occurs regarding very grievious sins in order to act as a deterrent. But human experience as well as social science tells us that many traits are indeed passed on from parents to children and that the genetic component is generally agreed to be close to 50%. And even cultural or environmental factors inherited from one's parents are quite difficult (if not impossible at times) to defeat. There is a long history in pagan thought as well of the transmissibility of sin, especially within families. See Angelos Chaniotis, "Under the watchful eyes of the gods," p.2. Interestingly, though the distinction is thought by some to be artificial, there appears to be no immediate transmissibility of moral impurity in the Bible, though there is such transmissibility for ritual impurity. Those who are close physically to a sinner need not bring a sin offering. Later Talmudic speculations did, however, refer to a kind of transmissible moral taint. This was developed even more specifically and dogmatically in the Christian doctrine of original sin. It is quite possible that later Jewish insistence on strict individual justice and the subsequent ignoring of an embarrassing earlier Jewish *genre* might be a result of (more or less subtle) anti-Christian polemic.

[313] Most notably, of course, Maimonides in *The Guide*, III, 17 gave what he considered the normative Jewish view and then attempted to refine or modify it with a much more ambiguous one of his own. The following quotation is from p.469 of the Pines translation. There is no need to quote his idiosyncratic opinion or attempt to explain it as that is not our current purpose. Nor does it particularly concern us here whether this quotation is consistent with all the other writings of Maimonides including the personal opinion that he gives subsequent to this in *The Guide*.

that Judah Abrabanel's emphasis on divine love or grace and the resulting eschatological conclusions of that love might obviate the need to resolve this problem; but that is simply not a very Jewish approach or at least not a normal Jewish method.[314]

> The fifth opinion is our opinion, I mean the opinion of our Law. I shall let you know about it what has been literally stated in the books of our prophets and is believed by the multitude of our scholars... It is a fundamental principle of the Law of *Moses our Master*, peace be on him, and of all those who follow it that man has an absolute ability to act; I mean to say that in virtue of his nature, his choice, and his will, he may do everything that is within the capacity of man to do, and this without there being created for his benefit in any way any newly produced thing. Similarly all the species of animals move in virtue of their own will. And He has willed it so; I mean to say that it comes form His eternal volition in the eternity a parte ante that all animals should move in virtue of their will and that man should have the ability to do whatever he wills or chooses among the things concerning which he has the ability to act. This is a fundamental principle about which — praise be to God! — no disagreement has ever been heard within our religious community. It is likewise one of the fundamental principles of the Law of *Moses our Master* that it is in no way possible that He, may He be exalted, should be unjust...

[314] I am aware of the *Midrashim* that expand the naïve view of reward and punishment, pushing it back to the afterlife, subsuming divine justice under the concept of divine faithfulness or explaining away anomalies by unknown facts. See *Sifre Piska*, 307, a commentary or reinterpretation regarding *Deuteronomy*, 32:4 and *Piska* 347, a more general explanation of apparent deviations from divine justice in the cases of David and Reuben. The very fact, however, that apparent anomalies of divine justice need to be explained actually proves my point. The simplest approach would be to simply say that this is God's world and He can do whatever He pleases with it and in it and therefore it is no one else's business. Although isolated examples of such an approach can perhaps be found in traditional Jewish literature, they are exceptions. In fact, there is a tendency in traditional Jewish thought to equate retributive justice with truth. This in itself is remarkable since it equates what is usually viewed as a factual matter (truth) with a normative one (justice). This is but further confirmation of the extreme importance of justice in Jewish thought. And regarding the use of the afterlife in order to

I will attempt to show this by quoting another Jewish philosopher who also seems to come out in the end to be more concerned with charity than with justice but still feels the need to discuss the latter and to justify the ways of God. I refer to Abraham bar Hayya, an 11th and 12th century figure, who is generally considered a rationalist.

> The attribute of charity is the reward of the world to come, which is stored up for the righteous. It is called charity, which implies a gift to the deserving poor, for all those who die and leave the world...For only one in a thousand is worthy of reward in the world to come and that is the one whose merits exceed his faults...The merit of most people is infinitesimal when compared with their iniquities, but if they believe in the Torah, God in His mercy is generous in His judgment and forgives them, although they do not deserve reward and rest. This is the attribute of charity.[315]
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> The attribute of justice is expressed in the equitable distribution of good and evil in the

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rescue the concept of divine justice, it is only used sparingly as a kind of *deus ex machina* and in general justice is expected to be meted out in this world as well.

[315] It is difficult not to see a resemblance here to the Christian concept of grace, which is dependent to an extent upon correct belief. Bar Hayya's view seems to be at odds with the teachings of Saadiah Gaon, who viewed the observance of the *mitzvot* of the *Torah* as conferring merit. But bar Hayya speaks instead of belief in the *Torah*, which would practically imply actions and observances. This overarching emphasis on belief is also prominent in Maimonides. Hence a close inspection of medieval Jewish philosophy reveals some similarities to Christianity that one might otherwise not suspect and that perhaps have been obscured by Christian-Jewish polemics.

> world—everyone of the righteous receiving his proper due, and each of the wicked according to what God deems fit...He gives the wicked good things, riches and possessions in this world that they should have no excuses nor claims in the world to come... [316]

Bar Hayya also states (implicitly) that the Jewish people were chosen for everlasting life by charity but admits that it would not be just ("that would be wrong") if that great gift were to be categorically and arbitrarily denied to others; therefore it is possible that the Gentiles will repent and be saved.[317]

> 'I called thee by thy name' when I said 'Hear O Israel'—everyone called by my name is bound to listen...and I will grant you eternal redemption...I do not say that such superiority is not available for the rest of mankind, for that would be wrong; we must believe that the gates of repentance are open for all who seek it...[318]

The reason I mention this subject is due to the fact that its conspicuous absence in Judah Abrabanel's philosophical work is quite anomalous and begs for an explanation. Stated in another way, Judah Abrabanel seems not to partake of Jewish

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[316] *The Meditation of the Sad* Soul, translated by Geoffrey Wigoder, pp. 121-122

[317] It could well be that many (or even most) early Jewish commentators were not particularly bothered by the fact that the Jews were chosen, despite the obvious fact that many of the children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren of the patriarchs were hardly saintly and even did reprehensible things. Although this is not often commented upon, there is at least one *Midrash* that asserts that the *Torah* was offered to the other nations but they rejected it because it prohibits actions that they enjoyed or were committed to (*Sifre Deuteronomy*, 343).

[318] Ibid. p. 53

messianism and instead adopts a mystical-philosophical posture. As Seymour Feldman noted, he needs neither "Christian redeemer nor a Jewish Messiah in order to re-enter Paradise. The Plotinian 'reversion' is always open to us if we pursue it."[319] The Jewish messianic belief is not an easy one to characterize. In the Bible the term is used specifically for an anointed king or priest but more generally to include other historical personages anointed by God for particular purposes. The paradigm case was King David, who both expanded the power and territory of Israel and defended it from its enemies. Eventually, possibly as a result of Christianity, the term evolved to be restricted to the ultimate historical redeemer; but as the rather old *Nishmat* prayer attests, even in the early Talmudic period the term still pertained to King David, who is described as God's servant and anointed. At any rate, as Feldman correctly notes, Judah Abrabanel seems to be completely uninterested in any kind of messianism whatsoever. One possible explanation for this lack of interest in historical redemption is kabbalistic. Many of the kabbalists believed that the sacred writings were really not about this world at all but in essence concerned God, the souls of the Jews and the *Sefirot*. Yet messianism remained prominent in Kabbalah not because the kabbalists were concerned about the world and the non-Jewish inhabitants thereof but because they viewed the struggle between the Jews and the Gentiles as one of cosmic significance involving the very unity of God. There is no trace in the *Dialoghi* of such a world-view but perhaps Abrabanel was indeed developing a kind of universalistic Kabbalah. Such a universalism would more likely have emerged from Jewish philosophy than from Kabbalah, however, and his lack of

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[319] See *Philosophy in a Time of Crisis: Don Isaac Abravanel: Defender of the Faith*, p.187.

messianism most likely stems from the great influence of medieval philosophy upon him. This should become obvious after we take a more in depth look at Kabbalah. And once we have also looked at Gentile influences, we may well be in an even better position to make a judgment.

Chapter III: Kabbalah

So far we have not really dealt with the specific question addressed by this book: What is the relationship between the *Dialoghi* and Kabbalah? Obviously, I must believe that there is a real question here and that the answer is not as obvious as some have supposed. As we will see, many previous authors saw (quite rightly) a resemblance to kabbalistic ideas and a milieu that was favorable to them and they concluded with what I will henceforth call the kabbalistic hypothesis. That explanatory scheme asserts that Judah Abrabanel was consciously promoting kabbalistic views. But before such a hypothesis can be fruitfully evaluated, we needed to examine the central themes of the *Dialoghi* and some of the more *obvious* influences on Abrabanel's thought. That is because we want to avoid what is often called "over causation." In other words, it is always possible to explain or understand a phenomenon by throwing in every possible cause or reason but that does not lead to useful hypotheses. Just as taking every possible medicine might cure what ails us but we would never know what is really working, asserting every possible cause cannot tell us what is really doing the work (not to mention dangerous side effects). Sometimes, however, this conservative strategy does not yield satisfying results. As a somewhat more conjectural methodology, we might then want to look at other *possible* but perhaps less likely influences later on.

So we began with an overview of the *Dialoghi* and then looked at the Jewish tradition, minus Kabbalah. We will now look at Kabbalah itself. In keeping with my goal of maximum accessibility, terms and concepts will be elucidated that may appear elementary to specialists in Judaica. Later on we will look at some non-Jewish influences, much of which Judah

Abrabanel does not explicitly acknowledge or refer to. We will also examine specific themes that I consider particularly relevant both to the *Dialoghi* itself and to its relationship to Kabbalah. Finally, we will re-examine the kabbalistic hypothesis and ask whether it yields a better understanding of the text than the other influences or whether the converse is true. But in this chapter we will mostly look at Kabbalah itself and propose a tentative rule of thumb regarding what might plausibly count as kabbalistic themes. A word of warning is required, however. Like so many words, "Kabbalah" is used in different ways and while we will attempt a rough and ready definition we cannot account for its myriad popular uses in any useful manner. My working definition of "Kabbalah" will also have little to do with how it is usually conceptualized as a form of mysticism. A broad definition of that latter term will be forthcoming in a later chapter and by that definition some kabbalistic phenomena could be called mystical and others more appropriately termed esoteric.[320]

The fact that I deal with Kabbalah in a separate chapter should certainly not be interpreted as a rejection of its essential Jewishness. Like all other strata of Jewish tradition it borrows from both Jewish and non-Jewish sources.[321] Even that most

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[320] By "esoteric" I mean a person or group believes it is in possession of special knowledge, not generally available to the public by virtue of the fact that it is transmitted privately. Hence the popular belief that the Jews were rescued by God from slavery in Egypt would not be esoteric knowledge but the belief in an oral tradition in Judaism might well be. Much of kabbalistic lore seems to be esoteric. In Christianity the belief in the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus does not seem to be esoteric. It seems to me that most religions have some esoteric traditions and some popular ones and the real question is not the presence or absence but the degree of each.

[321] The thesis that Kabbalah is to be explained by non-Jewish and Gnostic influences is often attributed to Gershom Scholem. The contrary thesis of continuity is associated with Yitzhak Baer and Abraham Joshua Heschel. Unlike some earlier polemicists perhaps, none of these thinkers denied either

quintessentially Jewish book, the Hebrew Bible, borrows themes from the surrounding cultures and, as even the rabbis said, is written "in the language of man." That could mean many things but if the aforementioned movement of thought is a fact, it might well mean the language of Middle Eastern peoples of the first or second millennium B.C.E. Likewise, philosophy (including Jewish philosophy) in its developed form in the West is a borrowing from ancient Greek civilization. And quite obviously, Judah Abrabanel is a philosopher. He is also a Jewish philosopher (in one sense or another) and Kabbalah is also part of his background of Jewish thought, alongside the Bible, the Talmud and Jewish philosophy.

Some 19th century scholars may, however, have denied that Kabbalah was essentially Jewish. They were so eager to extract everything magical, superstitious or irrational from Judaism that they assumed Kabbalah was of almost completely foreign origin and need not be seriously considered to be an important part of the Jewish tradition. As it turns out, that view is every bit as apologetic and a-historical as some of the kabbalistic views that they were criticizing. Those rationalists were, therefore, as guilty of manufacturing Jewish history as were the kabbalists themselves, who always claimed that their teachings were of ancient Jewish, or even divine, origin. Neither side was completely wrong, however, although they sometimes phrased their theses in the wrong way. The 19th century Jewish thinkers were perhaps influenced by Christian thinkers of that period who drew a sharp line between "real"

Jewish or non-Jewish influences on Kabbalah. As is usual in such disputes in the Humanities, it is difficult to see how it is to be resolved since there does not seem to be a major disagreement regarding the facts. For a good overview of this dispute see Reuven Kimelman, "Abraham Joshua Heschel's Theology of Judaism and the Rewriting of Jewish Intellectual History."

monotheistic religion (mostly Protestantism) and other hybrid forms more influenced by paganism, magic, etc. That distinction is not necessarily a bad one from a philosophical or theological perspective. Whether everyone will agree with it is another matter, but one surely has the right to define what is normative in monotheism for oneself. A problem arises, however, when one attempts to force history to conform to one's own present ideological commitments. It is now recognized by most scholars that magical and theurgic thinking is of fairly ancient provenance in Judaism (as well as early Christianity) but that many specific kabbalistic doctrines are much more recent accretions. Therefore, we perhaps are in a somewhat better position now to isolate those strata and perhaps name them as well.

Of course the age of a worldview doesn't ordinarily certify its correctness. But in a religious system like Judaism which views its origins in ancient divine revelation the antiquity of ideas does count for a great deal in terms of authenticity. It is not our task, however, to pass judgment upon that traditionalist way of thinking or to suggest alternatives to it. It suffices to point out that Judah Abrabanel's thinking was somewhat imbued with that kind of traditionalism while at the same time he was obviously seeking new avenues to the truth regarding man and God. This places him, like many philosophers, in a somewhat ambivalent relationship to Jewish tradition. Some but not all medieval thinkers were quite candid in acknowledging the separate authority of reason. In the Renaissance there was a similar division within Jewish thought but it was complicated somewhat by the presence of a widely accepted kabbalistic tradition. Judah Abrabanel at times adopts the independent philosophical stance but quite often he also attempts to ground his philosophical approach in Jewish

tradition. If he had wanted to maintain that all philosophical truths not ordinarily considered a part of Jewish tradition really are implicit in the Bible, then he might have been forced to admit that many and perhaps most traditional authorities had not recognized some of those truths in the sacred text. We cannot say with assurance that this was his opinion but if it were it would not be a comfortable place for a traditional Jew to be in. And that very difficulty helps make the kabbalistic hypothesis all the more attractive and plausible. Belief in the authenticity of Kabbalah as Jewish tradition would allow for at least a small, elite, esoteric tradition to satisfy both the craving for profound truth and the desire for that truth to be vouchsafed by a continuous tradition going back to Moses (if not earlier). It would also explain why the more exoteric Jewish traditional sources might have missed (or concealed) the truth. There is at least one looming problem with that possible strategy of using Kabbalah to authenticate philosophical truths, however. It could ultimately turn out that the teachings of Kabbalah at times vary greatly from those of the philosophical tradition and specifically from those of Judah Abrabanel himself. Indeed, we find many kabbalistic thinkers who considered philosophy and reason itself as a great danger to Jewish tradition.[322]

One of the great virtues of the scholarship of Arthur Lesley is his successful attempt to differentiate various such syncretistic approaches in Renaissance thought. Just because two thinkers both utilize philosophical, kabbalistic and traditional Jewish sources does not mean that they use the same methodology or produce the same results. This is similar to two factories that utilize the same raw materials but produce

[322] For a good discussion see Arthur Lesley, "The Place of the *Dialoghi d'amore* in Contemporaneous Jewish Thought."

completely different products. We can only analyze the essential differences by looking at the final product and/or any design plans that might exist and never by a mere accounting of what goes in to the production process. A somewhat flawed but nevertheless important means of categorizing such syncretistic thinkers is to compare their products with a pure or ideal type of philosophy and/or Kabbalah. Unfortunately, that may be impossible. Moshe Idel has reminded us of the rather wide range of historical expression of both *genres*. Nevertheless, and despite the continuum that can be detected in kabbalistic literature between universalism and particularism and between philosophical and anti-philosophical, I still believe that one can meaningfully describe a work as primarily either philosophical or kabbalistic, based mostly upon the kinds of arguments and/or justifications used.[323]

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[323] See Moshe Idel, "Particularism and Universalism in Kabbalah" for the best treatment of this subject. As Idel points out (pp.330-332), many Italian "kabbalists" were relatively uninterested in revelations or even in the direct transmission of esoteric lore from master to student. I would tend to classify such autodidactic learning as being more in the philosophical tradition and such thinkers as being primarily Renaissance philosophers who were interested in Kabbalah or even viewed it as the partial answer to certain philosophical and religious questions. As we will see, this definitional problem may be the key to understanding some differences of opinion regarding whether or not Judah Abrabanel was a kabbalist. Idel, in the aforementioned article states: "In Italy, such scholars as Johanan Alemanno, David Messer Leon, Abraham de Balmes, and Judah Abravanel (Leone Ebreo) introduced further Neoplatonic and Aristotelian conceptions in their casting of Kabbalah into a philosophical mold." (p.327). This seems to assume that their basic teaching was kabbalistic and their philosophy was less fundamental, something that is open to question. Indeed, such "hybrid" phenomena may justly be considered less kabbalistic by the results of Idel's own research. Despite his quite successful effort to acquaint us with a wider variety of kabbalistic writings, he states the following (p.334). "On the other hand, the openness to extraneous concepts has only rarely produced systems which represented milestones in the history of Kabbalistic thought. As far as Kabbalah is concerned, it would seem that the intense interaction with alien

I have isolated Kabbalah in a separate chapter because the specific theme of this book is the relationship between the *Dialoghi* and Kabbalah. I cannot imagine anyone questioning whether Judah Abrabanel was a philosopher or was of consciously identified Jewish ancestry and religious affiliation. Even many of those who thought he had converted to Christianity seem to have believed he was a Jew when he wrote this book although we did note an ambiguity in the word "*Ebreo*". But it is quite possible to question whether he was a kabbalist, even if that is indeed the conventional wisdom. There is yet another feature of Kabbalah that is distinctive in this context. While it was not really necessary to define biblical literature, Talmudic literature or philosophy, but merely to describe them, the definition of Kabbalah will indeed turn out to be somewhat problematic and also of central importance to this study.

A Definition

Let us readily admit that definitions are quite frequently arbitrary. Regarding almost any word, there are narrower and broader definitions as well as secondary definitions. My goal here is not to promote any particular agenda but simply to defend the use of the word that I believe is most commonly in place among fairly knowledgeable people. In defense of my proposed definition, I would appeal to the writings of Gershom Scholem and Joseph Dan, both of whom have dealt with the definitional question explicitly. Scholem first admitted that the term in its widest sense "signifies all the successive esoteric movements in Judaism that evolved from the end of the period

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thought effaced its particular structures, whereas the endeavor to avoid them catalyzed the emergence of more important works."

of the Second Temple and became active factors in Jewish history." He then went on to say that the word "Kabbalah" originally was a general word for tradition and "the new, precise usage originated in the circle of Isaac the blind (1200) and was adopted by all his disciples." Proof of his preference for that more precise or narrow definition is that in the book *Kabbalah* (which is also his article in *Encyclopedia Judaica*) he does not employ the word as a designation for Jewish mystics until approximately 1150-1200 C.E. in Provence.[324] In fact, he specifically states that the "Book Bahir" is the "earliest work of kabbalistic literature, i.e., the first book that adopts the specific approach and symbolic structure characteristic of kabbalistic teaching."[325] There were, of course, ancient schools of esoteric or mystical knowledge in Judaism such as *Hekhalot* and *Merkhaba* mysticism and ancient books such as *Sefer Yezirah* that came to influence subsequent Jewish thought, often in ways that we do not fully understand.[326] According to a broader use of the term "Kabbalah," those movements and literature could indeed be called "kabbalistic." Nevertheless, when we generally speak of Kabbalah and kabbalists we almost always refer to followers of the book called the *Zohar* or at least thinkers who came after it. Joseph Dan even more explicitly opts for the narrower definition when he states: "the kabbalah

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[324] See Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah*, pp. 3, 6, 42.

[325] Ibid. p. 312

[326] As an example, on pp.89-97 of the *Dialoghi*, Judah Abrabanel (Philo) discusses the association of astrology, the heavenly bodies and the human internal organs, a subject also discussed in *Sefer Yezirah*. It is not surprising that the latter book should be discussed by a Jewish philosopher. It is quite old, from the Gaonic period at the latest, was dealt with extensively by Saadiah Gaon and also by Abraham ibn Ezra, Yehudah Halevi, Nahmanides and Donnolo. In Jewish tradition, going back to the *Mishna*, it is associated with Abraham but also attributed at times to Rabbi Akiba. Those claims, however, do not seem to appear in the *Dialoghi*, nor does an explicit mention of the book.

only appeared at a relatively late date in Jewish culture — at the height of the Middle Ages, the end of the 12th century."[327] We can, therefore, restrict our discussion to the *Zohar* and other literature from the Middle Ages such as the book *Bahir* and another school of medieval esotericism or mysticism that arose at about the same time and followed Abraham Abulafia, as well as subsequent literature. That school of Abulafia explicitly combined many kabbalistic and philosophical motifs, as he was a great admirer of Maimonides. Indeed, that school was among the most influential in Renaissance Italy and might be a prime candidate in terms of kabbalistic influence upon a Renaissance philosopher such as Judah Abrabanel. But we must be mindful of one very important fact. While many Italian Renaissance Jews might have been acquainted with Abulafia and relatively ignorant of the *Zohar*, the Abrabanel family was not ignorant of the latter. They were extremely well informed about all the important Jewish literature that was produced in the Iberian Peninsula in the Middle Ages. One bold indication of that is their obvious knowledge that the author of the *Fons Vitae*, Shelomo ibn Gabirol (known to the Christian scholastics as Avicebron) was Jewish: something that the late medieval world had mostly forgotten although it is quite possible that other Jews were aware of it as well. Therefore, I will assume with many others that Judah Abrabanel knew something of the *Zohar*. A more significant question would be whether he derived any major ideas from it. Even if he had not, however, there were other possible kabbalistic influences.

I will be using the term "Kabbalah" henceforth to refer to movements of esoteric or mystical Jewish thought that somehow can be traced back to the period of the *Zohar*, *Bahir*

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[327] See Joseph Dan, *The Ancient Jewish Mysticism*, p.7.

or Abraham Abulafia. Therefore, if claims of kabbalistic influence refer to earlier Jewish literature or influences, such claims would be outside the scope of this discussion. It should also be noted that I do not consider Kabbalah to be a unified or consistent doctrine. As Gershom Scholem stated" "There is no such thing as '*the* doctrine of the Kabbalists.'"[328] Nevertheless, despite such a limitation, few believe that it is fruitless to discuss Kabbalah as a movement of thought with certain family resemblances. One might notice that like medieval Jewish philosophy Kabbalah had a peculiar attachment to Spain. The Iberian Peninsula had been a depository of diverse intellectual currents from Christian Europe, the Middle East and North Africa. It is quite possible that ideas that had been suppressed in other places re-emerged there. This might explain how Gnostic ideas (from the early Christian era) infiltrated Jewish kabbalistic literature.[329] Nevertheless, unlike philosophy, Kabbalah followed Spanish Jews wherever they went, maintained its relevance to them and was readily exportable to the Ashkenazic Jewish world as well. Therefore, its specific affinity to Iberia may have been somewhat weaker than that of Jewish philosophy, which to a great extent did not flourish as well elsewhere. Or, alternatively, the affinity of Jews to

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[328] *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, p. 89

[329] For those readers who are not acquainted with Gnosticism, it is characterized by the doctrine that the biblical creator god is not the supreme God. This in turn entails that the physical creation is essentially permeated by evil, chaos, confusion, etc. and sets the stage for redemption from that sordid mess by means of esoteric knowledge (gnosis). Despite the fact that it bears some similarity to Christianity (and other Jewish sects) this repudiation of the Hebrew Bible was in turn repudiated by the Church and declared a heresy. Gnosticism betrays both Jewish and Greek (particularly Platonic) influences but winds them together in a rather strange way (in comparison to normative Jewish or Christian thought). Some have characterized it as "cosmic pessimism."

Kabbalah was greater than it was to philosophy. While I will not specifically deal with the historical or sociological reasons for that, it should be kept in mind as a possible fundamental datum. We can certainly witness this affinity to Kabbalah and distaste for philosophy among observant Jews today in a rather extreme form. We cannot extrapolate from that to earlier eras but there is historical evidence for an antipathy between traditionalism and philosophy that is stronger than that between traditionalism and Kabbalah. From a purely intellectual perspective, it may not always be a simple matter to distinguish between these two streams and we may be tempted to think (as Moshe Idel once had the temerity to express at a conference) that the distinction between Jewish philosophy and Kabbalah is the result of categories of modern thought. I think he was right in a very important respect but I also suspect that there is indeed a basic antipathy between two different approaches that goes even deeper than the categories of modern scholarship. That antipathy is perhaps best conceptualized as one between traditionalism and freedom of thought, though not necessarily between tradition and free thought. I define "traditionalism" as an intellectual attempt to justify or strengthen tradition. In Judah Abrabanel's time and place that antipathy was surely far less extreme than it is now but he (and his father) might have noticed that trend nonetheless.[330]

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[330] This basic antipathy not only between Kabbalah and philosophy but more generally between traditionalist religion and philosophy in Judaism should not be misinterpreted as necessary, normative or as a prescriptive judgment. I am simply attempting to be descriptive. I am also not denying that it was briefly overcome on a number of occasions or that it might be overcome again in the future. But it does perhaps explain why Kabbalah and philosophy were mostly competing and not cooperating factions in Jewish history, with the major exceptions of the period after the expulsion from Spain and the Italian Renaissance. It also dispels the enticing belief of David Neumark that Kabbalah developed out of philosophical roots. See Gershom

It is widely believed that Judah Abrabanel was a kabbalist or at least heavily under the influence of Kabbalah. Since some excellent scholars such as Shlomo Pines, Moshe Idel, Hubert Dethier, Joao Miranda, T.A. Perry and Bernard McGinn have all entertained that belief, we must take it very seriously. I may sometimes disagree with them in a qualified manner but always with great reluctance and trepidation. Although Judah Abrabanel himself never specifically mentions any kabbalist, I have chosen to briefly discuss three possible sources: firstly what is often considered the earliest kabbalistic writing, secondly the most influential and thirdly, the one best known in early Renaissance Italy. An inspection of those writings will help us to answer the question regarding his relationship to Kabbalah.

Sefer Bahir

Since Scholem refers to this as the earliest kabbalistic work, it may be useful to briefly describe it. It appeared in southern France around the end of the 12th century and is in the style of a *Midrash*, which is to say stories supposedly written by rabbis of the Talmudic period. Of course, it was concocted much later and some of the names of the rabbis in it never existed, as far as we know. Like much Talmudic literature, which it is modeled

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Scholem, *Origins of the Kabbalah*, pp. 11-12: "It may be said, in particular, that Neumark's thoughtful conception appears to be far superior to Graetz's overly simplistic theory...Both Graetz and Neumark fell victim to the nineteenth-century illusion of an enlightened conception of religion. Neumark drew far-reaching conclusions from this prejudice and was led to view the Kabbalah as the product of a philosophical and rational process, not as the product of a religious process in which factors of an entirely different nature were at work." Whether I agree with all of Scholem's conceptions is not material to this discussion, which simply notes a certain degree of antipathy between philosophy and Kabbalah (despite counter examples) without necessarily attempting to explain it fully.

after, the book sometimes dwells on interpretation of biblical passages but at times there are statements made without the support of scriptural verses. Like the *Mishna*, some opinions remain anonymous. As is common in Jewish mysticism, there is a great interest in the Hebrew language and its letters. The author probably knew *Sefer Yezirah* and was acquainted with the notion of the ten *Sefirot*, but they are called *ma'amarot* or sayings. As in *Sefer Yezirah*, these are the 10 sayings by which God created the world.[331] The book is short, appears mutilated with parts missing and has very little in the way of logical continuity. But it is the earliest source of the divine attributes or *Sefirot*. Perhaps most importantly, it, like much kabbalistic literature, interprets biblical verses as *really* referring to events within the divine realm and not to the more literal earthly events. The 10 *Sefirot*, which in *Sefer Yezirah* were basically numbers with special significance, now become actual divine attributes. Those attributes relate not only to the creation but also to the commandments (*mitzvoth*) assigned to the Jewish people. While in some respects it shows the influence of medieval philosophy, for example in stressing the thought of God rather than the will of God, it also introduces new theories such as the transmigration of souls.[332] It makes little attempt to

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[331] This doctrine first appears in the *Mishna, Aboth,* V: 1. The reason given was in order to exact extra punishment for those who destroy the world and extra reward to the righteous who support the world. A cursory examination of *Genesis* I, however, will yield an explicit string of nine sayings beginning with "And God said..." followed by a specific creation. In order to obtain number 10, various commentators have found other similar sayings such as the one prior to the creation of Eve in the second creation story.

[332] That doctrine had never before explicitly appeared in a significant Jewish text although in the *Talmud* at times two historically distinct individuals (Pinchas, Elijah) are identified with one another. There is a similar allusion to this (Elijah, John the Baptist) in the *New Testament*. While we don't exactly know how to interpret those statements, they surely did not teach a

justify these innovations. Like most early kabbalistic literature, it was controversial, generally accepted as ancient but rejected by many as heretical or at least unorthodox.

Bahir is particularly important for our purposes because it was translated from Hebrew to Latin for Pico della Mirandola by Flavius Mithridates in 1486.[333] Judah Abrabanel, therefore, may well have had access to it also.

The *Zohar*

While this has become the most influential kabbalistic work, in early Renaissance Italy it was not so well known. As mentioned previously, the Abrabanel family did know of it but it is still possible that they would not have wanted to publicize it. That is because it contains some rather bizarre and controversial doctrines and some that might be quite embarrassing, even in a tolerant and sensual age.

The *Zohar* or *Book of Splendor* was supposedly found by a Spanish kabbalist by the name of Moses DeLeon around the end of the 13th century. It was the opinion of some of his contemporaries that he actually wrote the book and this is also the opinion of many modern scholars, most notably Gershom

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general theory of reincarnation as the normal or habitual destiny of the human soul or even the Jewish soul specifically. They may have referred to a spiritual resemblance between two persons and nothing more. Saadiah Gaon stated that those who believe in reincarnation are mad. That might indicate that there were indeed such individuals in the Jewish community. But every major Jewish philosopher had either ignored or repudiated it both before its appearance in kabbalistic literature and also afterwards, with two clear exceptions: Nachmanides and Isaac Abrabanel. In the case of Simon Zemah Duran, he may have followed Nachmanides' view in one text but not in another.

[333] See Saverio Campanini, editor, *The Book of Bahir*: Flavius Mithridates' Latin Translation, the Hebrew Text and an English Variation.

Scholem. More recent scholarship has attributed the work to multiple authorships. It is also *midrashic* in appearance, focusing on sayings of ancient rabbis that are mostly commentaries on biblical texts. The rabbis are not always fictitious but the book is. It is written in a deliberately antiquated Aramaic. There are many factual inaccuracies as well as obvious later influences that mark it as a medieval text. Almost all scholars believe that it dates from the Middle Ages, though some think that it might be based upon some earlier texts. It does, for example, seem to know *Bahir* and other early mystical or kabbalistic works. The book simply takes for granted notions about Satan, demons, realms of impurity, etc. The language is harsh and unforgiving regarding the enemies of Israel and non-Jews in general as well as regarding Jewish groups considered outside the pale, but the latter is only the case in certain sections considered of later origin. Overall, it is extremely contemptuous of Gentiles, even to the point of saying that they are not created in the image of God and are essentially evil. It was not printed until 1558 but prior to that it circulated in manuscripts; its printing was apparently quite controversial, even among kabbalists. The *Zohar* was considered a sacred text and far superior to earlier mystical writings by the sixteenth century kabbalists, most notably Isaac Luria. And so it has remained; many Jews believe that the mere recitation of passages from the *Zohar* brings spiritual and/or physical benefits, even if they understand nothing of what they are reading. This is rather strange and interesting since in general only the *Torah* itself is treated with such reverence. Another indication of the extreme importance of the book in certain circles is the fact that it is sometimes predicated by the word "holy," something very unusual regarding non-persons.[334]

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[334] See David Blumenthal's book review of Isaiah Tishby's *The Wisdom of*

The world-view of the *Zohar* is a combination of Gnosticism and medieval demonology, with some admixtures of philosophy, most likely from the Neoplatonic schools. One interesting feature is the coexistence of pantheism with what might ordinarily be considered its polar opposite: Gnostic contempt for the world. I find this to be one of its most remarkably idiosyncratic motifs and without recognizing it one could perhaps never really understand it. We ordinarily think of the spiritual realms as being superior and purer than earthly reality. The *Zohar*, however, considers half of spiritual reality to be evil and much of the evil here on earth is attributable to those realms of impurity on the left side of the spiritual realm. This includes almost all of the reality of the gentile world, though at times there seems to be an allowance for some benign spiritual influences on gentiles. As an example of this dualism I would like to quote a relevant passage that may be influenced by the doctrines of Empedocles regarding love and strife and the four elements (see footnote #1). It should be recognized, however, that the *Zoharic* exposition is radically dualistic and perhaps pessimistic in comparison to the corresponding philosophical one. This quote is found in the *Zohar*, Volume IV pp. 233-234.

> Then comes the third fire which surrounds that brightness, and wherein resides the terror of Severity for the punishment of the wicked. Indeed, there is also a teaching that speaks of four varieties of fire — four that are in essence one. However, it is in the aforementioned fire that the terror of Severity resides. Hence "thou shalt fear (that which comes) *from* thy God",

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the Zohar, p.385.

> meaning: "Thy fear shall start from, or be inspired by, His punishment." Furthermore, we should combine fear with love, fear on one side and love on the other. We have to fear on account of the punishment that proceeds from the one side for the transgression of the precepts of the Torah — for once this is begun, the side that inflicts it never relaxes until the transgressor is exterminated from this world and from the world to come... After fear comes love... For he who worships out of love attaches himself to a very sublime region and to the holiness of the "World-to-be", by reason of love ascending to the "right side" for its attachment and adornment. Think not, however, that worship coming from the side of fear is no worship at all. In truth it is worship highly to be prized. It does not ascend, however, so as to join the highest part of the supernal sphere. This is reserved for worship inspired by love, and he who worships in a spirit of love is the man destined for the future world.

I am not quarrelling with the values assigned to love vs. fear, which seem to cohere with other Jewish systems, whether philosophical and otherwise. What I do want to point out is the radical dualism of the two metaphysical "sides." Yet both stem from God, even if the left side (and those who rely upon it) does not seem to reach "the highest part of the supernal sphere." Hence both evil and the "Severity" that counters it come from a spiritual source, albeit not the highest one. If one inspects this doctrine carefully, it appears to be a rehashing of the ancient theodicy question. If God is good and all-powerful, from

whence comes evil? The general (but not universal) kabbalistic answer is that it comes from an aspect of God (the left side), which is somehow cut off from its essential source. That demonic aspect of the higher world is the source of all the regions of impurity and sin in the lower worlds.

This world-view, while perhaps absurd if taken literally, does indeed contain some degree of profundity. The medieval philosophical assumption that evil comes from physical matter, imagination, ignorance, etc. turns out to be somewhat inadequate when all of the relevant facts about evil are taken into consideration. After all, much of evil seems to have nothing to do with humankind as its source. The search for a more profound origin of evil and the belief in what nowadays would be called "radical evil" is something not to be taken lightly, whether one ultimately comes to accept it or not. But the *Zohar* also presumes that there is a superior, though not entirely transcendent, realm of goodness that affects earthly processes as well. This occurs mostly from the right side of the *Sefirot* and expresses itself here below mostly in the children of Israel. This principle is discussed masterfully by Elliot Wolfson.

> The implicit hermeneutic principle in the narrative of the old man — the principle that shapes the mythologic of the story and that incites the exegetical moves of the kabbalist author — is that by plumbing the depths of the mystery of conversion of the Gentile, one shall be led to to a mystical understanding of Torah. To grasp this one must bear in mind that the social-historical phenomenon of conversion suggested to the Castilians kabbalists a crossing

> of ontic boundaries that seemingly challenged the dualistic posture reiterated on numerous occasions in the zoharic text: Israel correlated with divine purity, and the nations of the world with demonic impurity.[335]

Hence, everything about the Jewish people takes on cosmic significance but especially their performance of the *mitzvoth* (which are deemed to have redemptive value even within the *Sefirot*) and the processes of procreation within the Jewish people, which signify the advancement of goodness in the universe. Perhaps to a very great extent this emphasis on religious rituals and sexuality is the key to the great popularity and influence of the *Zohar* within the rabbinic system. It is an appealing combination. But of course the allusions to the coming violence and vengeance should not be disregarded as possible selling points.

The greatest student and teacher of Kabbalah was Gershom Scholem. His erudition was immense and he was truly a pioneer in the scholarly treatment of the subject. There is perhaps no other comparable source of such encyclopedic knowledge of the subject. Without taking away anything from that or from his very well deserved credit for making this a respected scholarly field, two reservations regarding his scholarship should be noted. Firstly, more recent scholars such as Liebes, Idel and Dan have explored aspects of Kabbalah that Scholem was either unwilling or unable to address or which he never got around to in the same depth. Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, one can read many of Scholem's works and never get a sufficiently accurate impression of how shockingly particularistic some kabbalistic writings can be — even to the

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[335] *Language, Eros, Being*, p.223

point of what I would consider quasi-racism. That is not to say that Scholem did not acknowledge those trends – he did – but at times his writings give an unrealistically universalistic flavor to these writings. I will first quote Scholem on the *Zohar* and then the *Zohar* itself to illustrate this very interesting discrepancy.[336]

> The Kabbalistic view of the nature of man and the essence of sin is of course closely connected with the theory of the soul set out in the Zohar. The intimate connection between cosmogony and psychology in all Gnostic systems is so well known that its appearance in the Zohar is hardly a cause for surprise. In a mystical hymn, Moses ben Nahman has described the birth of the soul in the depth of the divine spheres from where its life streams forth. For the soul, too, is a spark of the divine life...

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[336] Scholem, aside from being a scholar of Kabbalah, was also a German refuge and quite zealous regarding both Zionism and anti-Semitism. This is quite understandable. It is evidenced in his quite adamant repudiation of Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which he ostensibly opposed because of its notion of banal evil but perhaps also feared would ignite anti-Zionism or anti-Semitism. He even accused Arendt of lack of *ahavat yisra'el*, by which he meant love of the Jewish people. See Diner Dan, "Ambiguous Semantics: Reflections on Jewish Political Concepts" for an interesting discussion of this as well as the term itself. Part of the problem might have been Arendt's own negative stance regarding the zealousness of the Jewish defense mentality. The following quotation reflects Arendt's own view of how Scholem had treated her. "Everything proves, in retrospect, to have been a trap. Like the exchange of letters with Scholem, to whom I responded in good faith – and who then went out to shout this whole sordid story from the roof tops...to infect those segments of the population that had not yet been stricken by the epidemic of lies. And everybody goes along." See the letter of 10/20/63 in the *Hannah Arendt, Karl Jaspers Correspondence 1926-1969*, pp. 521-525. Ironically, her description of "everyone goes along" could well have referred to the Nazi era.

> The psychology of the Zohar shows a peculiar mixture of two doctrines held by certain schools of mediaeval philosophy. The first distinguished between the vegetative, the animal and the rational soul—three stages which Aristotelian doctrine regarded as different faculties of the one soul, while the mediaeval followers of Plato were inclined to think of them as three different entities. The second, which was generally held by the Arab philosophers and popularized among the Jews by Maimonides, is based on the conception of the "acquired intellect." According to this view, the rational faculty latent in the mind is actualized in the process of cognition, and this realization of the intellect is the sole guide to immortality. To this doctrine, the Zohar now gives a Kabbalistic turn. It retains the distinction between three spiritual agencies: *Nefesh* or life; *Ruah* or spirit; and *Neshama* or soul proper, but abandons the idea that they represent three different faculties of the soul. Rather all three are already latently present in the first, *Nefesh*, and the higher grades correspond to the new and deeper powers, which the soul of the devotee acquires through the study of the Torah and through meritorious actions.[337]

Scholem's distinction between Aristotelian and Platonic theories could be questioned. Nowadays it is recognized that the relationship between Plato and Aristotle and especially between their medieval followers was far more complex than

[337] See Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, pp. 239-240.

many earlier scholars believed. Scholem was perhaps following conventional scholarly wisdom. There is also in this quotation a failure to distinguish properly between the acquiring of the ability to reason that was so important to medieval philosophy and "the new and deeper powers, which the soul of the devotee acquires." Those latter powers pf the kabbalist have little to do with the ability to think critically and should be properly distinguished from it. But the third and biggest problem that I have with this quotation is the false impression it gives of the *Zohar* as a universalistic work that somehow builds upon the foundation of medieval philosophy and its distinction between the specifically human soul and the lower aspects of the animal or vegetable. Such concepts make no essential distinction between Jew and gentile. Let us now look at some actual quotations from the *Zohar*. I will use the Soncino edition unless otherwise indicated.[338]

> The *eighth precept* is to love the proselyte who comes to be circumcised and to be brought under the wings of the 'Divine Presence' (*Shekhinah*), which takes under its wings those who separate themselves from impure 'unholy region'...Think not that the same 'living soul' which is found in Israel is assigned to all mankind. The expression 'after its kind' denotes that there are many

[338] This reluctance to acknowledge the extreme particularism of the *Zohar* is not confined to Scholem. See the introduction to the Soncino edition (p. xvii) by J. Abelson, which dares to assert: "The feature in the Jewish Cabbalistic literature which is calculated to recommend it for all time to the admiration of scholars and thinkers is the high place which it accords to the human soul... Man is man only because of his soul." As will become abundantly evident, the *Zohar* accords a "high place" mostly to the Jewish soul and teaches that other human souls come from realms of impurity and evil.

compartments and enclosures one within the other in that region which is called 'living', beneath its wings. The right wing has two compartments, which branch out from it for two other nations who approach Israel in monotheistic belief, and therefore have entrances into these compartments.[339] Underneath the left wing there are two other compartments which are divided between two other nations, namely Ammon and Moab.[340] All these are included in the term 'soul of the living'. There are besides under each wing other concealed enclosures and divisions from whence there emanate souls which are assigned to all the proselytes who enter the fold – these are indeed termed 'living soul', but 'according to its kind': they all enter under the wings of the Shekhinah, and no farther. The soul of Israel, on the other hand, emanates from the very bowels of that earth.[341]

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[339] While the nations are not specified, Christianity and Islam naturally come to mind. This is also the opinion of Daniel Matt in a footnote to his newer translation. This statement seems therefore to be a somewhat puzzling departure from a generally xenophobic literary genre. But since even well thought out philosophical treatises are often inconsistent, there is no reason to assume that the *Zohar* would be entirely coherent and of course it is not.

[340] These two tribes are specifically mentioned in the *Bible* as ones that showed no mercy towards the Jewish people when they left Egypt and therefore must never be allowed to marry into them in perpetuity. The rabbis of the *Talmud* interpreted this as only having applied to the males and ultimately as no longer in effect at all since the various tribes were scattered and blended with one another during the Assyrian captivity.

[341] See *Zohar*, Volume I, p.55. This quotation certainly does suggest pantheism as it considers being from "the bowels of the earth" a great privilege afforded to the Jewish people. The Matt translation, however, reads: "But as for Israel, their soul emerges from the trunk of the tree." (p.93). Pantheism will be explored in greater depth further on.

Said R. Abba: 'Happy is the portion of Israel, who are exalted above the idolatrous nations, in virtue of their grade being above on high, whereas the grade of the idolatrous nations is down below. The former are of the side of holiness, the latter of the side of uncleanness; they are on the right, the others on the left...But when the Temple was destroyed...the left side has since been gathering force and uncleanness, and will continue to do so until God shall rebuild the Temple and establish the world on its right foundations...the unclean host being then extirpated from the world...There will thus be one and only one King on high and below, and one and only one people to worship Him...'[342]

What did the Holy One do? He banished the children of Ishmael from the heavenly communion and gave them instead a portion here below in the Holy Land, because of their circumcision. And they are destined to rule over the land a long time, so long as it is empty, just as their form of circumcision is empty and imperfect; and they will prevent Israel from returning to their own land until the merit of the children of Ishmael shall have become exhausted. And the sons of Ishmael will fight mighty battles in the world, and the sons of Edom will gather against them, and make war against them, some on land, others on sea, and

[342] Ibid, Volume II, pp. 126-127

some close to Jerusalem, and one shall prevail over the other, but the Holy Land will not be delivered to the sons of Edom. Then a nation from the furthest ends of the earth will rise against a wicked Rome and fight against her for three months, and many nations will gather there and fall into the hands of that people, until all the sons of Edom will congregate against her from all the ends of the earth. Then the Holy One will rise against them, as it says: "A slaughter of the Lord in Bazrah and a great slaughter in the land of Edom" (Isaiah xxxiv, 6). He will "take hold of the ends of the earth that the wicked might be shaken out of it" (Job xxxviii, 13). He will wipe out the children of Ishmael from the Holy Land, and crush all the powers and principalities of the nations in the supramundane world, and only one power will remain above to rule over the nations of the world, namely the power representing Israel, as it is written: "The Lord is thy shadow at they right hand" (Psalm cxxi, 5).[343]

"R. Simeon taught: 'Blessed are the Israelites, for that the Holy One calls them "Men" (Adam), as it is written, "Ye are my sheep; the sheep of my flock; ye are men" (Ezek. xxxiv, 31). Why are they called "men", in contradistinction to the heathen nations? Because they "cleave to the Lord their God" (Deut. iv, 2)...Contrariwise Ishmael was a "wild man" (Gen. xvi, 12); he was only partly a "man"...But the seed of Israel, who

[343] Ibid, Volume III, p. 103

> were perfected in all things, they are "men" in the full sense..."[344]

What the above quotations should make abundantly clear is how far Judah Abrabanel's world-view is from the constricted, particularistic one of the *Zohar*. Perhaps this is one reason why he never mentions it or for that matter any of the more prominent concepts that are derived from it.

Another teaching of the *Zohar* that seems relevant regards the male-female polarity and relationship. Marriage is very important for the *Zohar* but we need to ask why it is important.

> It is incumbent upon a man to be ever "male and female", in order that his faith may be firm, and that the Shekinah rests on him. What, then, you will say, of a man who goes on a journey and, being absent form his wife, is no linger "male and female"? His remedy is to pray to God before he starts his journey, while he is still "male and female", in order to draw to himself the presence of his Master. When he has offered his prayers and thanksgiving and the Shekinah rests on him, then he can depart, for through his

[344] Ibid, Volume III, p. 261. The Soncino edition has been attacked as being in some regards a poor translation. I suspect, however, that there is no really good translation of the *Zohar*. At any rate, equally quasi-racist renderings can be found in the much more recent Matt translation such as the following. "A convert is beneath the wings of the Shekhina, no higher." (p.93). "You are human; the other nations are not." (p.156). "Similarly on the other side, side of impurity: the spirit spreading through the other nations emerges from the side of impurity. It is not human." (p.157). Despite legitimate textual problems, it is difficult to deny that the *Zohar* as a whole reflects quasi-racist thinking. For that reason it is even more perplexing that this is so easily overlooked by some scholars.

union with the Shekinah he has become "male and female" in the country as he was "male and female" in the town... When he does reach home again, it is his duty to give his wife some pleasure, because it is she who procured for him this heavenly partner. It is his duty to do so for two reasons. One is that this pleasure is a religious pleasure, and one which gives joy to the Shekinah also, and what is more, by its means he spreads peace in the world, as it is written, "thou shalt know that thy tent is in peace, and thou shalt visit thy fold and not sin" (Job. V, 24). (Is it a sin, it may be asked, if he does not visit his wife? The answer is that it is so because he thereby derogates from the honour of the celestial partner who was joined with him on account of his wife.) The other is, that if his wife becomes pregnant, the celestial partner imparts to the child a holy soul, for this covenant is called the covenant of the Holy One blessed be He... In this way the students of the Torah who separate from their wives during the six days of the week in order to devote themselves to study are accompanied by a heavenly partner in order that they may continue to be "male and female". When Sabbath comes, it is incumbent on them to gladden their wives for the sake of the honour of the heavenly partner... The esoteric doctrine is that men of true faith should concentrate their whole thought and p purpose on this one (the Shekinah). You may object that, according to what has been said, a man enjoys greater dignity

> when he is on a journey than when he is at home, on account of the heavenly partner who is then associated with him. This is not so. For when a man is at home, the foundation of his house is the wife, for it is on account of her that the Shekinah departs not from the house... Esoterically speaking, the supernal Mother is found in company with the male only at the time when the house is prepared, and the male and female are joined. Then the supernal Mother pours forth blessings for them. [345]

I would like to mention one other feature of Zoharic Kabbalah that deviates somewhat from the concerns of Judah Abrabanel. In the *Zohar* and related literature, theurgy consists of influencing the higher spiritual regions and the *Sefirot* or at least it *appears* to be that. I stress this because there is indeed a possibility of interpreting it in a different way. This is also a question regarding some Neoplatonic thinkers: Was their ultimate aim mystical experience or influencing the heavenly realms? One of the things that bothered some people about Kabbalah is that influencing the higher powers seems more magical than devotional or purely religious. The same charge has been leveled against Tantric Hinduism. Some have complained that Kabbalah turned the Jewish prayers into magical formulae, therefore contributing to even further rigidification, and prevented the reforms needed to allow Jewish prayer to be truly a religious outpouring of the heart. Now, the latter concept of prayer might be called a weak mystical or at least an experiential aspect of Judaism and could be viewed as superior to magical theurgic practices. Others, however, would

[345] *Zohar*, Volume I, p.158-160

argue that kabbalistic practices are really aimed at achieving some sort of stronger mystical relationship to God, which can only be misunderstood by the uninitiated or uneducated as magical practices designed to achieve worldly ends, but they are really much more than that. As we will see, Gershom Scholem denied the existence of truly unitive mystical experiences in Kabbalah while Moses Idel thinks he has found some. But even Idel might admit that it is somewhat rare. This may stem from a traditional Jewish prejudice against strong mystical experience, except perhaps in the case of the prophets. Such experiences might be seen as potentially undermining both traditional authority and a traditional legal system (*halakha*). Even for the early and most authoritative rabbis (*Tannaim*) engagement in mystical experience was considered a fairly dangerous matter. We already saw this traditional prejudice in the case of the 70 biblical elders (as well as Nadab, Abihu and Aaron) seeing God in *Exodus*, when we discussed the views of Isaac Abrabanel and others. Hence it is possible that theurgic Kabbalah, which ostensibly is about *influencing* the *Sefirot*, might really be about *elevating* the human soul, at least in accordance with certain readings of it. I mention this because Judah Abrabanel seems much more concerned with elevating the human soul, even to the point of union with God, which seems to be the kind of theurgy that was practiced by some of the Neoplatonists and espoused by the *Chaldean Oracles*.[346] We will now look at a kabbalistic thinker who also espoused those same concerns and

[346] See Paul MacDonald, *History of the Concept of Mind*, volume 2, pp.158-177. It is also possible, however, that Zoharic kabbalistic systems are really concerned with that very same thing but that requires a degree of interpretation that I am not capable of. And in the absence of philosophical arguments and/or dialogue, I am not even sure how such a dispute could be resolved.

whose world-view may actually be much closer to that of Judah Abrabanel than was the *Zohar*.

Abraham Abulafia

This thinker actually pre-dated the *Zohar* but was not nearly as influential in Jewish thought. Until Moshe Idel began to publicize his teachings they were practically unknown to most people, even those with an interest in medieval Judaica. There are a number of significant facts that make Abulafia particularly significant for this study. Firstly though he was a Spanish Jew like the Abrabanels, he also taught in Italy and was somewhat influential there in the period we are addressing. Secondly, he was quite knowledgeable about philosophy and, like Judah Abrabanel, considered himself a disciple of Maimonides. Thirdly, his kabbalistic teachings were of a more experiential and less theosophical type and fit in better with critical thought than do the highly crystallized metaphysical structures of the *Zohar*. I quote Moshe Idel.

> Abulafia advocates a theology similar to that of Maimonides in lieu of the Kabbalistic theosophy; he stresses primarily the understanding of God as Intellect/Intelligible/Act of Intellection, a definition allowing, as we shall see below, for the union of the actualized human intellect and the divine Intellect. The position of the *mitzvoth* is also different in Abulafian Kabbalah from that in classical Spanish Kabbalah. While the Kabbalists of Castile and Catalonia stress the mystical path which travels via the performance of the *mitzvoth*, Abulafia teaches a completely different way, consisting primarily of the

> pronunciation of Divine Names and a complex technique involving such components as breathing, singing and movements of the head, which have nothing to do with the traditional commandments of Judaism.[347]

Abulafia was aware of the doctrine of the *Sefirot* but it was not nearly as important in his teachings as in the *Zohar*. Like most kabbalistic systems, his showed a great interest in the Hebrew letters and in particular the names of God. The latter provided material upon which to meditate. This meditation appears to be more theoretical than practical and not nearly as theurgic or magical as in the other systems. It may produce visions but most importantly allows for the reception of forms by the soul, which allows it in turn to understand divine mysteries.[348] This preparation of the soul allows it to receive descending overflows from God via the Active Intellect and seems rather Maimonidean. There does not however (unlike Judah Abrabanel) seem to be an emphasis on the love of the higher for the lower. There is also no affecting of the upper realms as in the *Zohar*. Like the latter, however, there is erotic symbolism; but unlike the *Zohar* it is not an allegory for the union of the *Sefirot*. Instead it describes the relationship between the soul of man and God and it is the female (human soul) who yearns for the male (God). In particular, there is an ecstatic union between God as groom and Knesset Israel as bride. Unlike the tendency in rabbinic thought, the latter is not the people of Israel but the individual Jew.[349] In Abulafia, there

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[347] See Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 8-9.
[348] See Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah*, 371.
[349] Although Abulafia seems less offensively particularistic than the *Zohar*, that attribute still pervades his writings to a certain extent. This is not an indictment of him or his system but simply an observation that might apply

is a greater degree of ecstasy and individuality than there is in Zoharic Kabbalah.[350] There is also something rather significant that Abulafia shares with Judah Abrabanel. Both seem to consider the Active Intellect to be actually divine.[351] We have seen, however, this was also the view of Augustine and perhaps even of ibn Gabirol. Unlike Abrabanel, there is, as far as I know, no discussion by Abulafia of the needs, loves or desires of God or even of the Active Intellect. The mystical experience is discussed solely from the psychological perspective of man.[352] This is interesting because it is at least possible that Abrabanel's discussions about God may really be discussions about the more profound aspects of human psychology, especially given his quasi-pantheistic tendencies.

There is one particular area of human experience in which both Abulafia and Abrabanel (like most humans) showed an intense interest: sexual intercourse. We have seen and will continue to see the importance of this subject in Jewish thought, but mostly for reasons of procreation. In both Abulafia and Abrabanel, however, the key to the significance of sexuality seems to be in its intense pleasure. Even more than the metaphor of the (divine) kiss, copulation symbolizes the ecstatic union of man and God. This is one of the things Abulafia said about it.

> Apprehension of the nature of prophecy [i.e., ecstasy]: there is nothing more difficult for man

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to almost all Jewish writings of the period. It certainly does not rise to the universalism of Judah Abrabanel.

[350] See Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, pp. 77-80.

[351] Ibid. p. 80

[352] See ibid. p.95. Discussions of the possible needs of the higher or at least what renders the lower attractive to the higher do emerge in the writings of Moses Cordovero. See ibid. p. 190.

to apprehend in all human apprehensions [than this], and the human mind has not the power to apprehend this until it is attached to the divine intellect, in a connection similar to that of the body and the soul, or the connection of form and matter, similar to the union of male and female, the best and sweetest of which is the first [union] – that is, a virgin groom with a virgin bride – for the longing between the two of them has continued a long time before their uniting. [Thus] at the time of their union they attain the pinnacle of their desire, and the movement of the first desire... and their hearts receive a great peace, and the movement of their desire is from then on a calm one, in a moderate manner, neither excessively rapid nor excessively slow, but as is fitting: and after the two minds settle on one matter, they begin to move in the form of the desire of their giving birth, and they will attempt to guide their actions with the intention of impregnation, for they have already moved from one desire of a certain aim to another desire... But I must inform you here of the matter of those who seek out 'prophecy', which is similar to what I have said concerning the simile of the groom and the bride, and of this it is said, "if all the songs are holy, Song of Songs is Holy of Holies." For the entire intention of that poet was to tell us by means of parables and secrets and images the form of true 'prophecy' and its nature and how to reach it."[353]

[353] The quote is from *Sefer Mafteah ha-Sefirot* (MS. Milano Ambrosiana 53,

The rabbis (as well as the Church fathers) were bothered by the erotic imagery of the *Song of Songs* and attempted to shift its meaning (denotation) to something completely other than its literal meaning. The kabbalists were entranced by the *Song of Songs* and introduced it into the prayers for the reception of the Sabbath, giving even that biblical institution, with its severe restrictions, an erotic flavor.[354] Actual physical copulation became practically a positive commandment for that day and is connected with strange connections to (and between) the *Sefirot*. In Abulafia, however, the shift in meaning is not nearly so radical because copulation as a physical process is linked with spiritual love but not as in the Sefirotic Kabbalah, where the significance of copulation resides in its instrumental effects. Here in Abulafia, its significance is in the human pleasure afforded after long and intense longing. We will be looking at the *Song of Songs* much more intensively later on but it does seem obvious to me that both Abulafia and Abrabanel interpret it (and sexuality in general) in a rather unique and similar fashion, compared to earlier Jewish tradition. This raises the serious possibility that the latter was influenced by the former although it is always possible that they could have come up with similar ideas independently.

In addition, the two thinkers share the same ambivalence towards sexuality, though this may be more broadly true of

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fols. 170b-171a), translated by Moshe Idel and can be found in *The Mystical Experience of Abraham Abulafia*, pp. 185-186.

[354] The *Song of Songs* is recited by all Sephardic communities on the eve of the Sabbath, with perhaps one exception. That is the Spanish and Portuguese tradition of Amsterdam, where all overtly kabbalistic influences were expunged following the disastrous effects of the Sabbatean movement. For some reason, never satisfactorily explained however, the hymn *Lecha Dodi*, of kabbalistic origin and influenced by the *Song of Songs* was retained.

Jewish tradition. Abulafia calls sexual intercourse "the Tree of knowledge of good and evil, and it is a matter of disgust and one ought to be ashamed at the time of the act [and be away] from every seeing eye and hearing ear."[355] Yet neither Abulafia nor Abrabanel counsel anything like ascetic methods as a means of achieving mystical states.[356]

Despite the above-mentioned similarities, it might be of interest to note that Judah Abrabanel never mentions meditating upon Hebrew names of God or any words, Hebrew or otherwise and in fact only refers to Hebrew when discussing the meanings of terms. He never discusses visions or anything remotely related to them that might be achieved by meditative techniques, focusing on words, music, etc. If Abulafia was influential in the circles in which he traveled, there is no direct indication that Abrabanel personally was sympathetic to his teachings and he never mentioned him. But there is indirect evidence of a link, for example the fact that both revered Moses Maimonides, both were mystically inclined; perhaps Abulafia was also influenced by ibn Gabirol and both had similar views regarding the Active Intellect. Pico della Mirandola was certainly under the influence of Abulafia, though his nephew asserted that he ultimately rejected "the art of Abulafia."[357]

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[355] The statement is originally from *Ozar Eden Ganuz* (MS. Oxford 1580, fol. 130b) and translated by Moshe Idel, ibid. p. 204.

[356] Regarding the relative absence of asceticism in Abulafia see ibid., pp. 143-144. I have previously alluded to its *relative* absence in Abrabanel but a word of caution is required. Although the *Dialoghi* does not have the literary feel of asceticism, both Philo and Sophia make statements that can certainly be viewed as such. In the context of modern thinking, almost all medieval and Renaissance thinkers might be perceived as somewhat ascetic.

[357] Pico was generally far more impressed by kabbalistic type devices such as *gematria* and other plays on Hebrew words (associating them with the methods of Raymond Lull) than Judah Abrabanel appeared to be. Pico may, however, have believed that Abulafian type trances were required in order to

While direct irrefutable evidence is lacking, Abulafia may indeed be the most likely source of conscious kabbalistic influence on Judah Abrabanel if indeed such influence exists.

Is There an Objective Way of Assessing Kabbalistic Influence?

I think that there is really no such litmus test or checklist that must be passed with a certain grade before one can believe in the operation of kabbalistic type influence. Such broadly defined influence most likely would be present in a thinker like Judah Abrabanel. Furthermore, Kabbalah has been so influenced by earlier schools of pagan and Gnostic thought, early Jewish mysticism, Jewish philosophy and Christian and Moslem influences that it is a very difficult matter to resolve where it begins and ends.

But if we are to accept what I have called the kabbalistic hypothesis, it seems to me that certain additional more selective criteria should also be present. What those criteria should be and in what quantities they should be present, however, has never been definitively decided. Therefore any conclusion is tentative and may prove little as regards our question and even less regarding mere subliminal influence. But it might be useful to have a kind of typological rule of thumb in order to assess whether a given writing is definitively and consciously kabbalistic. Therefore, it might be interesting to examine all of the "topics" that Gershom Scholem listed in the book *Kabbalah* that might be relevant and ask to what extent Judah Abrabanel dealt with them. There are 19 topics in all and three are

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truly benefit from those methods. See S.A. Farmer, *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses (1486)*, pp.64-65.

obviously irrelevant for our purposes because they deal with later historical periods. Of the remaining 16, Abrabanel only deals with two and even there his interpretation is quite different from the prevailing kabbalistic one. While this does not refute the kabbalistic hypothesis, it may lay upon it an even heavier burden of proof. These are the 19 topics.

1. **The Zohar**. Abrabanel never mentions it in this book

2. **Shabbatai Zevi**. Obviously irrelevant as he was later in history.

3. **Jacob Frank**. Obviously irrelevant for the same reason.

4. **Ba'al Shem**. This term applies to those who possess special secret knowledge, magical or mystical. Abrabanel never mentions this word.

5. **Sefer Ha-Bahir**. Abrabanel never mentions this book.

6. **Chiromancy**. This is the ability to determine character and fate by examining the palm and fingers. Abrabanel never mentions it.

7. **Demonology**. There is no mention of it in the *Dialoghi*.

8. **The Doenmeh**. Obviously irrelevant as they came later.

9. **Eschatology**. This is an area where we can see clear differences between kabbalistic writings and the *Dialoghi*. The *Zohar* treats the topic in an apocalyptic fashion, alluding to the belief that only the Jews may survive the end of days. The *Dialoghi* makes no distinction whatsoever between Jew and non-Jew regarding their ultimate destiny. It also never

discusses eschatology in a historical sense and seems generally uninterested in it.

10. **Gematria**. This is the ancient interest in the numerical value of words and letters and its application to textual interpretation or even predictions. It was popular not only among Jews but also some Christians. Abrabanel must have been aware of it but never mentions it. This is even more amazing since Pico della Mirandola, his contemporary, makes extensive use of it.[358]

11. **Gilgul**. This is the Hebrew word for transmigration of souls. It has a long history in Hindu thought, Plato, Plotinus and others. It was rejected by Christianity despite a passage in the New Testament that might be interpreted as endorsing at least a limited version of it. It was also rejected or ignored by almost all Jewish philosophers but warmly embraced by Kabbalah. Interestingly, one of the few major non-kabbalistic Jewish thinkers to support it was Isaac Abrabanel. Apparently, this was an aspect of kabbalistic thought that he was favorably inclined towards. It was also mentioned by Ficino and Pico but ostensibly rejected by both in accordance with orthodox Christian belief.[359] Ficino even went so far as to argue in Book 17 of the *Platonic Theology* that Plato did not really believe in it and that his utterances regarding it were poetic.[360] Quite interestingly, Judah Abrabanel never mentions it at all as an opinion of the kabbalists. He does mention it on page 225 in

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[358] See S. A. Farmer, *Syncretism in the West*, p.73.

[359] The scholarship has gone back and forth regarding whether Pico and Ficino really rejected metempsychosis. Surely they would have had palpable reasons to pretend that they did. For a good and up to date discussion, perhaps weighted on the side of the view that they were pretending, see Brian Ogren, *Renaissance and Rebirth*, pp.212-263.

[360] See James Hankins, "Marcilio Ficino on *Reminiscentia* and the Transmigration of Souls."

the limited context of souls who become too involved in physical things: "Pythagoras declares that such souls as these migrate into the bodies of wild beasts and animals." This is quite interesting, given the influence of his father, Plato, Plotinus and (arguably) Ficino.[361] One might have thought that he would be more favorably inclined towards it due to the views of the first three and also due to kabbalistic influence and would at least have stressed its connection to Plato. He also makes no attempt to attribute the belief to Moses but instead gives it an ethical interpretation and uses Psalm 22:21 as a proof text.[362] This may be a rare example of historical accuracy in pre-modern religious and philosophical thought as Pythagoras (followed by Empedocles and Plato) seems to have been the first major Western thinker to believe in metempsychosis and it seems completely absent from the Hebrew Bible.[363]

12. **Golem**. These are human-like creatures created by magical means. Abrabanel never mentions them

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[361] For an excellent study of reincarnation in Renaissance Jewish thought see Brian Ogren, *Renaissance and Rebirth*. In particular see pp.102-138 for Isaac Abrabanel's views in favor of it.

[362] The English translation is "deliver my soul from the sword and my darling from the power of the dogs" (p.225). An examination of the context of the verse indicates that the psalmist refers to being besieged by enemies and it has nothing to do with the soul becoming bestial, as Abrabanel would have it. He makes no effort to justify metempsychosis with a biblical verse but searches for one that could be interpreted as fear of becoming like a beast rather than literally becoming a beast. This is underscored by the context of Abrabanel's discussion itself (pp. 223-224) that clearly refers to the baneful effects of the soul becoming preoccupied with the body. Pythagoras' view reinforces those negative consequences in this life and could be interpreted as a metaphorical exposition of them.

[363] See Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, Volume 2, for discussions of metempsychosis in the belief systems of the Getae, Celts, ancient Greeks, and in particular Pythagoras, Empedocles and Plato.

13. **Lilith.** This is an evil, female demon who plays a major role in Kabbalah. Abrabanel never mentions her.

14. **Magen David.** The Star of David was an ancient symbol that supposedly possessed magical powers. Abrabanel never mentions it.

15. **Meditation.** Abrabanel speaks about meditation in the sense of thought or contemplation but never of meditation on words or names as in kabbalistic literature. There is no mention of any such rituals, special symbols or quasi-magical procedures in the *Dialoghi*.

16. **Merkabah Mysticism.** This is an ancient mystical school. Abrabanel never mentions it explicitly but it is quite possible that he, like the entire Jewish tradition, was somewhat implicitly influenced by it.

17. **Metatron.** This was a very important angel for the kabbalists. He resembles God and according to some legends was once a man (Enoch). Some thought that he was the angel that Jacob wrestled with and then thought that he had seen the face of God. Abrabanel never mentions him, despite the fact that other syncretists, like Pico, identify him with the Active Intellect or "intellectual sphere."[364]

18. **Providence.** Obviously this is a subject that Abrabanel had to be concerned with. The Kabbalah, of course assumes special divine providence for Jews. The *Dialoghi* knows nothing of such a concept but only about the human soul or human person. Special treatment of Jews would only apply to the revelation, which ultimately becomes available to all people.

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[364] S.A. Farmer, op. cit. p.70

19. **Samael**. This was the kabbalistic equivalent of the devil. Abrabanel never mentions it. In fact he seems never to mention evil or malevolent angels at all.

A word of caution is required. Despite the encyclopedic nature of Scholem's work, there may have been aspects of kabbalistic thought that were not properly emphasized and that may show up with greater vigor in the work of Moshe Idel and others. We have already seen this to an extent and therefore I am not suggesting that this comparatively long list is exhaustive.

I would add one more topic, which might have been too controversial to discuss at earlier periods of Jewish history, due to the ever-present danger of persecution. I think we are now free to deal with this issue and its unpleasant consequences. Much kabbalistic literature utilizes a world-view that is generally questioned or even repudiated by Jewish (and other) philosophical thought. I will call it "physico-spiritual parallelism." Everything in the physical world has its correlate in the spiritual world — including evil. That means that such evil physical structures are not really subject to substantial change unless something monumental occurs in the heavenly realms. We may possibly find this kind of thinking in Yehudah Halevi but in few other Jewish philosophers. You may recall that this was a question for Plato's theory of forms as well and turns up in some of his dialogues. It was once asked by one of Socrates' disciples whether a piece of dirt has a correlative Form in heaven. This becomes a particular problem with earthly things that we find trivial, dirty, disgusting or evil. Philosophical thought has tended to downplay evil, sometimes even denying its reality, and attributing it to human ignorance/error/imagination, matter, etc. but not to demonic

spiritual forces. Some kabbalistic thinkers, like Moses Cordovero, also took that more philosophical approach.[365] But in general Kabbalah stresses the radical reality of evil, both here below and also in the higher realms. This is reflected most vividly in the kabbalistic view of the Jewish condition. For the Kabbalah, the position of the Jew in this world reflects a fundamental metaphysical condition and not merely a shifting cultural-historical one. The Jew is essentially good and the non-Jew is essentially evil. Such views, of course, were not confined to kabbalists or Jews. As politically incorrect as they might be, there is no way of understanding certain medieval demonizing tendencies (in all the religions) without referencing them. There is, however, not even a trace of such thinking in the *Dialoghi d'Amore*. And as I mentioned in a previous note, the whole problem of theodicy is not dealt with by Judah Abrabanel in any strong way. This is in stark contrast to so much kabbalistic literature, which tends to be obsessed with evil.

Surely our author (Judah Abrabanel) was quite aware of Kabbalah. Many of his doctrines are quite similar to those of the kabbalists, as one might perhaps expect of a Renaissance Neoplatonic philosopher. Indeed, many concepts that might appear at first blush to pertain to Kabbalah may actually be philosophical in origin. One excellent example is his second model for the relationship between God and the physical universe in which he certainly seems to employ kabbalistic interpretations of *The Song of Songs*, calling them the views of "Solomon and the followers of Moses" (p. 424). A closer inspection reveals that these may actually be the views of his

[365] See Joseph Dan, "No Evil Descends from Heaven."

father and/or Yohanan Alemanno.[366] A similar relationship between God and the world could also be derived from Neoplatonic sources such as Abraham ibn Ezra or ibn Gabirol. To be fair, it does seem that he uses kabbalistic motifs, which might indicate either an intimate acquaintance with them or the recognition that his audience would find them familiar.[367] Nevertheless his own words seem ostensibly to indicate that he would not have been a true kabbalist, by which I mean one who accepts kabbalistic tradition relatively uncritically.[368]

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[366] Alemanno wrote a kabbalistic work on *The Song of Songs* entitled *Gate of Desire* and Isaac Abrabanel dealt with the subject in his *Commentary on Kings*. For a fuller discussion see Moshe Idel, "The Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations of Kabbalah in the Renaissance" in *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, pp.213-215.

[367] The latter possibility might seem to militate in favor of his intended audience being Jewish or a rather elite group of non-Jews. Other possibilities exist, however. We know that non-Jews like Pico della Mirandola took a great interest in Kabbalah. New Christians also used Kabbalah to justify their conversion to Christianity. Abraham Farissol commented upon this in his anti-Christian work, *Magen Abraham*. The *Dialoghi*, on the other hand, is not overtly anti-Christian. The Abrabanels must have been intimately acquainted with both Jews and New Christians and one of Judah Abrabanel's goals might well have been to offer a philosophy that would be acceptable to all factions. However, we must also recognize that many writings are composites of communications that the author had in the past with varied audiences and are not always completely consistent, either in style or content.

[368] I am certainly not denying that he was influenced by kabbalistic ideas. It might be argued that, in opposition to my opinion, he desired to conceal his true leanings and was really more of a kabbalist than he admits. This will be discussed more fully in the concluding chapter but seems somewhat suspect to me under the circumstances. He lived in relatively tolerant times. His father was somewhat favorably inclined towards Kabbalah, as was most of the Jewish intellectual community and many non-Jews as well. He was willing to discuss pagan mythology openly and favorably. Why would he conceal his kabbalistic beliefs? This will be discussed more extensively in my conclusion. Perhaps a more serious objection involves the very definitions of philosophy and Kabbalah. As mentioned previously, Moshe Idel once stated at a conference that the distinction between the two is the product of modern scholarship. That would perhaps explain why Leone

Compared to his discussions of philosophy and mythology, Abrabanel rarely discusses Kabbalah. He does not refer specifically to the *Zohar* or to the more influential Kabbalists in Italian intellectual circles such as Abraham Abulafia, Menahem Recanati or Joseph Gikatilla. The most obviously positive discussion of Kabbalah in this book that has often been quoted is from *Dialoghi*, III, 54a where Sophia says: "Mi piace vederti fare Platone Mosaico, e del numero de Cabalisti." But in Abrabanel's introduction to the subject of Kabbalah, he has Philo say: "Many, however, declare that they have it on divine authority" and "I will tell you what these teachers allege, although I do not counsel you to believe it, for the evidence of their texts is not clear, but full of obscure meaning" (pp. 292-293).[369] I will now repeat that first quotation (of Sophia) in its English translation with its full context. "I am content that you are able to reconcile Plato's opinion with that of Moses and the Cabbalists, and as you say, it is enough that I should know of the existence of this opinion, since neither absolute reason nor limited faith forces me to give it credence." (p.296). We will have more to say about that passage later on but it suffices to simply mention at this point that the literal words do not indicate great kabbalistic sympathies on the part of the author but simply an interest. If

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Ebreo would prefer to be known as a philosopher even if he harbored kabbalistic beliefs. If we accept that position, however, a problem still remains. It would still be valuable to distinguish between philosophers who accepted kabbalistic claims of an authentic esoteric revelatory tradition relatively uncritically and those who did not. Based on his own words it seems that Abrabanel, while not as vociferous an opponent of Kabbalah as Elijah del Medigo, was indeed critical or doubtful of some of its claims.

[369] The Italian text (p.249) reads: "*Ti dirò ciò che dicono, il che non ti persuado che tenghi, però che l'evidenzia loro ne li testi non è chiara, ma figurative*..."The new English translation (p. 239) renders it: "I will tell you what they say, though I do not persuade you to believe it, because their evidence in the texts is not clear, but figurative..."

indeed he was a Kabbalist or was favorably inclined towards Kabbalah, it will have to be teased out of the contextual settings of these statements. In other words, there is nothing self-evident about his kabbalistic affiliations and if they exist we must infer them from his writings in accordance with some theory and perhaps additional evidence.

The Theory of Mind and Soul in the *Dialoghi* and in Kabbalah

This subject is extremely important since the *Dialoghi* reads like a book that is quite concerned with the inner life of humankind. In that respect it is fairly typical of Renaissance literature. As might be expected in such a *genre* there is an emphasis on love, mysticism and the various psychological passions, needs and desires.[370] It seems significant to compare that with kabbalistic literature but on the other hand one would not expect medieval literature or even later kabbalistic literature that was relatively unaffected by the Renaissance to exactly line up with Renaissance writings, even one like the *Dialoghi* which explicitly relies so much on medieval philosophy. Furthermore, there is really no unified "theory of mind" in kabbalistic literature. Nevertheless, the following analysis may be of value in helping to determine the extent to which kabbalistic doctrines inform the work of Judah Abrabanel.

One of the traits of philosophers is that they try very hard not to contradict themselves, except perhaps when they are attempting to give an esoteric signal. Of course no one likes to contradict him or herself but, with the clear exception of mathematics and logic, most non-philosophical writers might have somewhat less of a problem with self-contradiction than

[370] See Ekhard Kessler, "The intellective soul" for a good discussion.

do philosophers. It seems to me that on the surface Judah Abrabanel's theory of mind and soul conflicts with that of the *Zohar*, which might very well mean that he didn't pattern his own theory after it. That would perhaps be expected since the *Zohar* was not very well known in Italy at the time, even if the Abrabanel family knew of it. But it may also be that in reality the *Zohar* is in conflict with itself. Nowadays many scholars believe that it is a composite of writings of various authors and that might explain such conflicts. Whether or not the *Dialoghi* is also in conflict with itself is a matter that might be of even greater import however since it is generally agreed to be the work of a single hand. The *Zohar* is also modeled after Talmudic discussions where one is accustomed to find disagreements. The *Dialoghi*, on the other hand, purports to be a discussion between a master and his disciple, even if it is not quite as asymmetrical as once thought, and is somewhat nuanced as are most such relationships. We have already noted the distinct possibility that the author could have expressed his beliefs through Sophia at times and through Philo at other times. Therefore, although I believe his theory of mind and soul to be crucial to understanding Judah Abrabanel, it may not be possible to extract a completely clear doctrine from the book. I am issuing this warning as it might be yet another indication that Abrabanel was holding back some information about his own positions.[371] Even if that were the case, however, it need not indicate kabbalistic sympathies and we will have to evaluate that later on.

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[371] In 1513 the Lateran Council decreed that individual immortality was not only the position of the Church but could be demonstrated philosophically and therefore must be supported by all philosophers. While the *Dialoghi* was surely written prior to 1513, it is plausible that a Jewish philosopher in Italy would not have dared to openly dispute that and other official Church doctrines.

Before we even consider these two psychologies, it is worth noting that in both of the relevant historical periods (late Medieval and Renaissance) Aristotle's *De Anima* was the standard psychological text along with the mostly Arabic commentaries on it. This should be obvious to anyone who reads the *Dialoghi*. In addition, and this may be somewhat less obvious, the Renaissance thinkers were becoming aware of some of the ancient Greek commentaries on the *De Anima*. Of course the *Zohar* would not mention any of those non-Jewish texts but the *De Anima* and the Arabic commentaries would almost inevitably be in the background of its treatment of psychological issues to a certain extent, assuming that a late medieval text would be dealing either overtly or otherwise with the issues of the day.[372] For an encyclopedic description of various kabbalistic views regarding the soul and their relationship to medieval philosophical concepts one would be well advised to read Gershom Scholem's, *Kabbalah*.[373] What we will say here and which Scholem goes into much greater detail on is the relatedness between philosophical notions of the vegetative, animal and intellectual souls and kabbalistic notions.[374] Nevertheless, despite the obvious influence of

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[372] It is not necessary to substantiate the great interest that medieval philosophers showed in Aristotle's *De Anima*. See Katherine Park and Eckhard Kessler, "The Concept of Psychology" in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy* for a good discussion of the *De Anima* and its preeminence in the Renaissance as well.

[373] See "Kabbalah" article in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, volume 10, pp. 606-17.

[374] Elliot Wolfson has opined that the medieval kabbalists adopted a "negative view towards the corporeal body" due to "the influence of philosophical thinking that had informed the general cultural trends of European societies in the High Middle Ages." There may have been other influences as well. He goes on to discuss the "positive valence accorded the body in kabbalistic symbolism." This apparent contradiction could be explained by psychological theories but I do not necessarily attribute that view to Wolfson. See *Language, Eros, Being*, p.246.

medieval philosophical categories on Kabbalah, we should not necessarily equate those respective divisions of the soul. One of the reasons for that are the varying purposes to which kabbalists and philosophers put those categorical distinctions. Each was to a certain extent attempting to justify some more or less controversial activity. While to go into great depth on this matter might be an instance of psychology encroaching on philosophy, religion and history, this is something that one should perhaps keep in mind. One generalization that we could make and which seems intuitively as well as empirically correct is that philosophers are somewhat more concerned with the mind and kabbalists more concerned with the soul as something other than the mind. This is a matter that has resurfaced in modern consciousness studies as well as a result of the discovery that many cognitive processes are unconscious. This is true of phenomena as varied as blind sight and artificial intelligence. Therefore, we now tend to think that there can be intelligence without consciousness and consciousness without a great deal of intelligence. One word of warning would be advisable, however. If it turns out that Judah Abrabanel did not equate the soul and the intellect that does not necessarily mean that he was following a kabbalistic model. Ficino also did not equate the soul with reason.[375]

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[375] See *Meditations on the Soul*, 22, pp.39-40 where Ficino seems to be suggesting that reason might be ontologically higher than the soul but lower than God, something quite similar to the view of ibn Gabirol.

> Similarly reason is either substance or quality. If reason is substance, it is like existence; it is the all, perfect and utterly boundless. The soul is not of this nature; only God is. If reason is a quality, it is clearly an attribute and faculty of the soul rather than the soul itself. But no one would venture to assert that the soul is itself a quality and an attribute, for it freely rules the body... The soul,

I would like to repeat something previously quoted that Gershom Scholem stated regarding *nefesh*, *ruach* and *neshama* (the three aspects of the soul) in Kabbalah, without necessarily assuming that it is true in all instances of kabbalistic writings. But even if it is only generally true, it may tell us quite a bit about the relationship between certain strands of Kabbalah and Abrabanel's thought. This is what Scholem said: "Rather all three are already latently present in the first, *nefesh*, and the higher grades correspond to the new and deeper powers, which the soul of the devotee acquires through the study of the Torah and through meritorious actions."[376] The higher levels are, in brief, "latently present" in the lower one: *nefesh*. And apparently the latter has the ability to engage in "study" and "meritorious actions." Let us now see what Judah Abrabanel says regarding the soul on page 204. We have already quoted this passage in the notes to the section on the third dialogue in chapter one. Our point in doing that was to show that Abrabanel's ideas about consciousness differed somewhat from the medieval rationalist tradition. Here is the quotation.

> Philo: The soul is in itself one and indivisible, but by distributing its powers throughout the body and permeating even its surface and extremities, it branches out for certain activities pertaining to perception, movement and nutrition among various organs and divides itself among many divers faculties. In this it resembles the sun which, though one, becomes many in the diffusion and multiplicity of its rays, according

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therefore, is an incorporeal rational substance, fitted to direct the body.

[376] Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 240

> to the number and diversity of places on which they fall.

The first thing one might note here is that Abrabanel seems to consider the soul, and not simply some sort of intellect, to be "one and indivisible." This is a somewhat radical notion, perhaps even more so than the Aristotelian one regarding the intimate connection of soul and body. There is admittedly a similarity between Abrabanel's notion and the kabbalistic one, as both seem to downplay individuality and collapse the Aristotelian distinction between soul and intellect.[377] That having been said, it is also quite different from the customary psychology of Zoharic Kabbalah, at least as described by Scholem. It might even be more different than is readily apparent since writers like Scholem no matter how much they attempt to be faithful to the meaning of medieval texts inevitably import some modern sensibilities into them. Hence when we read those medieval and Renaissance texts, whether kabbalistic or philosophical, whether in the original language or in translation, we are always translating them into modern forms of thought. That is just one reason why the critical investigation of texts is so important. Unfortunately, we are not able to intensively compare the *Dialoghi* with the *Zohar* or other clearly kabbalistic writings in this work but we can perhaps get a general sense of things.

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[377] The distinction between soul and intellect is fairly clear in Aristotle. Religious systems, however, tend to be more concerned with the fate of the individual soul and often under philosophical influence tend to collapse that distinction. The *Zohar*, not expressing philosophical ideas while perhaps reflecting them, is in no need of harmonizing Aristotle with religion but Abrabanel surely is. For a good, though somewhat controversial analysis of the Aristotelian view of intellect see Lloyd Gerson, "The Unity of Intellect in Aristotle's *De Anima*"

One important issue here is the relationship between psychology and metaphysics. One would expect this to be more fully appreciated by philosophers than by mystics or esotericists. In other words, people who are concerned mostly with their own spiritual experiences may not feel the need to integrate them and make them coherent with an overall metaphysical world-view. I think it is quite obvious that Judah Abrabanel is primarily a philosopher and any mystical or esoteric inclinations are secondary. In Abrabanel's theory it is the higher level of soul (whatever that turns out to be) that gets diffused into the lower levels, not latently at all but its power is diffused like the rays of the sun. In fact, given the analogy of the sun, one cannot help suspecting that this is a description of some very high spiritual being, completely separate from the human body (perhaps even God) diffusing itself into what we ordinarily call the human soul.[378] We find the very same

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[378] As an example of this way of viewing the soul, I quote from Ficino's *Meditations on the Soul*, p.138. I have deliberately chosen this passage because while it combines philosophical and religious motifs (and the latter are quite significant), the philosophical one seems to predominate.

> Since souls are divine, why do they live such unholy lives? Because they inhabit an unholy house in an unholy land. Some go astray through lack of care or knowledge, and there is nothing to wonder at in that, insofar as we live in the murky sediment of this world. Others err through too great love of the body, and that is not strange either, since the body is the companion and child of the soul. Yet others fail through lack of trust, either in immortality or in divine mercy – and what wonder, since they live their lives in a region of death and cruelty? Others again fail because of over confidence in the divine mercy, or that all will be put right tomorrow. Both lack of trust and overconfidence are very dangerous: the first torments a man, the second deceives him.

metaphor for Soul used by ibn Gabirol in the *Fons Vitae*.[379] This is part of a long discussion regarding sensible forms and their origin in a "simple substance." What is meant by that term is not altogether clear but it is made clear that it is something with an essence, composed of form and matter and that it is not God (the first Maker).[380] Most likely, it refers to Intellectual Substance or what some might call the Active Intellect. Judah Abrabanel makes it abundantly clear, however, that he considers that Active Intellect to be God. In that respect he differed from Maimonides and ibn Gabirol and I am not claiming that he obtained this metaphor of light for the soul from the latter. He might also have obtained it from Moses Narboni.[381] He would most likely not have taken it from Ficino since in his commentary on love Ficino uses it specifically for Angelic Intelligence and not for Soul.[382] While the *Fons Vitae* is

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[379] See *Fons Vitae*, third treatise, 25 (pp. 139-140) where it is used in regards to the substance of Soul. Later on (fourth treatise, 2, p.190) the same metaphor is used for spiritual forms even though the teacher seems to be opposed to that view. To confuse matters more, the teacher states that form is pure light in the fourth treatise, 14, p.208. What can perhaps be inferred from this is that the *Fons Vitae* endorses the general use of light as a metaphor for higher spiritual forces infused in lower material ones.

[380] Ibid., pp. 138-139. It could be either the substance of Soul or Intellect.

[381] See Narboni's Introduction to his commentary on Averroes' *Epistle on the Possibility of Conjunction with the Active Intellect*, p.22. Although Narboni quotes Plato, the quotation seems not to be correct. See Kalman Bland's note #4 on p. 113. Apparently, his teacher A. Altmann shared his view that this is not an authentic quotation from Plato and Bland attributed it to Averroes himself in another work. He also opines that the metaphor of light goes back to Plato's *Republic*, 508b, c, 509b and that is correct. A close look at the *Republic*, however, indicates that light is being used as a metaphor for the Form of the Good and not strictly speaking for soul. Hence, the earliest source of this particular metaphor is still the *Fons Vitae*.

[382] See Commentary on the Symposium, SpeechVI, chapter 18. p. 144. "O Socrates, remember that that single light of the single wisdom is the beauty of the Angel, which you must honor above the beauty of the Soul." Jaynes' note 143 on p. 144 makes it clear that: "As usual, the word *Soul* here means *World Soul* and *Angel* means *Angelic Mind*.

basically a metaphysical work and we cannot assume that Judah Abrabanel followed ibn Gabirol in all its particulars, that metaphysics seems to imply a psychology and in a certain respect it is the opposite of the kabbalistic one as ordinarily understood.[383] That is because while the disciple in ibn Gabirol's dialogue expresses surprise regarding this doctrine, the master insists that all corporeal forms already exist in the higher spiritual substance rather than the contrary thesis that spiritual characteristics exist in a latent fashion in the lower corporeal substance.[384] While the two theories are similar in that there is no rigid separation between the physical and the spiritual, there is a subtle difference. In the kabbalistic theory (which is typical according to Scholem) the lower psychological level fulfills or perfects its latent potentiality by "study of the Torah and through meritorious actions." This fits in with the kabbalistic preoccupation with metempsychosis since it would be the *nefesh* that migrates from body to body and finally fulfills itself by acquiring the higher-level qualities. In other words, its very dependence upon physical bodies necessitates its improvement while in a body rather than simply an escape from the body. It is also consistent with a theurgic/magical notion of human religious activity. But such a kabbalistic fulfillment is of course only fully possible for Jews according to the *Zohar*. That is perhaps because of the view that there is something inherently sacred about the physical nature of the Jew that

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[383] That is because kabbalistic doctrines are rarely harmonized with logically coherent metaphysical systems even if they might have their origins in them. Most kabbalists assume a commonsense metaphysics and this might well involve them in contradictions with their religious and/or psychological doctrines. I am not claiming that kabbalistic views are not capable of being reconciled with sophisticated metaphysical systems.

[384] Ibid, third treatise, 25-27, pp. 135-142. Later on the disciple accepts the thesis that what is in the inferior is in the superior but that the converse is not true. See third treatise, 48 p. 172.

allows for a higher development of the soul. Such a view might be consistent with those of some earlier Jewish and Arabic medieval philosophers as well, though they would require some interpretation.[385] At any rate, the crucial component for at least many of the kabbalists seems to be the "hardware" (in the terminology of Daniel Lasker) of the *nefesh*, within which the crucial mental capacities latently exist and come to full expression through religious activities. There is a somewhat physical quality to this psychology and it is quite different from the Platonic or Neoplatonic psychologies. Likewise, the Aristotelian and Averroistic view of the soul can also be interpreted as naturalistic, viewing human mental activity as a sort of perfection of a particular type of physical organism.[386]

Judah Abrabanel's view, on the other hand, is a more typically Neoplatonic philosophical theory of soul, which holds that the human soul is already essentially higher than it knows itself to be and what is particularly crucial for it is self-discovery, rather than external physical activities *per se*. Such discovery unfolds the higher spiritual levels with which the soul

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[385] The kabbalistic view of the soul can perhaps be likened to the Averroistic doctrine of the unicity of the intellect as Kalman Bland claimed in regards to Elijah del Medigo, usually considered an opponent of Kabbalah. Bland's view is that del Medigo only opposed Neoplatonic Kabbalah. There is some truth to this claim of a similarity between the Averroistic and kabbalistic views regardless of whether del Medigo actually held that view. The kabbalistic doctrine only seems to apply to the souls of Jews, who were at Mount Sinai according to that tradition. The main concern is not the ability to reason but the ability to access revelation as determinative of a person's potential connection to God. For a sympathetic view of Bland's position see Jacob Ross, "Elijah Delmedigo."

[386] In the chapter on mysticism we will discuss variant interpretations of Averroes based on his own diverse commentaries on the *De Anima*. Therefore, this "naturalistic" interpretation is not the only possible one.

has an affinity. In other words, the crucial affinity of the evolving soul is not with a particular people or physical machinery but with incorporeal levels of reality to which it has access and from which the physical world emerges. There is no escaping the fact that these Neoplatonic systems tend to view the soul as already much more spiritual and perfect than it knows itself to be. And therein lays its conflict with most religious systems in the West, whether Jewish, Christian or Islamic.

The kabbalistic view, although it is quite intellectually involved, is a more or less typical religious theory, which demands the adherence to religious dogma and/or commandments in order to *achieve* perfection. To summarize this distinction in a somewhat questionable but nevertheless useful manner, one could say that the kabbalistic theory is somewhat materialistic. It is rooted in a bodily organism of a particular type (the Jew) and includes what might be considered the baser and more physical psychological faculties. Despite subtle differences and varying interpretations, the kabbalistic *nefesh* is similar to the animal soul of the philosophers. This is practically inevitable given the clear obsession of kabbalistic literature and especially the *Zohar* with Jews vs. Gentiles and the (somatically based) difference in their souls. The view of the *Dialoghi*, on the other hand is more akin to Plato's (or at least one of Plato's views); the soul is viewed as basically non-physical even though its relationship to the physically related psychological faculties is a still problematic factor. In fact we noted previously in the summary of the third dialogue that Judah Abrabanel departed somewhat from the more medieval philosophical contempt for the imagination and the emotions. Yet he clearly continued to deprecate the flesh. If we were to attempt to reconcile this apparent conflict, we might construct a

theory of mind that includes the imagination and emotions but resists the other more purely physical influences of the body. Whether that was indeed the view of Judah Abrabanel I cannot say but it does seem to be one plausible way of viewing it. And in that respect there is indeed another similarity between the kabbalistic psychology and that of Judah Abrabanel.

It should not surprise us that the kabbalistic theory as emphasized by Scholem seems to be in an uneasy co-existence with one or two other theories in the *Zohar*. We have seen how Neoplatonic elements entered Kabbalah along with Gnostic motifs and other older ideas. The *Zohar*, as a traditional Jewish post-biblical text, needs to justify Jewish customs and laws and it does so by connecting such practices with both the perfection of the soul and the perfection of the universe. But its restriction of the efficacy of such practices to Jewish souls requires yet another assumption if it is to provide a meta-halakhic explanation. The Jewish soul, in the view of the *Zohar*, despite being somewhat soiled by the realms of impurity in which it dwells, is essentially different from the Gentile one. It comes directly from God but the non-Jewish soul does not; though there may be exceptions.[387] This certainly explains why the practice of Judaism would be quite useless for most non-Jews and why it is desperately needed for Jews. Abrabanel's psychology, on the other hand, has no Jew/Gentile soul distinction, no realms of impurity (except possibly for physical matter in general) and no religious/magical means to escape from those realms, although he does posit a mystical

[387] There may well be an inherent contradiction in this position since in a sense everything comes from God according to the *Zohar*. We have already discussed the problem of the left and right sides and this book does not attempt to really get to the bottom of this doctrine. Nevertheless, from the perspective of a quite practical application of the text, the *Zohar* does make this rather stark distinction.

relationship with God, which might also function as an escape from the physical world. This seems to place him much closer to the Neoplatonists (and to philosophy in general) than to the kabbalists. The following quotation is from pp.387-388.

> It follows, therefore, that form is most beautiful without body, just as body is infinitely ugly without form. And natural things are of the manner of artificial things: because it is clear that those forms which make natural bodies beautiful exist with a far higher degree of beauty in the mind of the Creator and true architect of the world, that is in the divine intellect; for there they are all abstracted from matter, mutation or alteration, and from all manner of division and multiplication; and the beauty of the whole makes each one of them beautiful, and the beauty of each is found in the whole. These forms are also contained in the soul of the world, which is its second artificer, though not with that measure of beauty which is in the first creative intellect, because in the soul they do not exist in pure union, but with some multiplication or ordered diversity, the soul being the mean between the creator and the created. In the world soul, however, they enjoy a far greater measure of beauty than in corporeal things, for there they exist spiritually in ordered unity, abstracted from matter, mutation and motion. And from the world soul emanate all the souls and natural forms in the lower world, distributed amongst the various bodies, and all subject to change and motion with successive generation and

> corruption, save only the rational human soul, which is free from corruption, mutation and corporeal motion (though with some intellectual motion and spiritual reception of the forms). For it is not combined with body like the other souls and natural forms, of which (as we said of the artificial) those which predominate in their association with matter are more beautiful in themselves and make the body which they inform more beautiful, and those which are submerged in matter are less beautiful in themselves and make the body which they inform defective.

This discussion might inevitably lead us to a subject that has become quite ubiquitous in contemporary thought: the self and its narratives. I think its relationship to Renaissance texts and the *Dialoghi* in particular would be a good candidate for further investigation.[388] I can only remark briefly upon it here. The extremely eclectic and universal nature of that book practically screams out of its pages. Nowhere does it say that God particularly loves the Jewish people or compare them to others. In fact, the only entity in which the individual is ultimately submerged is God. And even there various interpretations are possible due to the underlying thesis that God loves the individual soul. One might even be tempted to impute onto the book a message regarding the individual that could be called "Burckhardtian." Whether that is really the case could be debated but it does seem that Abrabanel assumes a strong,

[388] For example, note the following quotation from Ficino's *Commentary on Plato's Symposium*, Speech V, chapter 3, p. 87: "For the beauty of any person pleases the soul not insofar as it lies in external matter, but insofar as an image of it is comprehended or grasped by the soul through the sight."

autonomous individual, relatively free of communal attachments, and then proceeds to show how utterly dependent even such a one is on human love and ultimately on the love that comes from God.

It is possible of course that a person can attempt to extract just such a universal message from a much more particularistic one. Many modern people do this regarding Kabbalah and other religious teachings. This is clearly something that Judah Abrabanel might also have done if he had wanted to and which, presumably, many now think that he did. Therefore, the stark contrast between the particularism of the *Zohar* (and most other kabbalistic writings) and the universalism of Judah Abrabanel is not altogether decisive in our quest to evaluate the kabbalistic hypothesis. We should also look at some other very fundamental aspects of the two world-views, some of which we have already done. The next chapter will concern itself with one of those features, one that is also intimately related to the subject just discussed.

Chapter IV: Pantheism

I am devoting a separate chapter to this subject, as I would like to provide some additional background information that might be useful to readers. The topic will re-emerge, however, in our discussions of mystical experience and metaphysics and I have already alluded to it in the introduction and in the section regarding Kabbalah. It does seem to be a particular problem for the philosophy of Judah Abrabanel, as has been noted by some other commentators. But it could also be argued that pantheism is often in the eyes of the beholder. As evidence I offer the following discussion by Ernst Cassirer regarding Cusanus, a thinker who was extremely influential in the Renaissance.

> Cusanus is and remains a mystic and a theologian; as such, he considers himself adequate to deal with the world and with nature, with history and with the new and worldly human culture. Far from rejecting these, he moves ever deeper into them, always relating them to his own realm of thought. We can easily trace this process. It begins with his early works, which are dominated by the Platonic theme of *chorismos*. In the later works, *methexis* gradually becomes the dominant theme. And in them, Cusanus considers 'the apex of the theory' to be the insight that the truth which he had sought earlier in the darkness of mysticism and which he had determined to be the antithesis of all multiplicity and change, reveals itself, in fact, in the very realm of empirical multiplicity; indeed, it is a common, everyday matter. This

> new feeling about the world emerges ever more clearly in the works of Cusanus, and together with it comes his characteristic religious optimism. The term Pantheism is not applicable to this new sentiment. The antithesis between the being of God and the being of the world is never blurred; indeed it is maintained in all its rigour. The *De Visione Dei* taught us that the truth of the universal and the particularity of the individual interpenetrate each other, so that the Divine Being can only be grasped and seen from the infinitely multiple individual points of view.[389]

Those "infinitely multiple individual points of view" are quite significant. They may shift the burden of true knowledge to the individual perspective rather than to more universalizable aspects of human thought such as mathematics. They might also, under the right assumptions, shift the focus of knowledge of reality on to what is most personal yet also universal: love. This may indeed be one of the great legacies of Cusanus for Renaissance thought. Perhaps it will also have repercussions in the thought of Judah Abrabanel.

Similarly, Meister Eckhart, who influenced Cusanus, has been accused and often convicted of pantheism by some and acquitted of it by others as the following quotation attests.

> Despite the misprision of his detractors, Eckhart did not hold the heretical position of pantheism,

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[389] See *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, p.36. Regarding Nicholas of Cusa, aside from his interest in multiplicity, he may also have led the way into an awareness of the relevance of human creativity and production to the act of knowing. This could have far reaching implications even to the human knowledge of God since for Cusanus the human mind mirrors that of the divine.

> the idea that God is everything. The more appropriate term for his position is 'panentheism', the idea that God is present *in* everything, that is that all things mediate God's presence: 'God is unseparated from all things, for God is in all things, and is more inwardly in them than they are in themselves'...It is of special importance to him that God is present in the human soul; in the inmost soul, in its summit, the soul's highest part.[390]

I included these quotations for two disparate reasons: firstly to show how subjective the evaluation of pantheism is and secondly to show possible theoretical positions that might have been popular in the Middle Ages and Renaissance and resembled pantheism but by at least some readings are not really pantheistic at all or are only modified varieties of it.[391] The basic problem seems to be that according to some people's intuitions, if God is *really* present in the physical world then that world is *really* and *ultimately* God. This type of ambiguity that we find in some philosophical systems seems somehow incongruous in popular religious teachings because we might have expected popular religions to give their adherents clearer guidance in this matter. But this expectation of clear metaphysical guidance may also be an anachronistic projection of our own current needs. It is at least doubtful if traditional religions in the West really cared so much as we do about

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[390] See Paul MacDonald, *The History of the Concept of Mind*, Volume 2, pp.275-276. The quotation within the quotation is of course from Eckhart.

[391] It is common to call Nicholas of Cusa and similar thinkers "panentheists," which is a milder version of pantheism. This is a rather difficult subject that requires detailed analysis. See David De Leonardis, *Ethical Implications of Unity and the Divine in Nicholas of Cusa*, pp.47-56, 89-111.

metaphysics prior to the modern period. Indeed the term "pantheism" did not even emerge until after the dissemination of the views of Spinoza, generally considered the pantheist *par excellence*. In other words, the very term may originate in a kind of defensive religious apologetics, like some other types of orthodoxy. In keeping with the logically elaborated system of Spinoza, pantheism is often associated with a rejection of a personal God and the simultaneous identification of God and nature. It is possible however to discuss pantheistic tendencies in earlier, less elaborated systems of thought that might be more compatible with religious orthodoxy either because those pantheistic trends were not well thought out or perhaps concealed. Nevertheless, concepts such as space and time (which are crucial to pantheism) are not simple or uncontroversial even if, as many believe, they are primitive and innate ones in the human mind. Philosophical and scientific concepts of space and matter may be dependent upon quite sophisticated mathematical and logical concepts.[392] While we cannot expect most people to appreciate or even understand those concepts, there seems to be an intuitive human need or at least propensity to believe that some sort of identification with or merger with a deity is attainable.[393] There is also a way of thinking that tends to equate God with the real human self or

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[392] See Salomon Bochner, *the Role of Mathematics in the Rise of Science.* He also believed that the ancient Jewish concept of *makom* (place) was actually a fairly sophisticated and early notion of space. See his article in the *Dictionary of the History of Ideas*, Volume 4, p. 296.

[393] See Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, Volume 2, pp. 170-209 for discussions of Thracian religiosity, Dionysianism, Orphism, etc. and the repercussions of such religious myths on Pythagorean, Platonic and other philosophical systems. Of particular note is Eliade's concept of a "total science," which he attributes to Pythagoras, Plato, the humanists of the Renaissance, Paracelsus, the alchemists of the sixteenth century as well as Indian and Chinese medicine (pp.195-196).

ego, while dismissing matter or nature as something less than ultimately real. Whether or not we ought to apply the terms "pantheism" to that world-view is a matter of dispute. But it has appeared in sources as disparate as some Hindu philosophy, Hermetism and perhaps in a modified form in German Absolute Idealism. And there are somewhat similar views, such as that of Plotinus, that allow for some notion of ultimate union between the self and God (the One) but do not go so far in that regard as does the Vedanta philosophy.[394] But rather than attempt to survey all purported cases of pantheism it seems most productive to first look at it in relationship to the Jewish tradition.

Early Judaism

The subject of early Judaism and pantheism is a rather interesting and controversial one. Many people would be astounded to hear that pantheism could be a legitimate part of a Jewish belief system and they would almost reflexively refer to Baruch Spinoza, who was excommunicated for just such beliefs. Of course there are biblical verses, such as *Exodus* XXXIII: 20 that seem to proclaim divine transcendence but also others such as *Exodus* XL: 34 that could be interpreted otherwise. But overall the biblical impression is one of transcendence interrupted by occasional messengers or

[394] The issue of union (or essential unity) as regards different levels of reality is a rather difficult and complex one that we have alluded to in various places. It is germane to both the discussions of pantheism and mysticism. For a good discussion of this issue as it relates to Plotinus, see R.T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, pp.88-89. One could perhaps argue that for Plotinus our normal view of reality is not illusory in quite the same way as in some Indian philosophy. That is to say that for all Platonic thinkers ultimate reality is somehow mirrored in what one might otherwise be tempted to call illusory thinking and perception.

appearances. Yet the story is a bit more complex than most people's reactions would indicate. This stems from the lack of an "authoritative" teaching in Judaism such as exists in Roman Catholicism or for that matter in the Dutch Reformed Church, which may have been as influential in the excommunication of Spinoza as was the Amsterdam Jewish community itself.[395] Thus while Christians can fall back on the teachings of their particular church it is not nearly so easy for Jews whose primary loyalty may be to the Jewish people and the all too ambiguous biblical and rabbinic traditions, rather than to a particular ideology or sect. Second Temple Judaism was quite diverse in terms of beliefs and we can only imagine how diverse the earlier strata were. Even today various Jewish sub-groups often can be shown to harbor incredibly strange beliefs that most people might never associate with Judaism. Many of those beliefs are just beginning to be widely publicized.

Having said all that, it is also true that, from the perspective of comparative religion and focusing on the primary biblical and Talmudic sources, Judaism seems not to be particularly pantheistic and in fact can be plausibly viewed as at least partly anti-pantheistic, certainly as regards the physical world outside of humankind. This stems from the strong anti-idolatrous bias of Judaism, which tends to preclude identification of God with any finite thing.[396] That is not to say

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[395] I am referring to informal pressure and a resulting fear on the part of the Jewish community.

[396] An even more sophisticated (and modern) philosophical approach might be able to argue that the universe is neither finite nor a thing and that physical matter remains a mystery. That might obviate somewhat the need to be anti-pantheistic. But Judaism is not primarily a philosophical or metaphysical religion and therefore the bias against pantheism, which may primarily stem from personalist considerations, would hardly be affected by such intellectual gymnastics. Perhaps the biggest fear of all the biblical religions is the identification of man with God.

that the original anti-pantheistic impulse was philosophical. Rather, it was a reaction against the archaic pagan gods that were often associated with the forces of nature or with particular tribes or places as well as with the enemies of Israel. In the popular mind such idolatry was and still is associated by Jews with the worship of statues, animals, etc. Yet a close examination of the Bible leaves open the possibility that there are indeed real but finite spiritual forces other than the true God. The unique God of the Bible, on the other hand, created and owned the entire world yet had chosen a particular people to be His peculiar champions and fountain of revelation. This is somewhat analogous to the more modern association of individualism with universalism. It need not be maintained, however, that all sources of the Jewish tradition are quite so anti-pantheistic but only that it developed along those lines. We should certainly not think of ancient Judaism as inhabiting a secular, disenchanted world (such as ours) with the mere addition of a transcendent deity. It is rather easy to eschew idolatry in a secular world but it was much more difficult for ancient Israel. It took a long time for the ancient Jews to discard the other gods. One possible reason for doing so might be the feeling that the ultimate creator God was also here in the physical world. This began with the construction of the *Mishkan* in the desert and continued with the construction of the Temple in Jerusalem but it did not really reach completion until the Babylonian exile and the subsequent return to Zion.

Obviously, ancient Judaism shared many characteristics with other archaic religious world-views, one common feature of which is the division of the physical world into sacred and profane, cosmos and chaos, friendly and demonic. It is clearly the case that the Bible preserves some archaic concepts of sacred space, as in *Genesis*, XXVIII: 10-19. These sacred

places in the Bible seem not to be inherently sacred, however, but are meeting places between God and man and those meetings were almost always initiated by God. Hence, it is possible that the concept of holiness and sanctity in the Bible (*kodesh*) is one that begins in a transcendent realm and then is applied to earthly things and places that are set aside for such Transcendence. In stark contrast, the attempts of early man to reach God and to sanctify themselves were rebuffed as in the biblical account of the Tower of Babel. We see a domestication of this trend in *Exodus* with the construction of the *Ohel Moed* and *Mishkan*.[397] Early Judaism did not, however, sacralize the prime candidate for sacred space: Mount Sinai, nor did it note the burial place of Moses or many other sites of biblical human encounters with God. The original meeting place (the *Mishkan*) between the Jewish people and God was mobile as was the case with certain other nomadic tribes and only after the establishment of the monarchy was the permanent Temple built and possibly conceptualized as sacred space.[398] Hence, physical space in ancient Judaism, while at times considered sacred, is always removed from God and the two can never really be identified with one another. And even regarding humankind, which the biblical God obviously shares much with, there remains a stark contrast between the will of God and that of individual human beings and between the commandments of God and the actions of those created in His image. This

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[397] While Jewish tradition equated these two structures with one another, there are certain discernible features that distinguish them. The *Ohel Moed* was placed outside the Israelite camp, guarded by Joshua, not by the priests, and mostly entered into by Moses. The presence of God descended upon it from time to time. The *Mishkan* was clearly a priestly structure, the purpose of which was for God to dwell in the midst of the people at all times. See *Exodus*, XXV-XXXIII.

[398] For the paradigmatic treatment of sacred space, including that of temples, see Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, volume 1, pp. 40-43.

distance shows itself in early Talmudic discussions regarding what it means to be created in the image of God and what it means to cleave to God. The following quotation from Gershom Scholem is apt.

> The original religious impulse in Judaism, which found its valid expression in the ethical monotheism of the Prophets of Israel and its conceptual formulation in the Jewish philosophy of religion of the Middle Ages, has always been characterized as a reaction to mythology. In opposition to the pantheistic unity of God, cosmos, and man in myth, in opposition to the nature myths of the Near-Eastern religions, Judaism aimed at a radical separation of the three realms; and, above all, the gulf between the Creator and His creature was regarded as fundamentally unbridgeable. Jewish worship implied a renunciation, indeed a polemical rejection, of the images and symbols in which the mythical world finds its expression. Judaism strove to open up a region, that of monotheistic revelation, from which mythology would be excluded. Those vestiges of myth that were preserved here and there were shorn of their original symbolic power and taken in a purely metaphorical sense.[399]

We may come to disagree somewhat with Scholem regarding "the Jewish philosophy of religion of the Middle Ages" but that quotation certainly encapsulates a canonical view of biblical and prophetic Judaism that may be substantially

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[399] *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, p.88

correct. A word of warning is in order, however. Modern concepts of time and space did not exist in ancient times. The early rabbis did not always adhere to what we might now believe are normative Jewish principles. The Bible itself is notoriously difficult to interpret at times. There are, therefore, some rather problematic early texts. In *Exodus*, 33:21, for example, God's Glory cannot be seen by Moses, lest he die, but there is an allusion to a *makom* ("place") that is "with" God. Moses is hidden in that place and covered by God's "hand" until His Glory passes and then Moses can see God's back side even though he could not see His "face." Admittedly, this is a very difficult passage to interpret and I will not attempt it here. We certainly cannot assume that the Bible always shares our insistence that God cannot be spatially located.[400] What is especially interesting, however, is that the *Mishna* (Abot II: 13) actually uses the same word "place" (*makom*) as a synonym for God. This is rather strange from our point of view since, despite the arguable existence of objectively sacred places, God can never be confused with any position in space. In another section of the *Mishna* (*Berakhot*, 5:1) it is stated that early pious men used to direct their hearts to "the Place" prior to prayer.[401] Subsequent Jewish tradition adopted this word *makom* as a common name for God and there is a Talmudic passage in

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[400] This insistence that God is not spatial (at least in Judaism) may actually be a legacy of Maimonides. At any rate, it is simply taken for granted today by almost everyone as when Jerome Gellman states: "on no theology does God exist in space. So God lacks dimensionality." See his *Mystical Experience of God*, p.39 and pp.49-51 for a good discussion of the term "Place" in Judaism.

[401] Judith Hauptman seems to believe that this might actually refer to God being in a place. See her *Rereading the Mishna*, p.5, n.15. This may be a novel interpretation of that particular passage but regarding others it has been opined that the word *makom* might refer to cultic spaces such as Jerusalem, the Temple, the Holy of Holies, etc.

Genesis Rabbah, 68 that not only refers to God as "the Place" and refers to the original passage in *Exodus* but also states that God "is the place of the world but His world is not His place." This may be a very early wrestling with a concept of all-encompassing space and identifying it with God, rather than a reference to a particular place in space in which God dwells. If so, it might have fueled pantheistic speculation regarding the ultimate unity of God and the physical universe in the all-encompassing space called *Makom* or God. Now this is all very confusing and it was left to Maimonides to strongly deny that this term "place" has anything whatsoever to do with spatiality but only refers metaphorically to rank (*The Guide*, Part I, chapter 8). The adamancy of that section in the *Guide* surely indicates that the term was commonly misinterpreted in the view of Maimonides. We do know both from his writings and those of his opponents that in his day some learned rabbis still believed that God had a body or perhaps might possibly have one. This leads us to at least be willing to suspect that the ancient Jews might also have associated God with some sort of physicality in space, if not with space itself. If some rabbis in the Middle Ages were willing to believe that God might be spatial, then why not the ancient Jews?[402] Since we are not

[402] Although it might appear to be tangential to our discussion, Paul's notion of participation in Jesus leaves room for a great deal of speculation regarding the Jewishness of the former's apparently realistic view of a physical relationship between the believer and the resurrected Christ. To what extent was his view Hellenistic and to what extent Jewish and can we even make such a distinction at that period of history? To what extent were his statements metaphorical, as some moderns tend to interpret them? For up to date discussions see articles by Craig C. Hill, Heikki Raisanen, Richard B. Hays, Stanley K. Stowers and John M.G. Barclay in *Redefining First-Century Jewish and Christian Identities*, edited by Fabian E. Udoh, pp. 311-389. The relevance of this to pantheism is two-fold. On the more specific level, Christ could be viewed as the prototypical man (*Adam Kadmon* in

really capable of fully understanding these ancient texts at the present time, some of which seem pantheistic and others anti-pantheistic, we shall say nothing more about them. But even if the battle over pantheistic tendencies was waged early on in Judaism, it does seem as if it was settled sometime in the Middle Ages (probably thanks to Maimonides) in an anti-pantheistic manner, at least until the emergence of Kabbalah. And regarding the latter, there is still a great deal of controversy regarding how pantheistic it really is.

There is also another borderline area in which some scholars do see the Bible as more clearly endorsing a type of pantheism, albeit a very restricted one. This has to do with the very close relationship between angels and God, sometimes verging on identity[403] and a somewhat less strong relationship between humans and divine beings.[404] This view places the human being in a somewhat ambiguous position as a divine

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kabbalistic thought). On a more general level of interpretation, the Redeemer is also the *Logos* or the archetype of the entire created universe.

[403] See James Kugel, *The God of Old.* Also see the Passover *Haggadah,* which repeats a *Midrash* that the angel of death and destruction alluded to in *Exodus* was really God.

[404] Much controversy revolves around *Genesis*, VI: 1-2. The Hebrew term *binei elohim* (sons of God) denotes some kind of beings who were able to mate with the daughters of men. The *Septuagint* translates that term as "angels of God" but many dispute such an interpretation. Other controversies revolve around the figure of Enoch (*Gen.* V:22) who some say bridged the gap between men and angels. In the *Book of Daniel*, XII:3 there is the apparent doctrine of righteous humans becoming stars. According to Mircea Eliade, this is a belief shared by Australian and South American tribes. See *A History of Religious* Ideas, Volume 1, p.32, note 7. There are many other examples of a biblical affinity between angels and human beings. See Fletcher-Lous, Crispin H.T., *All the Glory of Adam: Liturgical Anthropology in the Dead Sea Scrolls*. For a good discussion of some of the controversies regarding Enoch and *Genesis* see Erik W. Larson, "The LXX and Enoch: Influence and Interpretation in Early Jewish Literature" *Enoch and Qumran Origins: New Light on a Forgotten Connection*, edited by Gabriele Boccaccini.

being like the angels but as possessing physicality as well.[405] One might well ask what that has to do with pantheism as usually conceived as the identity of God and the physical universe. Although we will not explore it in nearly the depth that would be required, we can say that the very close relationship between man and God and perhaps other spiritual beings opens the door to a kind of modified pantheism. That is especially the case as Judaism is not a metaphysical religion as much as it is a personalistic and ethical one. We have already seen and will see in even greater detail that some medieval and modern scholars continued to view a quasi-pantheistic doctrine on the level of human knowledge as an acceptably Jewish one. In other words, man can somehow imbibe the divine knowledge that was used to create the world. Now, admittedly, these are rather mild versions of pantheism and some have also said that it is only that kind of pantheism that is accepted by Judah Abrabanel. Yet one can also find in early rabbinic legends (*Midrashim*) some rather astounding and conflicting views regarding the relationship between the angels, man and God.

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[405] The problem of physicality was not nearly as strong in biblical times as it has become in post-Maimonidean ones. If Maimonides had one enduring legacy it is the complete ban on viewing God as physical but even as late as his own times there were learned rabbis who thought God might indeed be physical. The notion that humans are essentially angels can also be found in a number of biblical sources. For a strong and detailed argument in favor of this view see Crispin H.T. Fletcher-Louis, *All the Glory of Adam*. It should be mentioned, however, that even if such a direct connection between these three entities (God, angels, humans) is accepted, there remains in the Bible powerful and clear statements regarding a discontinuity and even conflict between God and man on the level of will and desire. Therefore, despite a lack of sophisticated philosophical terminology in the biblical texts the somewhat primitive concept of the human will also contributes to an anti-pantheistic trend. Furthermore, early Jewish writings and legends allude to conflicts between God and some angels. These are described well in Joseph Dan's, *The Ancient Jewish Mysticism*. So, there seems to be no uniform biblical teaching in these matters.

Firstly, we find a rather prevalent view that the angels opposed the creation of man, the placing of the divine image and presence on earth, etc.[406] Perhaps the most disturbing legend is as follows:

> When the angels saw him [Adam], they trembled and were taken aback before him. Then they all placed themselves before the Holy One, blessed be He, and said before Him: Master of the world, are there two powers (*shitei reshuyot*) in the world, one in heaven and one upon earth? What did God do? He put His hand upon him and reduced his stature [which had reached from earth to heaven] to a thousand cubits.[407]

This question regarding whether there are two powers also means that the angels wanted to adore Adam and proclaim "Holy, Holy, Holy before him.[408] This view of the awesome stature and presence of Adam (quite literally resembling God) presents quite a contrast to the more sober rabbinic tendency to question what it means for man to be created in the image of God, perhaps because even the concept of an image of God smacks of idolatry. To what extent those more daring *Midrashim* were pantheistic, however, is an open question since we are dealing here with material that is more mythological than it is philosophical.

Some other later Jewish sources also do not reveal such a neat picture. In particular, many have asserted that the Kabbalah crystallizes pantheistic tendencies regarding nature

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[406] See Alexander Altmann, "The Gnostic Background of the Rabbinic Adam Legends", pp. 1-6.
[407] The legend is from *Midrash Oti'ot de R. 'Akiba*, adopted by *Yalkut Shime'oni* and translated by Alexander Altmann, ibid., p.7.
[408] This version is found in another *Midrash* in *Sefer Hasidim*. See Ibid., p.7.

that were perhaps latent even in much earlier post-biblical sources.[409] It has been further suggested that Judah Abrabanel exhibits very strong pantheistic tendencies and I tend to agree with those assertions. While the degree to which this is the case is quite important and we will attempt to deal with that question, I should say at the outset that pantheism may very well be a significant key to understanding his thought and in particular his mystical theology. This is despite the fact, already mentioned, that the word "pantheism" had not yet come into use.[410] I am also not quite convinced that his "pantheism" can be successfully confined to human knowledge but this is a question that we cannot address here in anything approaching an adequate fashion. It has to do with the ultimate mechanics of emanation and/or creation and its relationship to divine knowledge and human knowledge. These are metaphysical discussions, similar to those to be found in the *Fons Vitae* (*Fountain of Life*, *La Fuente de la Vida*), which seek to ascertain whether those entities that popular cognition deems to be separate and distinct are really so. We have already seen in the previous chapter that Judah Abrabanel's psychology seems on the surface to be more pantheistic than ibn Gabirol's but it is also possible that the former simply failed to make distinctions that the latter did make.

The question of pantheism is also essentially connected with mysticism, as we will discuss again in the chapter on that latter subject. That is because no experiential state can be

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[409] Much of the literature on Judaism and nature is tinged with polemics and hyperbole. For a good recent attempt to discern the various strands of opinion see *Judaism and Ecology: Created World and Revealed Word*, edited by Hava Tirosch-Samuelson, especially the introduction by Tirosch-Samuelson.

[410] According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, the word was invented in 1705 by John Toland.

completely isolated from pre-existing states of belief. I will say a few words about it here as well. Choice of a metaphysical system can plausibly be viewed as related to a person's personal needs and desires. Some feel more comfortable with a materialistic metaphysics and even those who believe in God often are more comfortable with a remote deity who will provide salvation at some future time, but perhaps not too soon. Others, on the other hand, feel the need for a more intimate and current relationship to a spiritual Being. For the latter types (and Judah Abrabanel seems to be one of them) pantheism may serve a very useful function by providing an underpinning for the belief that we are all a part of or at least intimately related to God and other spiritual agencies. In other words, God is viewed as not only the goal but also the substantial origin of the human soul, and at times the ultimate origin of all reality.

Jewish Philosophy

In almost all philosophical systems there is a tendency to equate thought and intellect on the human level with that on the divine level and which could be termed mildly pantheistic. This perhaps stems from the relative lack of concern in philosophical thought for the transcendent Holiness of God that we find in the three monotheistic faiths of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Nevertheless, certain religious attitudes that express philosophical ideas also reflect that aforementioned mild pantheism. I don't think it is particularly controversial to assert that there are pantheistic tendencies present in both medieval Jewish philosophy and Kabbalah as long as we restrict that assertion to *tendencies*, rather than crystallized opinions. In fact, the question that we discussed earlier regarding the origin of the human soul indicates just such tendencies. The more meaningful question has to do with the extent to which those

tendencies express or fulfill themselves. In some philosophical systems they go far beyond the recognition of kinship between the divine realm and the human soul and encompass the physical world as well. In other systems a quasi-Gnostic repudiation of the physical world establishes a strong break between the physical and spiritual realms. Those pantheistic and contra-pantheistic tendencies can perhaps be traced back to Plato and Aristotle. Regarding their provenance in early rabbinic thought, however, there is far less clarity since we are not dealing with systematic philosophical writings.[411] It should be obvious however that Plato's theory of eternal forms, as enunciated in the *Republic*, related on the one side to God (The Idea of the Good) and to physical reality on the other constitutes a system that could legitimately be viewed as pantheistic. The allegory of the cave reveals a relationship between those two realities, which is something like the relationship between reality and illusion (as image of reality).[412] In a sense the true reality of an image is the real thing that it is an image of. It is also true, however, that in the later dialogues Plato makes a retreat from this position and begins to take physical reality more seriously. It is not our task to decide which one is the real

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[411] There is a very interesting statement by Rabbi Akiba in the *Mishna, Abot* III: 17-18: "Beloved are Israel in that there was given to them a precious instrument. Greater love was proved to them in that there was given to them the precious instrument whereby the world was created." This refers to the *Torah*, not as an earthly book or even as the recording of a divine revelation but as a heavenly substance or being and perhaps as an emanation from God.

[412] I quote William J. Prior regarding the early Plato: "The distinction between Being and Becoming is a distinction between two sorts of entity, two orders of being. As so far discussed, it implies no physical or spatial separation..." And then, regarding later developments in his thought: "the metaphysics of the *Timaeus* responds with a high degree of success to the challenges raised in the *Parmenides*. The coherence of the theory of Forms is vindicated..." See *Unity and Development in Plato's Metaphysics*, pp. 33, 123.

Plato (if there is such a thing) but simply to chronicle these pantheistic or anti-pantheistic tendencies.[413] Likewise, Aristotle's metaphysical view of form and matter appears at first blush to be a dualistic system but upon closer inspection matter appears to dissolve into mere potency or potentiality and all reality is in a very real sense ultimately constituted by form. This combined with the assertion of the eternity of the physical universe may also lead to pantheistic interpretations. How those two systems (Plato and Aristotle) differ need not detain us here but it suffices to point out the deep affinity to pantheism in both as well as in the Neoplatonic systems that dominated the Middle Ages. One could also find pantheistic tendencies in Philo of Alexandria.[414] This was once again concealed by the

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[413] Some, like Alban D. Winspear, saw the later Platonic metaphysics as a movement to more practical political concerns with clear theological underpinnings in the *Timaeus*. That seems to show up in the difference between the *Republic* and the *Laws*. In the former, knowledge of the Forms seems sufficient for good governance while in the latter laws and earthly procedures are necessary. Depending upon one's view, the early phase could be viewed as either pure or immature. See Winspear's *The Genesis of Plato's Thought*. Others have noted a fundamental incoherence in some of the later writings. This may be an almost inevitable result of attempting to connect a full-blown metaphysical system with the world, as we know it without sacrificing the reality of the latter. See Kenneth Sayre, "The Multilayered Incoherence of Timaeus' Receptacle" in *Plato's Timaeus as Cultural Icon*, edited by Gretchen J. Reydams-Schil.

[414] See David Winston, "Philo's Theory of Eternal Creation" *Proceedings of the American Academy of Jewish Research*, Vol. XLVI-XLVII (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980) 593-606 for a good discussion of this and also the views of Plato, Aristotle and later Platonists. Winston goes so far as to say: "In the mystical monotheism of Philo nothing really exists or acts except God; all else is but a shadow reality ultimately deriving from the truly Existent." (5971598). On the other hand Erwin R. Goodenough believed that: "Philo was not a true monist, for unformed matter itself seemed always to him to be in contrast to the immaterial nature of God...For Philo the cosmos was itself not God and should never be worshipped; but it was the supreme priest of God..." See *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, edited and abridged by Jacob Neusner, pp. 163-164. Both Winston and Goodenough would agree that for Philo of Alexandria the universe should

explicitly constructed levels of reality, which appear to be real things but upon closer inspection can quite plausibly be viewed as somewhat illusory conceptions of the one true reality. One of the problems here is that the same explicit metaphysical system can be viewed in different ways, comprising in fact a meta-metaphysical interpretation.[415] But, on the other hand, running through all those systems is a relative contempt for physical matter. Whether that contempt ultimately should be traced to false thoughts or imagination in the human mind or to the physical matter itself is another important question. Also important is the relationship between Platonism and Gnosticism as regards contempt for physical matter.[416] Admittedly, all the aforementioned systems are not explicitly pantheistic to the extent of Spinoza's and reasonable people can disagree

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not be worshipped, but for different reasons. For Winston the reason is the universe (as ordinarily conceived) does not *really* exist and worshipping it would be attributing to God essential characteristics that He does not really possess. For Goodenough, worshipping the universe would be worshipping something other than God and therefore Philo would surely have opposed it.

[415] For example, Harry Wolfson believed that the concept of Divine Attributes in Islamic philosophy pertained to something within God and the Christian notion of the *Logos* could be interpreted as either within or without the Divine Being. See his "Extradeical and Intradeical Interpretations of Platonic Ideas" p.512. Presumably, it was easier for the Muslim philosophers to deny Divine Attributes id they could only be conceives as within the divinity. The Christian view would have been more nuanced. This stemmed from certain distinctions that were made by Christian philosophers such as Aquinas and Scotus. This would perhaps explain the aforementioned disputes regarding whether certain Christian thinkers were indeed pantheists. Regarding Judah Abrabanel, it might also help to explain his emphasis on the Active Intellect being God, especially since he was obviously reluctant to quote Christian sources. Of course retracing an author's unacknowledged sources is always perilous.

[416] This question, far more complicated than most suppose, is given a good airing in an article by Kevin Corrigan entitled "Positive and Negative Matter in Later Platonism: The Uncovering of Plotinus's Dialogue with the Gnostics" in *Gnosticism and Later Platonism: Themes, Figures and Texts*, edited by John D. Turner & Ruth Majercik, pp. 141-178.

regarding the degree to which they are but they exhibit pantheistic features nonetheless.

The influence of Arabic and Muslim thought on Jewish medieval philosophy provided additional pantheistic elements, some of which were related to mysticism and others simply to philosophical and psychological speculation. We will be dealing with this more intensively in the chapter of mystical union. Nevertheless, these influences must be noted here, especially since both Jewish philosophy and Kabbalah originated in Spain, where there were always strong cross-cultural influences between pagan philosophy, Islam, Christianity and Judaism. One thing that might have been specifically provided by Islamic thought is a kind of deep and pervasive religious atmosphere, which can quite easily be interpreted in a pantheistic manner. Another thing was the intense intellectual speculation, often influenced by Neoplatonism but basing itself on Aristotle, regarding the nature of real existence of things other than God. If indeed the existence of everything is ultimately based upon God's self-knowledge, perhaps in a very real sense God and the universe are one.[417]

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[417] This depends upon the notion that only God has true being and that all other entities exist in some other secondary sense. As Stephen Menn expresses it regarding al Fārābī: "God is his own *wujūd*, but if there is any sense in which he is the *wujūd* of other things, it is only in the sense in which earth might be called the *wujūd* of lunar eclipse because it is mentioned in the causal definition of lunar eclipse, and has nothing to do with the existence shared by all things, which for Fārābī can only be the second intention being-as-truth." In other words (for al Fārābī), all things (besides God) possess only being-as-truth and not true being. Therefore, in one sense God and the universe are not at all identical but in another sense (in terms of both the cause of the universe and the true being reflected in the universe) they are one, since the universe does not possess true being by itself. See Stephen Menn, "Fārābī's Kitāb al-Hurūf" p.96. To my mind this is similar

Given their philosophical and Iberian roots, it should not surprise us if we were to find pantheistic tendencies in both Kabbalah and the thought of Judah Abrabanel.[418] Spinoza did indeed have a Spanish translation of the *Dialoghi* in his library and many people have suspected that he was greatly influenced by it. I suspect that pantheism will explain a great deal about this book but I would caution readers that there are different kinds of pantheism and some are much more explicit than others. What we often find in philosophical thought is something that goes to the brink of pantheism but never quite gets there. Perhaps it is also important to distinguish pantheism from monism. The former may allow for more differentiation than the latter. There is also something that is called "panentheism" which is often asserted to be distinct from pantheism but this is not the place for an exhaustive analysis of those concepts. I suspect that some of these distinctions are more political and rhetorical than philosophical even though we cannot expect all pantheists to agree on everything. There will always be philosophical problems in this area and disagreements on how to resolve them.

A number of years ago I had submitted an article to a major Jewish journal. In the course of attempting to explain a

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to the Aristotelian question as to whether the form or the form/matter composite is truly substantial. If one opts for the former, then the physical universe could be viewed as substantially equivalent to the forms, whatever one concludes the latter to be.

[418] This was noted (in a qualified sense) by Hubert Dethier. See "Love and Intellect in Leone Ebreo: The Joys and Pains of Human Passion" *Neoplatonism and Jewish Thought*, edited by Lenn Goodman, pp. 353-386. I find nothing in this article to disagree with but I think the distinction between love and identity must be explored more fully. Granted that for Judah Abrabanel love comes very close to being an intellectual force that may bridge the gap between the subject and object. Nevertheless, this would not ordinarily be considered true ontological unity.

characteristic medieval philosophical/psychological concept, I had written that according to that prominent medieval view when a person engages in deductive reasoning his/her thoughts actually became the thoughts of God. An anonymous reader crossed out "God" and replaced it with "Active Intellect." Of course, that was indeed the view of Maimonides. Now technically the reader was right and that is how it eventually went to press. But I was struck by the lack of any deeper discussion or inquiry about the actual relationship between God and the Active Intellect; it was simply assumed by the reader that the two are ultimately distinct or at least should be considered as such. Yet if the latter is an emanation of the former, is there not some basis for arguing that they are ultimately one? The basic philosophical problem here is the relationship between the different levels of emanation and whether in reality they are all ultimately one in God. We have already seen how Judah Abrabanel eliminates the intermediary separate intellects in so far as the actualization of the human intellect goes. For him (and Augustine) it is God who actualizes the human intellect. This may be extremely significant since it is often the liberty and independence of the human soul that is the ultimate sticking point of pantheism and monism. On the one hand, it would seem that pantheism deprives the human being of the ability to do evil but it also deprives him or her of the ability to do good or at least to take credit for it. The first problem dissolves somewhat if one posits an evil Gnostic demiurge as the real source of evil. The second remains, however. Now whether it is a real "problem" may be a matter of basic intuition. Some may actually see it as a great liberation to attribute everything good one does to God. But others might see this as undermining our moral and legal systems and concept of justice, retribution, etc. We cannot

pursue this very important matter further here but we will look a bit further into the Gnostic system. The following quote from Hans Jonas may better flesh out what I am trying to say about Gnostic thought.

> The new vocabulary reflects the revolution of meaning as an established fact: "cosmos" and such derivative terms in Gnostic speech, and this with the force of a fixed terminology. But it is to be noted that the negativity of the concept "cosmos" is not merely that of the absence of divine values in the universe: its combination with such terms as "darkness," "death," "ignorance," and "evil" shows it to be possessed of a counter-quality of its own. That is, contrary to the modern analogue, the withdrawal of the divine from the cosmos leaves the latter not as a neutral, value-indifferent, merely physical fact but as a separatistic power whose very self-positing outside God betrays a direction of *will* away from God; and its existence is the embodiment of that will. Thus the darkness of the world denotes not only its being alien to God and devoid of his light but also its being a *force alienating* from God. In short it denotes a spiritual, not merely physical fact, and in its paradoxical way the Gnostic cosmos is as much a theological entity as that of the Stoics. Accordingly, the world has its own spirit, its god-the prince of this world.[419]

[419] Hans Jonas, *The Gnostic Religion*, p.252

Pantheism, even of the limited type restricted to human intelligence, has no real room for an independent human will but only one under the dominion of divine spiritual, intellectual forces. As I said, some see this as a problem. Gnosticism resolves this problem somewhat by positing a demonic force, which wars against God. Even for the Gnostics, however, there can be no real freedom since man is the plaything of the warring spiritual forces. Medieval philosophy, on the other hand, even when it posited an evil physical realm reminiscent of Gnostic speculation, allowed for sufficient but not excessive human dependence upon the divine. That could perhaps account for the otherwise incomprehensible freedom of will or at least allow for it. It was the task of the truly great philosophers to forge ahead with a truly sufficient justification of human freedom or (like Spinoza) to definitively deny it. But this analysis of the subtle and nuanced differences between Gnostic and philosophical approaches to human freedom still reveals a pervasive similarity between those two intellectual *genres*, one that is rarely acknowledged. The similarity is as follows. The basic monotheistic teaching of the Bible (if it is truly monotheistic) coexists with a doctrine of human freedom. More in depth examination of these two doctrines reveals some degree of incompatibility in those two views. Ultimately, the conflict gets resolved in both philosophy and Gnosticism but in very different ways. In the former it is resolved by a doctrine of ultimate *agnosticism* regarding the true nature of God. In the latter it is resolved by a well-defined opposition between two spiritual agencies. It should not surprise us therefore if those two approaches were to coalesce once again in kabbalistic thought.

Kabbalah

The prior discussion of Gnosticism may be useful to keep in mind since Kabbalah shares certain features with it. Some investigators of kabbalistic thought seemed to assume that Kabbalah followed Neoplatonic emanationist schemes while others assumed that it rejected anything foreign to the orthodox Jewish doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. Hence there are some who view it as basically but guardedly pantheistic and others who view it as dualistic to an extreme. For example, Rosella Pescatori interprets the *Zohar* as identifying earth with Shekhina.[420] The truth of the matter for Kabbalah as a whole is probably far more complex. It is possible that it inherits one tendency from philosophy and another from Gnosticism and that they have never really been resolved. I noted this conflict in a recent talk that I attended by a thinker who apparently was under the influence of both philosophy and Kabbalah. He gave two apparently incompatible theories to justify the doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. One based itself on a Maimonidean idea that God creates the universe out of His own self-knowledge and the other viewed the universe as like a dream of God's. Those justifications appeared to me to be incompatible. We often utterly repudiate our dreams as mere fantasies but our relationship to our self-knowledge is a much more important and intimate one. It was very refreshing for me to read something that Moshe Idel wrote about the relationship between philosophy and Kabbalah in the context of Abraham Abulafia's views and those of R. Isaac ben Yedaiah, a contemporary of his.

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[420] See new English translation, note 110, p. 401. I do not consider myself capable of rendering a definitive opinion on this, especially since Gershom Scholem seems to have denied it, but it does seem that Pescatori has interpreted the *Zohar* in a plausible way.

> This indicates to us that a literary expression of mystical unity does appear in Jewish philosophy, a fact indicating the importance of philosophic thought for the understanding of medieval Jewish mysticism.
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> The idea of the unity between man and God which, according to Scholem, is foreign to Jewish mysticism nevertheless appears in Abulafia in connection with several questions. The passages quoted above from *Or ha-Sekel*, in which God, the Active Intellect and the human intellect are portrayed as having "one essence", suggests the conclusion that the intellectual element in man is none other than a Divine "spark" which has descended to the world of matter, and that the process of intellection is simply the restoration of that spark to its divine source.[421]

It was indeed the opinion of Gershom Scholem that Kabbalah originally confined emanation within God and the *Sefirot*. Regarding whether emanation in kabbalistic thought continues from the *Sefirot* to other aspects of material reality, he was considerably more circumspect.[422] He did believe, however, that the author of the *Zohar* held a pantheistic doctrine in relationship to the human soul (or at least the Jewish one). This might even be similar to the world-view of Judah Abrabanel but it certainly does not prove direct influence. This is what Scholem wrote.

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[421] Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, pp.132-132.
[422] See Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah*, pp. 95-105.

> In his Hebrew writings, Moses de Leon actually propounds the question: How is it possible for the soul to suffer in Hell since *Neshama* is substantially the same as God, and God therefore afflicts punishment upon Himself? His solution of the problem — which incidentally throws a flood of light on the pantheism at the bottom of his system — is that in the act of sin, *Neshamah*, the divine element, abandons man, and its place is taken by an impure spirit from the "left side" who takes up his abode in the soul and who alone suffers the torments of retribution. *Neshamah*, itself is not affected, and if it descends to Hell, it is only to guide some of the suffering souls up to the light. In the Zohar, too, the punishment of the soul after death is similarly restricted to *Nefesh*, and in some passages is extended to *Ruah*, but never to *Neshamah*.[423]

As we have seen, however, the *Zohar* does not really teach such a universalistic doctrine regarding "man" but only regarding the Jew. This is sometimes not fully apparent until one notes those passages in the *Zohar* that explain that the Jew is the only real human created in the image of God. But even if it did contain that more universal message, such a view regarding the human soul hardly qualifies as full-blown pantheism. The bigger problem lies in the relationship between the *Sefirot* on the "left side" and God. Aside from the philosophical ones, another common problem with pantheism exists in both medieval philosophy and Kabbalah—conflict

[423] See Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 241.

with religious orthodoxy. But for the kabbalists yet another problem exists. Its roots in Gnosticism resist emanation of the world from God because the Gnostics tended to believe that the real God was not even a creator and most certainly not the substantial reality of this quite inferior and evil realm of being. Even when that Gnostic model is modified to incorporate one Creator God, a problem with emanation persists. Hence, Kabbalah attributes much of earthly existence to the "left side," which in one sense could be viewed as a part of God but also consists of impure demonic metaphysical structures. This seems to involve kabbalistic thought in a very basic contradiction, which various kabbalists have attempted to resolve in one way or another. But it should be obvious that aside from conflicts with religious orthodoxy and philosophical problems relating different levels of reality to one another, Kabbalah has its own unique problem: the ultimate reality of evil, symbolized by the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Unlike philosophy, which often tends to ignore evil or explain it away as something less than real, Kabbalah is generally incapable of not taking it very seriously indeed. This leads to rather complex explanatory schemes that resist simpler emanationist or pantheistic ones. Recent work by Moshe Idel in what he calls "Ecstatic Kabbalah," much of which stems from the teachings of Abraham Abulafia, may require us to amend older ways of thinking about pantheism and Kabbalah. In particular might induce us to view some of the latter as somewhat more pantheistic than Scholem had thought.

Judah Abrabanel

No less than the kabbalistic systems, Abrabanel's thought also is attracted to but resists pantheistic tendencies. The great innovation of Judah Abrabanel, as we have seen, is

the philosophical allowance of God's love for the world and the human soul. It should be noted that unlike the kabbalistic schemes that we have looked at, Abrabanel makes no distinction whatsoever between *nefesh, ruah* and *neshamah* or between Jew and Gentile in so far as God's love for the world and humankind is concerned. This love, moreover, (unlike man's love for God) does not fit easily into a pantheistic scheme. The latter kind of love can more easily be viewed as the natural tendency of a self-consciously illusory existence to seek its own true reality in God, which it acknowledges as the one true reality. We will have more to say about that theme as it relates to Ficino and Pico in the next chapter. Hence there is some truth in Miranda's assertion that pantheistic tendencies in the *Dialoghi* are mostly restricted to the cognitive aspects of existence, since human knowledge is substantially linked to divine knowledge and therefore also (in my opinion) to the human knowledge of God. However, Abrabanel also uses the words "perfection" and "felicity" (*perfezione, beatitudine*) to describe the union between man's intellectual soul and God.[424] This indicates to me that this union might be more than simply a cognitive relationship between the knower and the known but the description is left somewhat ambiguous. Unlike ordinary cognitive relationships, which serve human needs, true wisdom for Judah Abrabanel is inexhaustible and "like salt water, for the more a man drinks the thirstier he becomes: for the delights of wisdom can never cloy like those of other pleasures, but with every hour they become more desirable and less satisfying."[425] He (Philo) then refers to the ladder of ascension by which Sophia will "mount this ladder to the heavenly and angelic

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[424] *Dialoghi*, p.187 (Italian text, p.162)
[425] Ibid. p.312

world."[426] Most interestingly for our purposes here, one who mounts this ladder will come to see "how much of the beauty of the Creator is lacking even in the most perfect of His creatures."[427] And then the conclusion is reached that: "it is only through the love of man for the divine beauty that the lower world, which is his domain, is united to the Divinity, the first cause and final end of the universe and the highest beauty universally loved and desired; for otherwise the lower world would be wholly cut off from God. Love, therefore, was born in the created universe in its angelic part, and was thence imparted to its other parts."[428] Yet, it is also clear that for Judah Abrabanel the world was created out of "chaos," which is eternal.[429] Since this "chaos" may actually be an emanation from God, this lends a pantheistic flavor to the teaching. Yet, "chaos" is very different from reality as we know it and therefore the term "pantheism" may not be appropriate. We have already discussed Shlomo Pines' views on the "chaos" in

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[426] Ibid. p.312

[427] Ibid. p.312

[428] Ibid. p.313. The ladder of ascension is found in the *Koran* and subsequent Arabic literature, both Muslim and Jewish. See Alexander Altmann, "The Ladder of Ascension." Interestingly, this literature as portrayed by Altmann seems to be mostly an ascending mystical journey. Michael Carasik recently pointed this out to me. Even ibn Gabirol's interpretation of the ladder is mostly ascending and that is one of the reasons that Abraham ibn Ezra, who stressed the angelic mediating of Divine intentions, rejected it. Maimonides' interpretation of the ladder included a descending element but it refers to human prophetic governance of this world rather than a binding of love between the two worlds. Even more interesting is the fact that later on in the *Dialoghi* (p.335) Abrabanel in the spokesperson of Sophia asserts the following. "I understand this from Arabic teaching: that love descends from the summit of the angelic world to the nethermost point of the lower world, and thence ascends to its first origin, passing successively from one degree of being to another, with wondrous order and in the form of a circle with a point of origin marked on its circumference." Philo does not contradict this interpretation of the "Arabic teaching."

[429] See the discussion on pp.277-284.

the thought of Abrabanel and ibn Gabirol beginning on p. 160. The charge of pantheism is also applicable to ibn Gabirol but perhaps less so to Abrabanel if one accepts Pines' interpretation, which I do not. In my view both these thinkers cleverly skirt pantheism without completely repudiating it.

Indeed, there might have been very personal reasons why Judah Abrabanel would have resisted full-blown pantheism. His father had made creation *ex nihilo* a cornerstone of his own philosophy.[430] Miranda states it thus:

> On the other hand, it is also quite obvious that Leone Ebreo, motivated by the Neoplatonic tradition, makes a strenuous effort to avoid the impression of Pantheism, as when he reasserts the ontological *difference* that exists between effect and cause...Furthermore, as professor Joaquim de Carvalho has recognized, we can also say that Leone Ebreo's *pantheism* is first and foremost of an intellectual nature, which is evident in the fact that the tendency of the *Dialoghi de'Amore* is to bring together *Dio intelletto* and *cosa intesa*, *Dio amore* and *cosa amata*, *Dio bellezza* and *cosa bella*.[431]

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[430] See Miranda dissertation, Part 1, pp. 170-172, Eric Lawee, *Isaac Abrabanel's Stance Toward Tradition*, p. 49, Benzion Netanyahu, *Don Isaac Abravanel*, p.103. It is perhaps of interest that Maimonides' arguments for creation *ex nihilo* have been subject to the charge of insincerity from medieval times to the present. It is my opinion, based on my acquaintance with their respective philosophies, that Judah Abrabanel would have been even more likely to dissemble on this issue than was Maimonides.
[431] Miranda dissertation, pp. 726-727

But perhaps Judah Abrabanel cannot be let off the pantheistic hook quite so easily. If God's knowledge of and love for us are the ultimate bases for our separate existences, are not the latter somehow illusory? Yet God's love for man and the world cannot be dependent upon an illusion, as God cannot be deluded. From the purely human cognitive perspective, knowledge of God would seem to obliterate everything else, as in the Lurianic kabbalistic doctrine of *zimzum*, where God must contract in order for the world to exist. Abrabanel at times attempts to explain the real existence of man and the world in terms of God loving Himself but this does not seem to me to be entirely convincing. Perhaps it is an attempt to integrate his new way of thinking with medieval philosophical motifs. Undoubtedly (in my opinion at least) the only thing that saves his system from pantheism is his doctrine of divine love, which confers ultimately real existence to beings in a manner that human reason simply cannot fathom. This seems right, as love by its very nature seems to transcend intellectual understanding. However, Judah Abrabanel certainly does his very best to comprehend it and devotes pages 227 to 267 to it. Sophia exclaims: "This account of the essence of Love will suffice as an introduction to our discussion of its birth."[432]

But it is also interesting that while he feels the need to pay lip service to some medieval philosophical ideals, Abrabanel feels no such need to subsume his thinking under traditional Jewish religious ideals. There is for example absolutely no discussion regarding the difference between divine providential care of Israel and the other nations. The only real distinctive quality of Israel is the sacred teaching of its *Torah* and even there it is assumed that Plato and other gentiles

[432] *Dialoghi*, p.267

received those teachings as an inheritance as well, albeit as a copy. Miranda puts it well.

> Like Heinz Pflaum, we also believe that the *newness* of Leone Ebreo's conception depends for the most part on the correlation he establishes between God's own *perfection* to the perfection that *God Himself* brings about in the created world. In fact, by advancing this most important idea about the *loving relationship* that exists between *God* and the *world*, which as we have seen, simultaneously asserts a relation of dependence from the world toward God and, of course only to a certain point, from God toward the world, Leone Ebreo is putting forward, clothed in a philosophical and ontological language, that most central and fundamental Jewish idea of a *covenant* of love between God and Israel. As a man of the Renaissance, i.e., as someone profoundly aware of an emergent *secular* attitude, Leone Ebreo simply universalized that notion of the covenant to the point of making it include the entire Universe.[433]

I think the notion of a covenant and the underscoring of the distinction between man and God, while at the same time affirming God's love and loyalty to His creation and especially to humankind is indeed a distinctive Jewish contribution to human civilization and the universalizing of that message places Judah Abrabanel in a very interesting relationship to Christianity, which could perhaps be viewed as a kind of missionary offshoot of Judaism for the other nations. We will

[433] Miranda., p. 840

have even more to say about this shortly but it should certainly not be confused with pantheism.

On page 268 it is asserted by Philo (and Sophia agrees) that both the lover and the beloved must exist prior to love itself. This prevents his philosophy from being interpreted as dissolution of all separate beings in an ocean of love. At times, however, Philo seems to flirt with pantheism when he discusses the relationship between man and God and the unitive experience being beyond love (as normally conceived) and knowledge. Even more so is his notion of the world as "son of God" pantheistic, as we can see on pages 458-459. In fact the very term "son of God," while an ancient Jewish one, seems problematic in a Christian environment. While Philo of Alexandria had used the term to refer to the intelligible world of Ideas, Judah Abrabanel's use of it is even more potentially controversial but might make sense if he was addressing it to a Christian audience accustomed to the word.

> Philo: It cannot be denied that as the love of the universe is its guide to joyful and blissful union with the Creator, so the love of God for his creatures is that which draws them into His divine union in which supreme joy they attain to their own beatitude. For the procreative love of the father for the son is not love of the son, who does not yet exist, but the love of himself which causes the birth of the son; for he desires to become a father to increase his own perfection, begetting a child in his own image. There is another and second love, that of the son when he is born, and this it is which makes the father to nurture and raise him up and educate him in

> every possible accomplishment. In the same way the procreative love of God for the universe is not the love which He bears the universe but another prior to it, to wit, the love of Himself, desirous of imparting this supreme beauty to the universe created by Him in his image and likeness...When the universe was created God's love for it also came into being, as that of the father for the newborn son. The end of this love was not only to preserve the universe in its first created state, but also, and more truly, to guide it to its ultimate perfection in blissful union with divine beauty.

The emphasis here on the universe, and not simply on the human soul, lends an even more pantheistic flavor to this narrative. Let us recall that the pantheism of the Kabbalah was somewhat ambivalent regarding the universe and most explicit as regards the Jewish soul. Likewise, most medieval philosophy was quite suspicious of physical matter and therefore its pantheistic tendencies tended to be restricted somewhat to separate intellects, human knowledge, purely formal structures, etc. But Abrabanel seems somewhat at home in a new appreciation for the physical universe even if he reverts to the anti-materialistic position form time to time. Yet the book never takes the final step that would lead to a full-blown pantheistic system. Nevertheless, the questions raised in it might seem to be answered adequately only by taking that final step. For example, the love in the universe is engendered by God's love for His creation yet Abrabanel attempts to explain it by God's love for Himself. That might seem to imply the ultimate unity of God and the created world. On the other hand, unity and love seem to be quite different things, since

love is what bridges a gap between separate beings. And in fact in an earlier section of the book (p.268-276) he seems to define the actuality of Divine love as "the will to benefit His creatures and the whole universe and to increase their perfection as far as their nature will allow." (p.275). But soon afterwards he is forced to modify this as regards the actual creation of the universe. Although the beloved remains the cause of love, before anything else existed the beloved of God must be God. "And since the Godhead, in its supreme oneness, is necessarily both beginning and end and lover and beloved, its beloved is more divine than the divinity itself, as every beloved is more divine than its lover."[434] This throws the whole concept of divine self-love as a basis for the reality of the world into a bit of confusion. On the one hand, love of God for Himself engenders the universe but on the other hand the love of the universe for God and His reciprocation of that love sustains the universe as a separate entity. It seems to me that either unity or love must ultimately be subsumed under the other. It is true that in our ordinary lives unity often loses out but Abrabanel seems to be enough of the mystic to envision a higher unity where the love of the other turns into unity in God. Nevertheless, Abrabanel seems so invested in divine love that this conflict appears much more significant than it would in other thinkers. Is it possible that as a transitional figure he failed to see the ultimate incompatibility of the two models?

Another conflict between knowledge and love as the essence of the human relationship to God is resolved through a mysticism that approaches pantheism. Abrabanel insists (as we will see) that it is the intellect that loves God and unites with Him. When that happens, everything is seen as being in God. If

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[434] *Dialoghi*, p.276

that entire process is ignited by God's love for Himself and ends with the cognition of the world being in God, the ultimate reality of the world and the human intellect is thrown into question. Yet a pantheistic solution is never explicitly stated.

Concluding Comments Regarding Pantheism

The conclusion that I come to is that medieval philosophy, Kabbalah and Judah Abrabanel all flirt with pantheism without generally going the whole way. In fact, the obsession of kabbalistic systems with realms of impurity makes them somewhat less likely to arrive at truly pantheistic conclusions. Hence, any pantheistic tendencies found in Abrabanel's thought are not necessarily attributable to Kabbalah in any logical sense, though they certainly could be the result of kabbalistic influence. It is much more likely, however, that they are an inheritance of classical philosophy, perhaps mediated by medieval philosophy and/or Kabbalah. Surely, the *Dialoghi* is on the cutting edge of pantheism when compared with most prior philosophical treatments but when compared with Spinoza there is far more ambiguity in the relationship between God and the world. It would be a mistake to equate his thought with the latter though he surely could have been an influence upon him.

Chapter V: Some Important Non-Jewish Influences

These influences are immense and I do not mean to underestimate them but I will only concentrate on two thinkers in this chapter: Plato and Ficino.[435] In other parts of the book, and specifically in the chapter devoted to Moses and Plato, other influences from the non-Jewish world will be discussed further. Since this book deals specifically with kabbalistic influence, it is weighted somewhat on the side of Jewish thought but many of the Jewish thinkers discussed were themselves heavily influenced by non-Jewish thought. To be absolutely complete, therefore, we would also have to attempt to assess the non-Jewish influences on both medieval Jewish philosophy and Kabbalah; but that would go far beyond the scope of this study. Conversely, with the exception of Judah Abrabanel's most ancient sources, almost all of his non-Jewish ones were in turn under the influence of Jewish thought in some manner. Christians are also followers of Moses. Plotinus might have been influenced by Philo of Alexandria. Muslims are also enormously influenced by Judaism and Christianity. Judah Abrabanel was not only aware of some of those influences but even assumed (wrongly) that even Plato (and therefore Aristotle as well) were under the influence of Moses. Given that erroneous assumption and the fact that his father also willingly

[435] See Eugenio Garin, *History of Italian Philosophy*, Volume 1, p.391: "no less evident is the derivation from Ficino and Pico of the vast sixteenth century systematization of this vision of the universe as beauty and love in *Dialoghi d'Amore...*" While I hesitate to disagree with Garin, and he is probably correct, I have decided not to assume the influence of anyone not mentioned in the book with one exception: Ficino. The notion that anyone in that period and of that ideological persuasion would not have been under the influence of Ficino seems farfetched.

imbibed Christian influences, he most likely felt quite confident that learning from non-Jewish sources was in no way a threat to his own religious identity.

Perhaps the matter is even a bit more complex than that, however. We don't really know for what audience the book was originally intended even though we do know it was eventually read mostly by gentiles. As mentioned previously in the introduction, Judah Abrabanel was most likely profoundly influenced by many thinkers whom he never acknowledged. This failure to acknowledge Christian influences may, as Shlomo Pines thought, have been an Iberian Jewish tradition that Abrabanel might have learned from his father although his father surely violated it at times. It does seem to be an enigma given his willingness to openly discuss ancient pagan mythology. In a sense, however, Judah Abrabanel may have been both closer to his Christian environment than his father was and also, perhaps because of that very proximity, more threatened by it. Perhaps we can learn something from his poetry, where he proudly asserts that his Christian contemporaries are like "grasshoppers" in comparison to him. These are all conjectures but it is quite possible that despite his deep indebtedness to Christian sources the historical Jewish-Christian rivalry and polemics still weighed heavily upon him. I will make yet another conjecture. His father had taught him to feel free to learn from Christians but in comparison to his father his thought seems on the surface to be even more permeated by Christian influences. The very enormity of that influence may have actually inhibited him from acknowledging it, not only for inner psychological reasons but also for fear of appearing to be a convert. One possible example of such unacknowledged influence might be Origen, who considered erotic language, like that of the *Song of Songs* to be the most powerful way for

language to express truths about God, which human speech is really incapable of describing.[436] I will argue that Judah Abrabanel does just what Origen suggested and given his otherwise fierce allegiance to a Maimonidean negative theology such influence or similar viewpoint are perhaps the only good explanations that might not involve him in a contradiction. The reason that it might not contradict negative theology is that such erotic language can't possibly be interpreted literally as it applies to God, at least not by an intelligent philosophical person.

We have also seen how pantheistic tendencies in his thought are mostly an inheritance from classical philosophy, perhaps mediated through medieval philosophy and/or Kabbalah. Through his father he was acquainted with a multitude of non-Jewish thinkers as well as Jewish ones. He seems to have been acquainted with all of the great pagan and Moslem philosophers and many Christian thinkers as well. His father, however, was a Jewish thinker, *par excellence* but also well acquainted with philosophy. Judah Abrabanel's appreciation of philosophy seems much greater than was his father's. The reader may detect an implied conflict here between Jewish tradition and philosophy and that would be partially correct. I would caution again that such a conflict is perhaps more stylistic than it is logical or normative. But style is influential and, therefore, important. David Weiss Halivni has observed that rabbinic theology (for lack of a better term) "is more prone to homiletic discourse than to carefully groomed, neatly disciplined speculation."[437] In a very real sense, therefore, Judah Abrabanel was less rabbinically Jewish

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[436] See Bernard McGinn, *The Foundations of Mysticism: Origins to the Fifth Century*, p.118.

[437] *Peshat & Derash: Plain and applied meaning in rabbinic exegesis*, p.89

than his father even if he was every bit as proud of his heritage. The conscious awareness of all those non-Jewish influences and of the stylistic gap between his method and the traditional Jewish one might well have produced an intolerable cognitive dissonance. But that is enough psychologizing for now!

Of the non-Jewish influences who Judah Abrabanel does name, there are some that I will not specifically comment upon and I will give my reasons for that. Like almost all medieval thinkers, he was greatly indebted to Aristotle, Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes. This was quite typical of the Iberian tradition and should not be considered anything extraordinary. I fail to deal with them in depth because I believe Judah Abrabanel was basically a Platonic thinker. Nevertheless, an argument could be made that he was decisively influenced by the innovations of the Arabic Aristotelian thinkers. This is especially the case since Maimonides was also heavily influenced by them. Indeed, there are places where Abrabanel shows a preference for Aristotle over Plato, for example in his treatment of the "inverted tree."[438] In addition, Abrabanel mentions al Ghazali in the first and third dialogues. This may be quite significant and he may have been quite sympathetic to the latter's Sufi-style mysticism. Nevertheless, in order not to be excessively expansive, we have not dealt specifically with him in this chapter. In 15th century Italy it is quite possible that most philosophers were still Aristotelians,

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[438] The "inverted tree" was a metaphor with a long history. For Plato it distinguished man from all of the other creatures because his head (or root) was located in heaven and not in earth. For Aristotle it distinguished the animals from the plants and therefore had a more biological orientation. See A.B. Chambers, "'I was But an Inverted Tree': Notes Toward the History of an Idea" for a rather detailed treatment. Also see the *Dialoghi*, p.97 for Abrabanel's treatment of the concept.

despite the increasing popularity of Plato. I will nevertheless neglect Aristotle and the Aristotelians to an extent and the degree and significance of that neglect can be debated by those who are more knowledgeable about it than I or who are of another opinion. Perhaps, however, it can be defended by stating quite openly that I am concentrating more on his divergence from the pre-kabbalistic Iberian tradition than his obvious adherence to it. It is a result of that divergence that kabbalistic influence is often hypothesized. Those with different interests might focus on the influence of the Arabic Aristotelians far more than I have. Obviously, Judah Abrabanel felt the need to refer to those more canonical Aristotelian thinkers time and time again, as we will also. By doing that, he was also paying homage to his medieval Jewish philosophical tradition. All of those aforementioned thinkers deviated from both Plato and Aristotle to some extent, though to what extent is a matter of controversy. Most of them could actually be considered Neoplatonists as well as Aristotelians. Nevertheless, no matter how much Abrabanel utilizes the critical and creative talents of those thinkers, he always seems to go back to Plato and Moses as his primary explicitly acknowledged sources of inspiration. In my opinion, therefore, there would be very little sense in calling Judah Abrabanel an Aristotelian thinker, despite his obvious respect for Aristotle and the medieval Aristotelian tradition. It must also be noted that his Plato was not exactly the same one that classical scholars study today. Like almost all medieval thinkers he viewed Plato through a Neoplatonic lens.[439]

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[439] Seymour Feldman has insisted perhaps more than anyone else on the dependence of Judah Abrabanel on Plotinus, and implicitly perhaps on Philo of Alexandria. See "Platonic Cosmologies." The resemblances between Abrabanel and Philo are quite striking but might not be the result of direct

Nevertheless, there are also obviously important areas in which he disagrees with Plato and (though he would never admit it) even with Moses. The most important area of disagreement with Plato regards the question whether love (and/or desire) can be predicated of God.[440] Those areas are important and most certainly were influenced by a multitude of prior thought. But mostly Judah Abrabanel can, and I believe should, be viewed as a Renaissance Platonic thinker. As such, he comes under the powerful influence of Marsilio Ficino, who in turn was influenced by all the aforementioned thinkers and many more. This fact also complicates Abrabanel's relationship to Kabbalah since Ficino was only superficially acquainted with it and approved but was not involved with it nearly to the extent of Pico della Mirandola. All those thinkers, including Pico, were under the influence of Hermetism, which appeared much earlier than Kabbalah and to a suspicious mind might perhaps have appeared more authentic.[441] There are, indeed, stories of meetings between Pico and Judah Abrabanel, who was reputed to have written an esoteric book for Pico but many scholars

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influence. Unlike some earlier Jewish medieval thinkers we know that Abrabanel was aware of Plotinus since he mentions him. What we don't know, however, is to what extent he recognized Plotinian influence on his conception of Plato's thinking.

[440] See pp.251-253 of the *Dialoghi*, especially p.253 where Philo states: "If the father had not loves, could he ever have begotten his children, and if he did not love them, would he support them with such loving care?" The new English translation (p.210) reads: "if the father did not have desire, could he ever generate?" This is more consistent with the Italian text (p.216): "*se'l padre non appetisse, generaria mai?*" Sophia then agrees with Philo and recognizes that Plato was wrong.

[441] It is now known that Hermes Trismegistus was considered by some in the Arabic tradition to have had medical and astrological powers. See Kevin van Bladel, *The Arabic Hermes*. It is interesting that Judah Abrabanel, while expressing doubts about Kabbalah, never seems to explicitly doubt Hermetism.

dismiss those claims as spurious. Therefore, we may be omitting some fairly important influences but for the sake of caution and parsimony we will restrict ourselves to Plato, whom he explicitly credits and Ficino, the giant of the period, who would have been an influence on almost any Renaissance thinker.

Plato

To be technically correct, we would have to caution the reader that the immediate influence upon Judah Abrabanel was not so much Plato but the Neoplatonic tradition. That is because even when Renaissance thinkers read Plato they did so through the lens of the Neoplatonists, who in turn had been influenced by Aristotle and many other strands of thought. The central figure in that synthesis was Plotinus and we will see that some of Abrabanel's key doctrines fit in very well with his. Add to that mix Judaism and Islam in the Arabic tradition and Christianity in the Latin and Greek schools. While Christianity was Platonized in the early Middle Ages and Renaissance, Plato was also Christianized. Hence some could hardly tell the two apart. Judah Abrabanel, like so many other Renaissance thinkers, was a Platonist or at least thought himself to be. He was not a Christian but it must be allowed that along with Plato and the Neoplatonic and Arabic traditions may have come some anachronistic ideas about Plato that came through the Christian tradition. Prior to the 13th century most Christian thought had been vaguely Platonic, even though most of Plato's work was not known. It might be more correct to call it Neoplatonic and perhaps it was more under the influence of Plotinus than Plato. In the Renaissance that all changed as some Latin thinkers learned Greek and more of Plato's works became known. The influence of the Greek Neoplatonists on Judah Abrabanel seems

obvious but mostly remains unacknowledged, in contrast to the Arabic philosophers. Although Abrabanel, like Pico, was able to cite numerous Greek and Arabic writers, it is unlikely that he knew Greek and there is no clear indication that he knew Arabic either. And despite his familiarity with Greek philosophy (probably from Latin or Hebrew translations) the only two Greek philosophers who are really taken very seriously by Abrabanel are Plato and Aristotle; and for him Plato is far superior. In a sense, the word "Plato" represents to him everything that is good about philosophy. His praise for Plato is only possibly exceeded by his praise for Moses but one could make a good case (and it will be discussed in a later chapter) that his interpretations of many Mosaic teachings are really the views of a broad Platonic tradition in disguise. In at least one rather interesting case, however, he does subsume a biblical commandment under an Aristotelian ethical and psychological notion.[442] This immense admiration for Plato coexists with the

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[442] This is really an extraordinary yet isolated example since it underscores what I have elsewhere described as Judah Abrabanel's almost scandalous lack of interest in the Jewish people in the *Dialoghi*. On page 31 in a discussion of friendship based upon virtue he argues as follows.

> Such friendships the Philosopher [Aristotle] defined, when he said that a true friend is an other self, meaning that those linked in true friendship have a twofold life, constituted in two persons: each, in his own and that of his friend; so that his friend is his other self and each comprises in himself two lives: his own and his friend's; loving both persons and guarding both lives with equal devotion. And therefore it is that Holy Scripture commands virtuous friendship, saying: 'Thou shalt love thy neighbor as thyself': implying a friendship of perfect union, in which one love shall hold the hearts of both friends.

The new English translation (p.48) reads: "And this is why Sacred Scripture commands honest friendship, saying: 'You will love your neighbor as

fact that he (in good traditional fashion) attributes the superiority of Plato to his supposed reception of Mosaic doctrines even though, as we have seen, some Renaissance biblical scholars such as Manetti had denied that. But the equation of Plato and Moses serves an interesting philosophical and religious function even if it is not historically accurate. It signals what Judah Abrabanel's primary interests are and what they are not. They are not logical nor are they legal/ethical. They are metaphysical and psychological.

We have also seen that Abrabanel equates the Active Intellect with God but not every such equating of the two was acceptable to him because God must not be reduced to a comprehensible, immanent principle. This problem really goes back to Plato's *Parmenides*. From a strictly logical point of view the One cannot receive any predicates but from another point of view it contains all predicates. Essentially we are

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yourself,' and wants friendship to be a union of equals, in which one love is in the hearts of both friends." See the Italian text (pp.29-30), which is a bit difficult to translate. The new English translation is a superior description of what Aristotle (and presumably Abrabanel) meant despite the peculiar use of "honest" (which Rossella Pescatori explains in terms of conventional translations of the Italian "*onestà*") and the somewhat misleading translation of an obviously normative biblical commandment. Whatever the biblical injunction to love ones neighbor means, it was not traditionally interpreted by Jewish exegetes as referring to virtuous friendships so much as to relationships between Jews. It might have been interpreted by some as referring to all neighbors, which would explain Jesus' emphasis on the question of who was truly a "neighbor" in the parable of the Good Samaritan. The fact that Judah Abrabanel would reinterpret the notion of neighbor as referring to a special type of friendship advocated by Aristotle, without any explanation, is interesting and revealing. He could, for example, have explained that the Jews' adherence to the commandments of the *Torah* render them capable of sustaining such friendships based upon virtue. Then he would have at least attempted to reconcile Aristotle with the *Torah*. His failure to do something of that sort leads to the suspicion that he really understood that biblical passage in terms of Aristotelian psychology and ethics and not in traditional Jewish (or even Christian) terms.

dealing here with God as transcendent and as immanent and as the latter there is a desire to link Him with the human intelligence, something that is also found in *Genesis*, where Adam is given the job of classifying God's creation. So it would appear that despite the identity of God and the Active Intellect there is also a distinction of sorts between them. This is not nearly as much of a distinction as some of the medieval philosophers made but it does serve a very important function. It is that distinction between God as lover and God as beloved that allows for love in the universe. Another important point in favor of Plato is that Abrabanel interprets him as relegating the First Wisdom or *Logos* to the status of a second principle, whereas he views Aristotle's God as that very same *Logos* or secondary principle. There is much truth in this assertion but it also raises questions. Firstly, does Abrabanel consider the *Logos* to be the same as the Active Intellect? For Aristotle, God is the formal principle of the entire physical universe whereas for Plato (and the Neoplatonists) God appears to be a transcendent Being that cannot really be described at all and which has a far more nuanced relationship to this corporeal reality. But as our discussion of pantheism showed, this is not nearly as clear as it initially appears and Aristotle could be interpreted differently. The notion of a second spiritual principle in the universe (Logos, First Wisdom, Active Intellect) confuses the claim that the Active Intellect is indeed God. I do not have an answer to this problem. Perhaps the Active Intellect is the mediator between God and man and therefore more truly one with God than the *Logos*, which mediates between God and the universe. Perhaps they are all really the same but we are dealing with levels of perceived reality that are essentially one. Be that as it may, besides a clear metaphysical affinity, there is also a religious, poetic and aesthetic flavor to

Plato that would have appealed to Abrabanel.

In order to elucidate Plato's basic religious, metaphysical idea, which Abrabanel accepted, I would like to quote Werner Jaeger.

> Obedience to law in that sense is simply obedience to God, who, as the saying goes, holds the beginning, end, and middle of everything. When a godless man is leader of the nation, he leads it straight into the abyss. God is the measure of all things. God is the aim which all should strive to reach. This thought, fundamental in Plato's ideal of the state, is put most simply and clearly in *The Laws*. In *The Republic* it is philosophically modified and expressed in such concepts as the 'Idea of Good' and the 'conversion' of the soul to it, since it is the source of all being and all thought. The Idea of Good was the new Platonic aspect of the divine to which everything else must be subordinated... As the discussions of the soul in *The Laws* show, Plato considers not matter and its chance distributions, but the soul and its order, to be the ruling principle of the world. From the stars down to the plants, everything is united under the rule of the soul: soul, meaning reason and a standard... In the other great work of his old age, *Timaeus*, which was written at the same time and expressed parallel ideas, he showed how the divine demiurge reproduces the world of eternal Ideas in the natural world of phenomena. Thus, the Ideas are the 'models

> fixed in the realm of Being'... In this sense the un-Homeric description of God as the world's *teacher* is justified. In fact, it illuminates more emphatically than any other phrase the origin of the new Platonic attitude to God.[443]

One can see in this description three aspects of God that I consider relevant. The first is the immanent intellectual aspect that was also stressed by Aristotle but especially the one that allows for mystical experience. The second is the transcendent aspect that is far beyond the corporeal world. The third is the active demiurge, which functions as creator but also as our teacher.

Despite his rather clear debt to Platonism, there is however also a decidedly un-Platonic flavor to Abrabanel's philosophy. Plato had been rather harsh at times in his literary treatment of the unlearned or un-intellectual. One could perhaps say that for Plato it is the intellect that makes one a human person and the more intellect one has the more of a person one is. This legacy of extreme and normative intellectualism was transferred to Aristotelian, Neoplatonic and medieval thought. Those without a significant degree of intellect deserve to be slaves according to Plato. There is little discernible trace of that normative (and rather intolerant) attitude in the *Dialoghi*, although Abrabanel may well have agreed to it intellectually. We really don't know much about his personal beliefs but we scarcely find such contemptuous utterances in his work. In fact we find quite opposite ones, as when he refers to children and women as occupying the focal point of family life. This perhaps is something worth focusing

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[443] See Werner Jaeger, *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture*, Volume III, pp. *241*-242.

upon. His (and our) interpretation of Plato sometimes comes filtered through biblical religion with its message of one human family under the fatherhood of God. The obvious consequence of that is the great value of every human being. We see this interpretive bias quite clearly when we attempt to teach Plato to college students. Whether that bias might perhaps really have a basis in Plato's thought is something that I cannot opine regarding but it is obvious that it is an anachronistic bias nonetheless.

For Plato, God or the Form of the Good exhibits an attractive erotic power over the human soul. Abrabanel accepts that without reservation. But added to that universal (and impersonal) *Eros*, he insists that God loves human beings in a personal way and that such divine love is at the very root of human dignity and individuality. For Abrabanel, love is a superior principle emanating from God whereas for Plato, love is only an inferior principle, which arises from human insufficiency and neediness.[444] For Plato, love for human beings is an inferior kind of love whereas for Abrabanel it is God's love and therefore in a sense supreme. I find this to be his major area of disagreement with Plato himself but not necessarily with the Platonic tradition. Hence we could say that Abrabanel's Platonism is of the Renaissance type, quite covered over by biblical and later Neoplatonic influences, yet retaining much of its original religious and poetic qualities.

Perhaps the one work of Plato that is most relevant to the *Dialoghi* is the *Symposium*. However some might argue (and they would be correct to a degree) that it is the *Timaeus*

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[444] See p.252 where he not only disagrees with Plato regarding this but cites Aristotle as a source for his contrary opinion and as a justification for disagreeing with Plato when he is in disagreement with the truth.

that deserves that position. That is because in many respects the *Dialoghi* remains a typical work of medieval philosophy and as such it would have been greatly influenced by the creation myth of the *Timaeus*. Nevertheless, we are not particularly interested in the more typical medieval aspects of Abrabanel's philosophy here, even though we readily acknowledge them. It is to be expected that we would find them in the last great representative of the medieval tradition; and both he and his father could both be plausibly credited with that title even though Judah Abrabanel is generally considered either a transitional figure or a Renaissance one. What we are more interested in is Judah Abrabanel's new and revolutionary philosophy of love, which seems somewhat out of keeping with the Jewish medieval tradition and it is that anomaly that among other factors has led many to impute kabbalistic influence. The logical place to look for influence regarding that aspect of his work is the *Symposium*. Both it and the *Dialoghi* deal with love and its relationship to spirituality. Both deal with the carnal and spiritual aspects of love. Both give great deference to a woman; for Plato it is Diotima and for Abrabanel it is Sophia.[445] In both

[445] It is plausible that despite lingering contempt and discrimination the position of women improved greatly from ancient to medieval times. It is obvious that their position in the Greco-Roman world was shockingly restricted and low, despite some recent revisionist tendencies (partially correct) to attribute a more influential role to them. It goes without saying that women have a certain real power over men either in accordance with or despite their socially and culturally designated roles. This does not conflict with the factual description of those roles and the influence of cultural models on human psychology. Nevertheless, women have always functioned as significant mythical and literary figures in a manner sometimes inconsistent with their normal roles and the normative beliefs regarding them. We have seen on many occasions that Judah Abrabanel continues in that long tradition of considering women inferior. Nevertheless, as we also note elsewhere, his literary method seems to give them extraordinary significance and attributes to Sophia not only intuitive power but great logical and intellectual prowess.

works the reputedly wise person (Socrates, Philo) needs that woman in order to complete his wisdom. We will, therefore, briefly inquire into both the similarities and differences in these two works.

The first significant speech in the *Symposium* is by Phaedrus (as recalled by Aristodemus). He begins by quoting older writers who believed Love to be a great god — indeed the oldest of the gods. Socrates also admits that it is "the ancient source of all our highest good."[446] He even compares it favorably to just about everything (family, privilege, wealth, etc) as a "beacon which man must steer by when he sets out to live the better life."[447] Furthermore, the state would be well served by lovers, since they would never fail to act courageously and nobly. Thus, "heaven itself has a peculiar regard for ardor and resolution in the cause of Love."[448] Yet, love by itself seems to lack something as when a lover like Orpheus is lukewarm in his love for Eurydice. Very different was the love Achilles had for Patroclus. But now a significant problem arises. Aeschylus considered Achilles the lover and Patroclus the beloved. But Phaedrus insists that it was the former who was more handsome and younger and therefore the beloved. Why is that significant? It is important because "while in any case the gods display especial admiration for the valor that springs from Love, they are even more amazed, delighted, and beneficent when the beloved shows such devotion to his lover, than when the lover does the same for his beloved. For the lover, by virtue of Love's inspiration, is always nearer than his beloved to the gods."[449] This is an old story;

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[446] See Plato, *The Symposium*, 178b-c, p.533.
[447] Ibid, 178c-d, p. 533
[448] Ibid, 179d, p.533
[449] Ibid, 180a-b, p.534

benefactors love their beneficiaries more than their beneficiaries love them. The former are also closer to the gods not only because they are superior but also because of "Love's inspiration" and therefore greater valor is to be expected from them than from their beloved. In ancient Greece the lover was an older man with much to give his beloved, who had little to offer in return besides beauty. Aristotle comments at length on this phenomenon (including love of parents for their children) in the *Nichomachean Ethics*. He concludes that to love is nobler than to be loved. This is also the conventional wisdom and as we saw in Phaedrus' speech the inspiration of Love was considered ennobling. To return to the *Symposium*, there commences a number of discussions, including one regarding the hermaphroditic myth and explanations ensue regarding why some men are primarily homosexual (which seems favored) and others more oriented towards heterosexuality. Agathon disagrees regarding the great antiquity of Love (in fact he insists that he is a young god) but agrees that he is the most blessed of all the gods. He concludes by saying that "Love, besides being in himself the loveliest and the best, is the author of those very virtues all around him."[450] So we can see from these background speeches that the ancient Greeks were "normal" in the sense of attributing a great deal of nobility to what certainly seems to be romantic love. It is now time for Socrates to give the definitive praise and analysis of love, which as we will see somewhat subverts the conventional wisdom.

It was Diotima, a woman with quasi-magical powers who taught Socrates the truth about love. This is interesting! Apparently, knowledge of love is not a purely rational or discursive type of knowledge. Socrates also used to believe that

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[450] Ibid, 197c, p.549

"Love was a great god."[451] But Diotima got him to recognize that "Love was neither beautiful nor good."[452] Love, it appears, lacks those qualities and therefore is not really a god at all! This must be a quite revolutionary view! Neither is Love a mere mortal but "a very powerful spirit" and "halfway between mortal and immortal."[453] Love is an envoy between heaven and earth. It is the son of Resource and Need and its fate is to be "always needy."[454] This might possibly indicate that such a mediating figure is not really at home in either realm. A further revelation from Diotima is that neither the gods not the purely mortal seek the truth, the former because they already possess it and the latter because they do not miss it. It is only those in the middle — like Love — who seek the truth. And so, despite the fact that it is usually interpreted in a much more narrow sense, "Love, that renowned and all-beguiling power, includes every kind of longing for happiness and for the good."[455] It is not true, therefore, that lovers seek their other halves; that view is rejected because love only seeks the good. The proof is that "men will even have their hands and feet cut off if they are once convinced that those members are bad for them."[456] The general outline of Plato's theory of love should now be clear. It is the love of the good, the true and the beautiful, leading a man from the beautiful things of this world to those of the spiritual world and ultimately to God or the Form of the Good. Yet the original dictum of Phaedrus that "the lover, by virtue of Love's inspiration, is always nearer than his beloved to the gods" is never really repudiated or challenged. Indeed, given Plato's

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[451] Ibid, 201e, p. 554
[452] Ibid, 201e, p.554
[453] Ibid, 202d, p. 555
[454] Ibid, 203c, p. 555
[455] Ibid, 205d, p.557
[456] Ibid, 205e, p.558

assumptions it could not be otherwise and though Socrates clarifies matters Phaedrus also seems to be a spokesperson for at least some of Plato's more poetical and mythological notions. Despite a slight downgrading of the status of love by Socrates, there is no essential change in the ethical view. Love in its purest form goes from the lower to the higher and the higher one is the less needy and therefore the less in need of love. Therefore, the lover is superior to the beloved; it is nobler to love than to be loved and one who loves rightly is elevated even higher.

> Having reached this point, he must set himself to be the lover of every lovely body, and bring his passion for the one into due proportion by deeming it of little or of no importance
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> Next he must grasp that the beauties of the body are as nothing to the beauties of the soul, so that wherever he meets with spiritual loveliness, even in the husk of an unlovely body, he will find it beautiful enough to fall in love with and to cherish — and beautiful enough to quicken in his heart a longing for such discourse as tends toward the building of a noble nature. And from this he will be led to contemplate the beauty of laws and institutions. And when he discovers how nearly every kind of beauty is akin to every other he will conclude that the beauty of the body is not, after all, of so great moment.
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> And next, his attention should be diverted from institutions to the sciences, so that he may know the beauty of every kind of knowledge. And, thus, by scanning beauty's wide horizon, he will

> be saved from a slavish and illiberal devotion to the individual loveliness of a single boy, a single man, or a single institution. And, turning his eyes toward the open sea of beauty, he will find in such contemplation the seed of the most fruitful discourse and the loftiest thought, and reap a golden harvest of philosophy, until, confirmed and strengthened, he will come upon one single form of knowledge, the knowledge of the beauty I am about to speak of.
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> And here, she said, you must follow me as closely as you can.
>
> Whoever has been initiated so far in the mysteries of Love and has viewed all these aspects of the beautiful in due succession, is at last drawing near the final revelation. And now, Socrates, there bursts upon him that wondrous vision which is the very soul of the beauty he has toiled so long for. It is an everlasting loveliness which neither comes nor goes, which neither flowers nor fades, for such beauty is the same on every hand, the same then as now, here as there, this way as that way, the same to every worshipper as it is to every other.[457]

The traditional Greek glorification of the superior lover here issues in an epiphany and in no way repudiates the basic and traditional belief. That basic presupposition of the superiority of the lover to the beloved is, however, utterly repudiated by Judah Abrabanel who, as has already been shown,

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[457] Ibid, 210b-211a, p.562

considers the beloved more blessed and superior than the lover. That is because for Abrabanel love is a gift of God and not a mere longing for Him, as for other good and beautiful things. Yet in terms of morality Abrabanel would surely agree with Plato and would consider the ability to love as a sign of moral superiority or at least of received grace of a superior kind. Nevertheless, even such superiority, whether deserved or not, pales in contrast with love itself and especially to the love that comes from God. In addition, Abrabanel might not really concur that "every kind of beauty is akin to every other" or that "devotion to the individual loveliness" (of Philo for Sophia, for example) is "slavish and illiberal." In order to understand this huge discrepancy we must go back to that revolutionary concept of Abrabanel that it is God's love for the human individual which saves the lover of God from a kind of self-immolation. For, ultimately, the impersonal Eros of Plato as it focuses on the Good the True and the Beautiful does not leave much room for a robust concept of individual selfhood.

But if the ultimate goal for Judah Abrabanel, like Plato, is union with the divine, what difference should it make if that union is achieved through man's love of God or God's love of man? Here we will only allude to something pursued somewhat more intensively in other sections, particularly the one on mysticism. For Plato, man's affinity to the gods or the Forms is one of essential or natural affinity and love is merely a craving for that unity which already really exists, as in the speech regarding the hermaphroditic origin of love. For Abrabanel, and the Renaissance generally, union with the divine is by way of love. It is love that brings a person into being and love that actively leads him to the true, the beautiful and the good. It is love that bridges the gap between separate beings, each of which has a will of its own. And it is love that validates the

unique life of every individual. That kind of love is not primarily a craving, but only secondarily so. It is essentially a powerful force emanating from God. It is indeed (as Plato apparently also believed) an envoy between heaven and earth but, unlike Plato's view, it is *not* needy.

In conclusion, it appears that Abrabanel borrows much from Plato and is very much in agreement regarding the nature of love as an emissary between heaven and earth. But the direction of that love is essentially reversed. We must not be fooled by the poetic language of Plato into thinking that for him love acts upon humankind. For Plato, it is humankind that pursues the good (whether it is procreation, beauty or truth) through erotic love. While the incommensurability of *Eros* and *Agape* has surely been overly emphasized in certain circles, it is hard not to recognize that there is a rather wide gap between the love espoused by Plato and that of Judah Abrabanel. From whence the latter obtained those new ideas cannot be known nor do we have the space to fully explore the diverse possibilities but we will be looking at various possibilities.

Ficino

We saw how Plato represented an entire tradition for Judah Abrabanel and how precise philology was not a particular concern for him. The same thing can be said of Ficino and oftentimes he is viewed as a mere uncritical transmitter of Platonic, Hermetic and other writings. While we cannot deal adequately with the question of the extent of his originality, it suffices to say that he was a dominating influence for the age in which Abrabanel lived, even if he is never mentioned in the *Dialoghi*. Nor is he mentioned in the writings of Isaac Abrabanel. But due to the rather explicit mention of Hermetic

and Platonic thought in the elder Abrabanel's writings, it has become conventional wisdom to assume a robust familiarity with not only Ficino but also other Christian Neoplatonic thought of the Renaissance on the part of the Abrabanel family. Since Judah Abrabanel's book breathes that Renaissance atmosphere even more so than does his father's writings, it seems fair to assume that he was very much under its influence and perhaps Ficino, like Plato, can be viewed as emblematic of an entire genre. For that reason I will quote from Ficino rather extensively in order to give the reader a good feel not only for him but also for the cultural ambience in which Judah Abrabanel was operating.[458] As always in this work, we are seeking to explain the peculiarities of the *Dialoghi* and whether it is comprehensible in terms of the more obvious influences or whether other more secret influences (such as Kabbalah) are needed as an explanation. From one point of view even Ficino himself could be called a secret influence since he is never mentioned. From another perspective, however, his immense influence in the Renaissance makes him an obvious potential influence. What should also become quite obvious, however, is the similarity of the writings of the two authors. And, as a very significant aside, both authors were well aware of Kabbalah but neither devoted a great deal of overt attention to it. Ficino left that to Pico de la Mirandola and, as we shall see in much greater detail, Judah Abrabanel dealt with it in a rather ambivalent and perplexing manner.

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[458] Although this may be somewhat conjectural, Eugenio Garin was of the opinion that Ficino was "in polemic" with ibn Gabirol to a certain extent. See *History of Italian Philosophy*, Volume 1, pp.250-25. I mention this because it shows the affinity of the age in which Abrabanel lived with many of the sources from which he drew his inspiration. Of course, the Scholastics were also in polemic with ibn Gabirol. This is another reason why the Renaissance cannot be studied as if it was divorced from the Middle Ages.

Perhaps the first thing that one must mention regarding Marcilius Ficino's particular viewpoint is his invention of the term "Platonic love" that came to inspire a whole genre of Renaissance literature, including of course the specific work under discussion. This may be the most important concept that must be kept in mind at all times if we are to understand this work, even if Abrabanel and Ficino are not always in agreement. It is clearly not the same as Plato's *Eros* as just described, Maimonides' intellectual love of God, Averroes' notion of it or for that matter Thomas Aquinas' view of the intellectual love of God. While technical philosophical discourse may conceal more about a *zeitgeist* than it reveals, to sense the differences we only need to look at the art that emerged from those respective periods. The ancient Greek art has a realistic, ideal, yet lifeless quality. The medieval art on the other hand is quite divorced from what we think of as corporeal reality. The Renaissance art seems more familiar to us than either of the other two, yet we still sense that it is infused with an ineffable spiritual quality generally not present in exactly the same way in more modern art or in our more secular modern world-view. The essential difference seems to be that love in the Renaissance, while recognized as ultimately related to God, extends to all of creation in a manner that it did not for the ancients nor in the Middle Ages and that has also been lost to an extent in later periods. I would ask readers to simply look at the artistic creations that emerged from those periods and draw their own conclusions. Another general differentiating theme is the relationship between the human and the divine or between religion and philosophy. In the ancient world, religion and philosophy were very much at odds with one another even if that conflict was not always on the surface. In the early Middle Ages, philosophy may have been at the service of

religion to a very great extent but there were quite a few important exceptions. The influence of the great Muslim thinkers: Alfarabi, Alkindi, Avicenna and Averroes changed all that to a great extent. There développed a dispute between fideism, skepticism and philosophy, which has never been successfully resolved to this day. While we cannot really do justice to that problem, we should address how Ficino attempted to resolve it. Perhaps to a greater extent than any prior great thinker, he attempted to erase the distinction between the human and the divine and between philosophy and religion.[459] Whether his synthesis was successful cannot really be determined except from a historical perspective and from that vantage point the answer seems to be no. Nevertheless, this perspective of the Renaissance has never been given the full treatment that it deserves, perhaps for the following reason. Our fundamental ways of viewing the world emerged in the Middle Ages and were then repudiated in the modern age, leaving some unsettled and perplexed. The syntheses achieved (or attempted) in the Renaissance seem to have been left behind because of their apparent irrelevance to modern science and modern philosophy. But perhaps the time will come when they will be found to be quite useful again and may be revived. That might be the case if and when the need for a new religious paradigm is acknowledged.

Ficino, like Pico, had a great sense of the interrelatedness of ideas spanning different ages, cultures and religions. This is a commonplace theme in modern scholarship though nowadays we search for subtle differences as well. But what is perhaps of great interest is the fact that people who

[459] For a good summary of these epistemological problems and their treatment in the Renaissance, particularly by Ficino, see Richard Popkin, "Theories of Knowledge" in *Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*.

explore "alien" traditions are often accused of heretical views within their own more insular communities. Although Ficino was fairly careful not to expose himself to the kind of persecution that Pico, Pomponazzi, Bruno and others endured it is inconceivable that there should not be some areas of controversy in such a broad range of writings. As Paul MacDonald notes regarding the *Platonic Theology*: "An attentive reading of the work reveals many unorthodox, sometimes heretical views just below the surface...Pelagianism, Origenism, Docetism, Arianism and even Gnosticism..."[460]

Although we cannot know for sure, it is possible that Ficino was the model for Judah Abrabanel's attempt to relate Plato and Moses. This would have been somewhat problematic since Ficino taught that the Christian revelation lies above the Mosaic and Platonic ones. In a letter to Martino Uranio in 1489 Ficino states the following.

> The divine Jamblichus describes two ways of happiness according to the mind of the Egyptians: one way is philosophical and the other priestly. The philosophical way to happiness is wider and Peripatetics and philosophers have chosen it; the priestly way to happiness, on the contrary, is shorter and on it, the religious people walk. Our Plato has admirably fused together these two ways into one that is in every sense equally religious and philosophical, an acute disputatant, a pious priest, and an eloquent orator. Consequently, if you... were to follow on the footsteps of the divine Plato, with his assistance you would find

[460] *History of the Concept of Mind*, Volume 1, p.225

> and acquire God and happiness with Him. The reason for this is that our Plato for Pythagoric and Socratic motives follows the Mosaic Law and anticipates the Christian one.[461]

Another area in which Ficino was a pioneer of sorts was the question of individuality. For him the essentially individual nature of the human soul stemmed from its divinity, which is to say its direct relationship to God.[462] This has quite often been considered to be a typically Renaissance motif as the following quotation from Ernst Cassirer shows.

> In the *Theologica Platonica* as well as in his letters Ficino constantly combats the doctrine of the unicity of the 'active intellect'. In this battle he, too, also bases himself on immediate experience which always shows our Ego and our thought in individual form. No essential difference can exist, however, between the *nature* of the self and that which it is *given* to us in our immediate consciousness, *quid enim menti naturalius, quam sui ipsius cognitio.*
>
> This process seeks to work out the *theoretical* foundations and conditions of 'subjectivity'. But beside it, there is another process, one that makes clear to us for the first time the actual forces that, in the final analysis, determine and dominate this whole intellectual movement. Ficino builds his doctrine of the soul and his doctrine of individual immortality not so much upon his view of human

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[461] See Eugenio Garin, *History of Italian Philosophy*, Volume 1, p.235.
[462] For a very good discussion see Eugenio Garin, *History of Italian Philosophy*, Volume 1, pp.249-263.

> knowledge as upon his view of human *will*. The actual pivot of Ficino's psychology is the doctrine of *Eros*. It becomes the central point of all the philosophical efforts of the Florentine Academy.[463]

Aside from the general notions of Eros, spiritual love and their relationship to religious philosophy and individuality, I will now present a number of statements by Ficino that seem to prefigure positions taken by Abrabanel. The first is a commentary on Plotinus' view of "well-adapted physical forms" alluring "the world-soul and the souls of the stars and the daemons."

> If there were only these two things in the universe—on one side the Intellect, on the other the Body—but no Soul, then neither would the Intellect be attracted to the Body (for Intellect is absolutely motionless, without affect, which is the principle of motion, and very far away from the Body), nor would the Body be drawn to the Intellect (for body is in itself powerless, unsuited for motion, and far removed from the Intellect). But if a Soul which conforms to both were placed between them, an attraction will easily occur to each one on either side. In the first place, Soul is led most easily of all, since she is the *primum mobile* and movable of herself, of her own accord. Moreover, since, as I have said, she is the mean of things, in her own fashion she contains all things and is proportionally near to

[463] See Ernst Cassirer, *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, 130-131.

> both…on the one side she conforms to the divine and on the other to the transient, and even turns to each by desire, at the same time she is wholly and simultaneously everywhere.[464]

The second deals with aspects of Judaism that Ficino himself thought cohered well with other spiritual notions of his and he commends Pico della Mirandola for pursuing this theme.

> In the midst of these things, if you want to assign all the reasons which led Moses to command the Hebrews to be at leisure on the Sabbath, perhaps you will discover behind it a more sublime a secret allegory; the day of Saturn unfit for action in peace or war but fit for contemplation and for beseeching divine patronage on that same day against dangers. Abraham and Samuel and most of the Hebrew astrologers testified that they were able to achieve this aid against the menace of Mars and Saturn by elevating their minds to God and by vows and sacrifices, thus confirming that rule of the Chaldaeans: "If you lift your ardent mind to a work of piety, you will preserve your weak body." Noteworthy is that statement of Iamblichus: "The celestial and cosmic divinities include some powers higher than they are and some lower." Through the latter, they bind us to the effects of fate, but through the former in turn they free us from fate, as if they have keys, as Orpheus says, for opening and closing. Much

[464] Marsilio Ficino, *On Obtaining Life from the Heavens*, Part One: Chapter 1, English translation by C. Kaske & J. Clark in *Marsilio Ficino, Three Books on Life* (Binghamton: The Renaissance Society of America, 1989), reprinted in *Marsilio Ficino*, edited by Angela Voss, p. 111

> more, therefore, does a super celestial divinity redeem us from fatal necessity. It would be very worthwhile to explore that Hebrew notion, namely that in ritual slaughter of animals and in the scattering of our possessions as a sacrifice, the evils menacing us from the heavens are deflected from us to our possessions. But we leave these things for our friend Pico (della Mirandola) to explore.[465]

The third deals with the masculine and feminine aspects of the universe, something that Ficino thought permeates all of reality.

> Hence Orpheus called the very nature of the cosmos and the cosmic Jupiter masculine and feminine. So eager is the world everywhere for the mutual union of its parts. That the masculine sex is truly everywhere mingled with the feminine, the order of signs testifies from up there, where successively in that unending order the preceding one is masculine, the subsequent one, feminine. Trees and plants testify it from down here: just like animals, they have one sex or the other...
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> With this in mind, agriculture prepares the field and the seed for celestial gifts and by grafting prolongs the life of the shoot and refashions it into another and better species...The philosopher

[465] Ibid. Chapter 22, p.162. Quotations are from *Chaldaean Oracles*, fragment 128 and Iamblichus, *De mysteriis*, 8.6-7. Ficino considered himself an unlucky and melancholic child of Saturn and therefore perhaps felt a great deal of sympathy for the Sabbath and those who honored it as a day of rest and contemplation because it might be of great danger to them otherwise.

> who knows about natural objects and stars, whom we rightly are accustomed to call a Magus, does the very same things: he seasonably introduces the celestial into the earthly by particular lures just as the farmer interested in grafting brings the fresh graft into the old stock. Ptolemy also strongly argues this, affirming that a wise man of this sort can help the work of the stars just as the farmer does the power of the earth.[466]

The fourth deals with the sun in its unique role of image of God. This concept is found not only in pagan literature but also in ibn Gabirol's *Keter Malkhut* and in the *Dialoghi d'Amore*.

> There is nothing in the world more like the divine trinity than the Sun. For in the one substance of the Sun a certain three-foldness exists, distinct from in its parts yet united. Firstly a natural fecundity which is completely hidden from our senses, secondly, a manifest light flowing out of this fecundity, ever equal to it, and thirdly a heating virtue quite equal to both. The fecundity represents the Father; light, likened to intelligence, represents the Son conceived of intelligence; heat stands for the loving Spirit...Also around the solar Trinity we find similar three-fold and nine-fold orders, since out of that very fertile nature of the Sun, three natural fecundities are generated through everything...

[466] Ibid, Chapter 26, 174-175

> Next, from the light of the Sun, three kinds of brightness are derived...completely white, or completely red, or mixed...In the manner of the ancients, we identify essence in the heavens, life in Rhea, intelligence in Saturn. If we contemplate the powers of the Sun after substance, we will call its fecundity Jove and Juno, its light Apollo and Minerva, and its heat Venus and Bacchus...
>
> After these nine divinities inside the Sun let us move on to the nine Muses around the Sun. Now why nine Muses around the Sun, unless they mean nine types of Apollonian godhead distributed through the nine spheres of the cosmos? At first the ancients only recognized eight heavens. Later under the celestial fire, they added pure air as the ninth heaven, which was heavenly with respect to its quality and motion.[467]

There is yet another aspect of Ficino's thought that, while blown out of proportion at times, may be quite significant. I am referring to the psychological dimension. This has been emphasized by Thomas Moore and others.[468] Although we will not discuss it in depth, it may help to understand the difference between Abrabanel and the medieval

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[467] Marsilio Ficino, *The Book of the Sun*, translated by G. Cornelius, D. Costello, G. Tobyn, A. Voss & V. Wells, Chapter 12 (*Sphinx*, vol. 6, 1994) from Ficino, *Opera*, 965-975) reprinted in *Marsilio Ficino*, 208-210

[468] For a discussion see Thomas Moore, *The Planets Within: The Astrological Psychology of Marsilio Ficino*.

philosophers to whom he was so indebted.[469] One of the motifs that resurfaced in the Renaissance was philosophy as a practical, psychological and therapeutic discipline. Ficino also used the study of music for that same purpose. This concept went all the way back to Plato but perhaps was most characteristic of Hellenistic philosophy and appears again in Boethius. For Ficino the role of the magus is to bring the blessings of heaven down to earth for the benefit of other humans. The magus is more like a farmer or cultivator than an academician. What is especially interesting for our purposes is the fact that Kabbalah can also be viewed as a practical therapeutic discipline, especially in comparison to certain types of philosophy. As in most such practical disciplines, the rationale for why it works may be far inferior to the actual therapeutic effect; yet it may still be integral to that effect. In other words, the full therapeutic effect may be dependent upon the practitioner believing (perhaps wrongly) that he or she knows how and why it works. Perhaps this therapeutic component of Renaissance philosophy explains why the Kabbalah of the Italian Renaissance had a much closer affinity to it than was the case in Iberia where philosophy and Kabbalah were generally at odds. This may also explain the great interest in the Renaissance in magic and astrology. Do we find as much interest in these practical studies in Abrabanel as we do in Ficino?

In general I would say that the *Dialoghi* is more a theoretical and artistic literary work than a practical one. But there is a somewhat jarring and enduring message throughout

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[469] Moore's book is a part of a series of studies in imagination. This may help us to understand a difference between medieval and Renaissance thought. The medieval philosophers, while interested in human psychology, were generally quite suspicious of imagination.

the book that sticks out like a sore thumb. Philo is so smart and erudite yet his soul is in torment due to his unrequited love for Sophia. This is a clear message that theoretical wisdom is not sufficient for human fulfillment — perhaps the very opposite of the view of Maimonides and of much of the medieval traditions. It hearkens back somewhat to Aristotle, who recognized the necessity of non-intellectual, practical goods and friendship for a flourishing life. It reminds us somewhat of ibn Gabirol's laments in his secular poetry over what would have to be viewed by philosophers as trivia. But neither ancient nor medieval philosophers would express themselves in quite the way that Philo (presumably representing the thought of Judah Abrabanel) does. His extreme suffering over a woman contaminates or enlivens his theoretical wisdom, depending upon one's view. One can perhaps even view it as part and parcel of the Renaissance humanist repudiation of the arrogance of human wisdom. Even the most superior human being is now viewed as in desperate need of human love and in particular the love of a woman. The significance of the need for love is a religious one, stemming from the divine creation and was described quite eloquently by Ficino. The following quotation includes a number of themes shared by Ficino and Judah Abrabanel, including the circle of love and hints of pantheistic tendencies.

> This divine beauty has generated love, that is, a desire for itself, in all things. Since if God attracts the World to Himself, and the World is attracted, there exists a certain continuous attraction (beginning from God, emanating to the World, and returning at last to God) which returns again, as if in a kind of circle, to the same

place whence it issued.[470]

This brings us to the final yet perhaps most important and/or relevant theme in Ficino: reason vs. will. It is treated much more explicitly in Ficino than in Judah Abrabanel but may well inform us regarding the underlying assumptions of the latter. I am quoting it at length in order to show both similarities and differences between the two thinkers. I would initially point out the eudemonistic orientation of Ficino as regards human fulfillment.

> Does happiness then reside in the virtues of reflection, such as the contemplation of truth? Certainly it does. But there is, so to speak, contemplation of different kinds: subcelestial, celestial, and super celestial...Aristotle believed that man in the first state is happy, but our Plato denied this...So, according to Plato, true happiness is the property of the soul that, when freed from the body, contemplates the divine. Both angels and God are accounted divine. Avicenna and Al Ghazzali seem to maintain that the soul will be happy in contemplating angels. The Platonists refute this...Therefore in God alone may the search of the intellect and the desire of the will come to rest...
>
> However, there are two activities of the soul in its relationship to God, for it sees God through the intellect and rejoices in the knowledge of Him through will...

[470] *Ficino's Commentary on Plato's Symposium*, Speech II, chapter 2, p.46

In that happiness the joy surpasses the vision. For as we find more merit with God in this life by loving Him than by searching for Him, so the reward in the next life is greater for loving than searching...The reason love unites the mind with God more swiftly, closely and firmly than cognition is that the power of cognition lies mainly in making distinctions but the power of love lie in union...For these reason we may conclude that the reward of loving is greater than that of human enquiry.

It befits the lover to enjoy and rejoice in the beloved for that is the aim of love, but it befits the seeker to see. Thus joy in a happy man surpasses vision. Besides we desire to see in order to rejoice; we do not seek to rejoice in order to see.... Desire, which is wide-ranging and continual, is rooted inbeing since all created things are always desiring something. Cognition acts through images that are received; it is the property of few beings and is intermittent. Therefore the enjoyment of goodness is more substantial through the medium of desire than through the vision of cognition.

If God were to separate the mind form the will and keep the two apart, the mind might seem to retain its previous form, for it would still be a form of reason; but the will might change its form since it would be a desire lacking the power to choose, a property of reason. But the mind would not enjoy any further good at all, it would

be like a creature without taste; nothing would please it; it would find nothing good, nor would it be agreeable to itself or anything else. But will would continue to enjoy to the full some goodness of its own. Therefore enjoyment of the highest good seems to be the property of will rather than intellect....The intellect, understanding things, not so much through their nature but rather through its own, seems to draw things toward itself and for that reason it cannot really be said to move the soul. Since will desires to perceive things as they are in themselves, it draws the soul to things outside itself; and therefore it is will that is the origin of movement.... The more ardently a man loves, the happier he becomes in that he approaches the very substance of happiness itself. What more shall we add to this? Since far more people can love God ardently than can know him clearly, the way of love is safer to mankind and far more suitable for the infinite good, which wishes to impart itself to as many as possible.

So it is through will that happiness is attained... When dimly and feebly we look into the depth of god's infinity, our love burns warmly and eagerly as so does our joy. Vision is not the measure of joy as some believe, for he who sees little may love much and vice versa.[471]

[471] See Ficino's letter to Lorenzo de' Medici, translated in *Meditations of the Soul*, pp.127-130.

Although Ficino was the most influential and perhaps the most profound of contemporary Christian philosophers, we would also like to take a somewhat broader view of the relationship between Judah Abrabanel and his Christian cultural environment. We will now, therefore, investigate to what extent the *Dialoghi* mirrors those general themes to be found in Renaissance Christian Humanism.

Affinities to and Divergences from Contemporary Christian Thought

The resemblance to contemporary Christian thought is rather striking. As David Ruderman put it, "Clearly not unnoticed by his Christian readers, God's beneficent love as portrayed by Leone strikingly conforms to the concept of divine grace and Christian charity."[472]

In the Introduction I discussed the relationship between philosophy and religion and how, in my opinion, the former has to an extent relegated its responsibility to the latter in modern times. This would obviously not have been the first time that religion exercised hegemony over philosophy, although the modern phenomenon might be attributable to the weakness of philosophy rather than to the strength of religion. In 1513 the Lateran Council repudiated the notion of the nicety of the intellect, a doctrine then attributed to Averroes. This was surely an issue for Judah Abrabanel and the Christian humanists, as it had been for medieval Jewish, Islamic and Christian philosophy. Judah Abrabanel fails to take an explicit or definitive stand on the matter but that was probably the case for most philosophers. We also mentioned other similarities

[472] "Italian Renaissance and Jewish Thought," p. 409

between the *Dialoghi* and contemporary Christian humanist thought. I would now like to discuss that in somewhat greater depth and admittedly in a manner that may be somewhat more conjectural but that may allow us to draw additional conclusions, albeit tentative ones. Firstly, we can say that the Christian humanism of the Renaissance was mostly Platonic, as was Judah Abrabanel, but at the same time (like his thought) it was eclectic. It was quite interested in Kabbalah and in Islamic philosophy, as he was. It was quite interested in the Bible, as he was. But perhaps even more significant was its interest in new avenues of human exploration. This was a period of explicit awareness and discovery of other spiritual traditions, some of which resembled Christian beliefs but in which certain concepts differed from that inherited tradition.[473] Christian humanism, even in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance, was interested in breaking with many of the inherited structures of medieval thought and forging new values and expressions of both exploration and creativity. Witness the following description of Charles Trinkaus:

> It has been our thesis that the traditional way in which human life was conceived and the way it was integrated into the Christian religious outlook was inherently unsatisfactory to many men of learning of the latter Middle Ages; that, furthermore, the Italian humanists from Petrarch on were involved in the effort to restructure this conception and this mode of integration. It was not simply that the norms of modern life ran against both the teachings of the Church and the

[473] See Moshe Idel, *Ben: Sonship and Jewish Mysticism*, chapter 5, for a good discussion.

> consciences of individuals as sinful, but even more that what from one perspective was admirable and desirable, from another was despicable and evil. Consequently an undesirable psychological condition emerged. Men, on the one hand, might be denounced as wicked and sinful, and on the other hand, their denouncers might be charged with hypocrisy, as may be seen in the humanist treatises on this theme. Worst of all was the state of distrust and despair which we have seen so vividly deplored by Petrarch.[474]

We do not, however, find this kind of explicit radical break in values in Judah Abrabanel except perhaps in one area, and even there the revolutionary ethos is rather muted. I am referring to Abrabanel's acceptance of not only the validity but also the importance and symbolic significance of romantic love, something that he cleverly weaves into the *Dialoghi* in a number of places. And if that did indeed signal a change in Jewish values it would perhaps only apply to medieval Jewish values. In the Christian world romantic love was already somewhat established as an ideal in the Middle Ages as the following quotation from Huizinga will illustrate.

> When in the twelfth century unsatisfied desire was placed by the troubadours of Provence in the center of the poetic conception of love, an important turn in the history of civilization was effected. Antiquity, too, had sung the sufferings of love, but it had never conceived them save as the expectation of happiness or as its pitiful

[474] Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness*, Volume 2, pp. 462-463

> frustration. The sentimental point of Pyramus and Thisbe, of Cephalus and Procris, lies in their tragic end; in the heart-rending loss of a happiness already enjoyed. Courtly poetry, on the other hand, makes desire itself the essential motif, and so creates a conception of love with a negative ground-note. Without giving up all connection with sensual love, the new poetic ideal was capable of embracing all kinds of ethical aspirations. Love now became the field where all moral and cultural perfection flowered. Because of his love, the courtly lover is pure and virtuous. The spiritual element dominates more and more, till towards the end of the thirteenth century, the *dolce stil nuovo* of Dante and his friends ends by attributing to love the gift of bringing about a state of piety and holy intuition. Here an extreme had been reached. Italian poetry was gradually to find its way back to a less exalted expression of erotic sentiment. Petrarch is divided between the ideal of spiritualized love and the more natural charm of antique models. Soon the artificial system of courtly love is abandoned, and its subtle distinctions will not be revived, when the Platonism of the Renaissance, latent, already, in the courtly conception, gives rise to new forms of erotic poetry with a spiritual tendency.[475]

Perhaps that will help somewhat to illuminate Judah Abrabanel's seemingly belabored discussions of the relationship

[475] J. Huizinga, *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, pp. *107*-108

and distinction between desire and love. It is even possible that Philo's own romanticized lovesickness signals some clinging to those relatively new Jewish (but fairly well established medieval Christian) values, consciously or otherwise.

As Alexander Altmann masterfully showed in "*Ars Rhetorica* as Reflected in Some Jewish Figures of the Italian Renaissance," a number of more or less contemporary Jewish scholars followed their Christian counterparts in a renewed interest in Cicero and rhetoric. In contrast, medieval Jewish philosophy (exemplified by Maimonides) had shown recognition of rhetoric but a low valuation of it. It is possible that Judah Abrabanel shares this Renaissance interest but I have not found a great explicit emphasis on it. In contrast to Messer Leon, who extolled the *Bible* as the greatest work of rhetoric, Judah Abrabanel seems more interested in utilizing it as a source of esoteric knowledge. Yet he also seems to have shared the following characteristic that Altmann noted: "The universalism that was all-pervasive in the syncretistic culture of the period made it psychologically imperative for a Jewish traditionalist like Messer Leon to stress the superiority of the Jewish heritage within the commonality of mankind."[476] Judah Abrabanel also tends to give the Jewish tradition (Moses) a privileged position within his universalism and while he does not stress the rhetorical element, an argument could be made that it is implicit in his writings. That is because a close examination of the *Dialoghi* often reveals an awareness of esoteric knowledge that predates Moses. Hence, the use of Moses as final authority might indeed boil down to reliance upon biblical rhetoric rather than substance.

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[476] *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, p.8

We also find in Judah Abrabanel a strong interest in pagan mythology, something that the Jewish tradition generally frowned upon. But I do not see where this interest in mythology explicitly signaled a radical change of values, rather than simply changing aesthetic tastes and perhaps a relaxation of traditional strictures. The immoral aspects of the Greek mythological world-view are explicitly condemned in the *Dialoghi* on a few occasions. The ultimate values that Abrabanel subscribed to were Mosaic or Platonic. They were not those of Greek Mythology, even if he sometimes attempted to connect them to the others.

There is continuity between medieval and Renaissance thought regarding the ultimate reality of the individual human soul. While we cannot expostulate upon this to the degree that might be optimal, this subject feeds into the disputes between Platonism and Aristotelianism as well as within those schools. To what extent is the human soul uniquely invested with dignity and godliness or is it more correctly viewed as a reflection of the rest of God's creation? Eugenio Garin has reminded us of an underlying but muted disagreement between Ficino and Pico in this matter, despite their many areas of agreement.[477] Although we cannot really contribute much to the scholarship, it may be necessary to revise some conventional views regarding Pico and human dignity, as Brian Copenhaver has already suggested.[478] Regarding this matter it is difficult to decide where Judah Abrabanel stood. In the section on mysticism we describe two incompatible visions of ultimate reality that

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[477] See his *History of Italian Philosophy*, volume 1, pp.302-306.

[478] See his "The Secret of Pico's *Oration*: Cabala and Renaissance Philosophy." Although I generally agree with Copenhaver's view of the post-Kantian distortions of Pico's views, I think it is at least possible and perhaps plausible that he gives an exaggerated importance to kabbalistic influences.

Abrabanel presented. Perhaps he was undecided or perhaps he was unwilling to declare his real views. However, on pp.186-187 (pp.159-160 in new English translation, Italian text, pp.161-162, there is an indication that he considered the human intellectual soul inferior to the celestial intelligences and only capable of perfecting itself by consciously desiring to come into union with God. The celestial intelligences, on the other hand, seek their own perfection by actual union with God. If I understand this admittedly difficult passage correctly, for Abrabanel the human soul would not be missing anything very important if it simply dissolved into a union with God, which constitutes its perfection.[479] Nevertheless, the concept of love of the higher for the lower might allow the latter to retain some distinct reality even within the *unio mystica*.

There was in Renaissance Christian thought a somewhat prevalent impression (right or wrong) that the medieval scholars were mere book-learners and, even worse, logic splitters who failed to pay sufficient attention to the real world and (perhaps most importantly) to their own selves. We find this attitude even as early as Petrarch.[480] Again, we do not see visible traces of this in Judah Abrabanel, who extolled the ancient and medieval texts every bit as much as did his medieval

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[479] The distinction that Abrabanel draws between the human soul and the celestial intelligences is quite obvious and perhaps for that reason that the new English translation adds the word "not" to Philo's response to Sophia's question: "And is it for a similar reason that the beatitude of human intellective souls and their ultimate end lies in union with God?" The Italian text and old English translation both answer in the affirmative.

[480] "For letters are instruments of insanity for many, of arrogance for almost everyone, if they do not meet with a good and well-trained mind... The facts have certainly not been investigated by those who are quoted as authorities for them... And even if they were true, they would not contribute anything whatsoever to the blessed life." See Petrarca, "On his own Ignorance and that of Others" in *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, edited by Ernst Cassirer, Paul Oskar Kristeller and John Herman Randall, pp. 56-58.

predecessors. Despite the fact that he was a doctor and obviously was learned in contemporary science and acquainted with contemporary scholarship, we find no shift in orientation from the world of tradition to the inner world of individual experience or from the abstract to the concrete, even if that shift were to be conceived ultimately as a means to achieve a higher unity with God.

Regarding the emphasis on the freedom and dignity of humankind, Abrabanel is not nearly as explicit as was Ficino, Pico or Pomponazzi. But a closer look at his teachings shows this motif to be a very prominent part of his world-view nevertheless. In particular, as was discussed earlier, God's love for humanity is the ontological basis for human dignity in his thought. Some have even attributed to him an Averroistic double truth doctrine, which might allow for quasi-heretical deviations from traditional religious truths if the intellect requires it.[481]

There was also in the Renaissance an aesthetic impression that the Scholastics' methods were boring and overly logical and the important ethical impression that academic knowledge puffs up and often conflicts with sincere piety. This is found in the writings of Erasmus and others but is not prominent in Pico. Is it possible that Judah Abrabanel also felt that way about the intellect (at least the traditional view thereof) despite his ceaseless praise of it? Once again, there is no explicit condemnation of traditional Jewish expressions of hyper-intellectual piety in the *Dialoghi*; but to be completely fair, we must note that we find few explicit discussions of specifically Jewish pietistic practices at all (intellectual or

[481] See Alfred Ivry, "Remnants of Jewish Averroism in the Renaissance" in *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*.

otherwise) except the study of the Bible, something that is not even specifically Jewish. Does this signal a depreciation of traditional Jewish ritual, Talmudic study and ceremony in his mind? Perhaps the most likely possibility is that Judah Abrabanel while exalting the intellect tended to subsume it under mystical and esoteric values. Therefore it is quite understandable that many should view him as a kabbalist. But, unlike the kabbalists, his book seems to deviate drastically from traditional Jewish concerns.

I have no intention of portraying Judah Abrabanel as a proto-reformer. He shows no interest whatsoever in attacking popular religious beliefs and/or practices but only in interpreting such popular religious phenomena in a more profound, philosophical and mystical way. As Roberto Bonfil showed, later Italian Jewish thinkers of the 16th century, under the influence of Kabbalah made many changes to the *minhag* (tradition) and liturgy.[482] We do not find such suggestions in the *Dialoghi*. It is simply a different sort of literary work, almost completely unrelated to practical religious rites. Nevertheless, in an era in which radical new ways of thinking were coming to the fore and things of the spirit were being viewed in novel ways, it is quite possible that he had some sort of hidden agenda that he never really articulated. Again I quote Charles Trinkaus regarding his Christian contemporaries.

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[482] See "Change in the Cultural Patterns of a Jewish Society in Crisis." Interestingly, Bonfil's description of the Medieval spiritual outlook vs. the modern one that was mediated by Kabbalah seems to leave Abrabanel more in the Medieval motif of physical and spiritual interpenetrating one another. I am not convinced that this dichotomy is completely correct but there is no doubt in my mind that Bonfil has made some suggestions that are pregnant with new insights and deserve a great deal more investigation.

> By a similar use of allegory within the theory of the *theologia poetica* the rampantly polytheistic and amoral mythology of Greek and Latin poetry could be made to reveal an inner core of proto-Christian orthodoxy beneath an outer cortex of amorous and litigious heroes and deities. But now some new statement of the universal history of mankind was necessary – one that would stress the underlying unity and harmony of meanings and religious insights, on the one hand, as well as account in an adequate manner for both the surface differences and the drifting apart of the rival and erroneous traditions from the true, on the other. In this process the *studia humanitatis*, taking their contents to comprise the works of their learning and culture, were being transformed into *studia divinitatis*, just as simultaneously the *studia divinitatis* were being subjected to the methods and disciplines of the *studia humanitatis*.[483]

It is significant that Judah Abrabanel also uses that "polytheistic and amoral mythology" to demonstrate the truth of Jewish or biblical beliefs. But was that simply a convenient concession to current style or a concerted effort to make fundamental changes? If Abrabanel had hidden opinions regarding the future direction of Judaism, we can only conjecture regarding what they might have been and also regarding why he chose not to discuss them. This of course is quite relevant to the kabbalistic hypothesis. But if we were to attempt such a tentative interpretation, it might go as follows.

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[483] Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness*, Volume 2, pp. 722-723

Judah Abrabanel (in the *Dialoghi*) exhibited little interest in Judaism as an *ethnic* world-view. He did show, however, a great deal of interest in pagan, Islamic and Christian patterns of thought, even if he was not always interested in expressing them fully. The ultimate arbiter of all those diverse intellectual currents seems to be Moses. Wherever the teachings of the latter are clear, they trump all other ways of thinking, even that of the "divine" Plato. Perhaps he viewed the great genius of Moses and Judaism as being a kind of universal arbiter of the truth and falsity of all the other opinions of humankind. But if that were indeed his true world-view, he would also have to find a way of dealing with the more traditional and particularistic world-view of his own religion and his own people, not to mention the particularistic views of Christians.

In order to address the latter problems and particularly the Jewish problem we may have to do even more esoteric conjecturing. Jewish tradition is quite conservative, perhaps even more so than Christianity. It is also quite intellectual (at least ostensibly) and obsessed with books and book learning. If he had indeed felt or believed in the kinds of critiques of his father's generation and earlier ones, as his Christian contemporaries were engaging in regarding their own tradition, would he have been willing or able to express them? I think the answer may well be no; it would have meant repudiating too much of his father's own teachings, those of the Jewish tradition and perhaps even the position of his family in the Jewish (and non-Jewish) world.[484] If that reluctance to repudiate his

[484] Interestingly, his father was not particularly reticent about criticizing the medieval Jewish philosophical tradition. But that might have been because he felt so comfortable as a part of traditional Jewish thought. The son, on the other hand, as a more universal thinker may not have felt the same

ancestors and family were indeed the case, we would have to read between the lines in order to discover the real doctrine behind the words. This reluctance to openly criticize tradition would most likely also apply to Kabbalah.

I alluded before to a kind of anti-intellectualist rebellion of Christian humanists against medieval learning. We do need to take this with a grain of salt, however, since those very critiques of book learning revealed a great deal of the same. These were real intellectuals criticizing the intellect! Nevertheless, there are anti-intellectual strands in Christianity (many of which long pre-date Renaissance humanism) that are stronger than what *appear* to exist in Judaism, where piety and learning have long been viewed as practically co-extensive, at least until the advent of Hassidism. What was and still is more commonly the case in Judaism is the radical restriction of the intellect to a narrowly circumscribed area rather than the explicit deprecation of the intellect per se. Judah Abrabanel exhibits neither strategy and it would be a far stretch of the imagination to include him in any kind of restriction or blocking of the intellect, despite the fact that Philo seems equally obsessed with a woman (Sophia) as he is with his books. But Sophia is also quite the intellectual and in no way does she lead Philo away from his books. In fact, she intensifies his devotion to learning by making her own critical reasoning available to him and her companionship contingent upon deep intellectual discussions. While it has sometimes been noted that love seems to take precedence over intellect in his philosophy, Abrabanel himself explicitly counters that impression by insisting that it is the intellect that is involved in the highest kind of love possible

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comfort or ability to critique prior Jewish thought. For example, he has only praise for Maimonides while his father was willing to criticize him at times.

for human beings — the love of God. And the birth of love in the universe is contingent upon the birth of the divine intellect and its love of God.[485] Despite the overall atmosphere of Italian Renaissance earthly conviviality, this book is quite medieval in its basic *intellectual* outlook. Perhaps, however, there is a subliminal message regarding intuitive wisdom (allied to love) ultimately conquering logical reasoning but it is nowhere to my knowledge explicitly expressed. If we look for something analogous to Erasmus' *In Praise of Folly* in Judah Abrabanel we would probably be looking in vain.[486] Nor is there any trace of fideism or skepticism, strands that continuously emerged in Christian thought (as well as in Judaism to a lesser degree) in the Renaissance.[487] Yet it is hard to read the book without detecting some strong and immediate message regarding the

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[485] An inconsistency of sorts may inhere in his insistence that intellect gives birth to love, both in God and in humankind. Firstly, Abrabanel ignores the Divine Will, which ibn Gabirol considered the first hypostasis from God. Why would not love be born in that Will? Secondly, the Divine Intellect contains much more than the human intellect and to compare the two would seem to be perilous. Therefore, the birth of love in the former might actually negate the necessity of the involvement of the latter. Did he not see this or did he feel the need to re-affirm the primacy of the intellect, as was the custom in the Jewish/Arabic philosophical tradition.

[486] Of course Erasmus was one of the great intellects of his age but the very fact that he could write such a wonderfully ironic book praising stupidity and ignorance makes it one of the most remarkable accomplishments of the human mind. But behind the irony and humor lies a quite serious insight that may not be accessible to all intellectuals, especially those who are obsessed with their own importance. And as much as Judah Abrabanel might attempt to transcend intellect in his mystical philosophy, there is no explicit indication from his writings that he would have appreciated the irony of *In Praise of Folly* or that entire *genre*. In fact, he may even display some of the logic-splitting propensities of the Scholastics that Erasmus found so distasteful.

[487] See Richard H. Popkin, *The History of Scepticism from Erasmus to Spinoza*, particularly the preface.

importance of the a-rational in human affairs, even if love, will and passion remain allied with reason every step of the way.

There has always been tension, both in Judaism and Christianity, between the letter and the spirit. It is particularly pronounced in kabbalistic writings, which tend to deflect descriptions of earthly events onto the heavenly realms. Despite the fact that this supposed conflict between the letter and the spirit surfaces explicitly in the *New Testament* as a criticism of Judaism, it remains as cogent in the context of Christian dogma as it is in relationship to Jewish law. Just as there were Christians who attempted to re-interpret the Trinity to mean something philosophically meaningful, there were Jews who attempted to reinterpret the literal meaning of the Bible to refer to higher metaphysical realms. Of those Jewish esotericists, some were philosophers and some were kabbalists and some perhaps were both to a certain extent. Yet the Jewish philosophical and allegorical traditions had been severely criticized by Judah Abrabanel's father and strong doubts and ambivalences regarding Kabbalah seem present in both father and son. It is at least plausible that Christian-type humanism might have seemed to be an answer of sorts to Judah Abrabanel, even if he was unable and unwilling to accept Christian dogma or even to consciously admit such Christian influence. And yet we also have his statement in his poetry that he considered himself far superior to the Christian scholars whom he had met, so obviously he had thought about this even if we can never know the actual content of those thoughts. Obvious also is the impression that the *Dialoghi* is an attempt to transcend the normal Jewish study of the *Torah*, which is replete with *Midrashic* explanations and the clinging to obscure verbal expressions in the text. Nor is it overly concerned, however, with a more literal interpretation of the Bible, something that

had been pioneered by Abraham ibn Ezra centuries before. It is much more thoroughly philosophical than either of those two traditions (the Midrashic and the literal), even if it does little to denigrate wither of them. It also seems to be an attempt at transcending both philosophical and kabbalistic studies and replacing them with something a bit more mystical yet also experiential in a sensual way. That experiential aspect depends utterly upon the feminine perspective with its heightened sense of smell, taste and its great appreciation for romantic love. It is women who ultimately bring humanity back to those earthly, experiential realities. In that respect he does seem to be very much under the influence of contemporary Christian Renaissance thought, even if he simply takes it for granted and does not really pursue its values in a very self-conscious way (again with the one exception, perhaps, of romantic love).

Perhaps the *Dialoghi* is meant to be a final expression of both Abrabanel's indebtedness to Christian culture and his quite conscious corrections and repudiation of it. He takes the good and expels the bad. Certainly, he has no use for the Christian monastic tradition, just as many contemporary Christians probably did not. He reinterprets the Trinity, shows an erudite and wise person who is lovesick and a woman who at times seems more stable and rational than her male pursuer. He expresses strong doubts about Kabbalah, which much of both the Jewish and Christian worlds were enthralled with. And the fact that it would have been possible for people to believe that he had eventually converted to Christianity tells us something very interesting. Anyone who reads this book recognizes immediately that this is no ordinary party-line thinker, whether Christian or Jewish. Is it even possible that a Renaissance Jew could convert to Christianity and *remain* such an independent thinker? If not, how then could some have thought that he had

converted? Perhaps some thought that this kind of freedom of thought for a convert was indeed possible. But most likely people would have believed that this troubled seeker after truth found the true light only *after* writing this book, especially since the character Philo remains so psychologically troubled at the end of the third dialogue. But even the notion of an independent thinker finding truly orthodox religious faith is itself controversial. And given the self-confidence of Philo regarding metaphysical and mystical matters, what would Christianity have added to his world-view? This question regarding the compatibility of free thought and religious faith may perhaps be more of a problem for us than for the Renaissance, which might have been a time in which independence of thought was quite highly respected (or at least tolerated) both among Christians and Jews.

The long and the short of it is that the influence of contemporary Christian culture on the *Dialoghi* is as apparent as anything could be yet Abrabanel never really admits to it. This, as Shlomo Pines noted, really does require an explanation. Of course one explanation is readily at hand. The world of Christian humanism was actually quite anti-Semitic.[488] Despite some collaboration and possibly even some fraternization, this was no paradisiacal ecumenical environment. It would perhaps be far safer for a Jew to stay away from intra-Christian disputes. The amazing thing then is, despite all those constraints, how thoroughly ecumenical the book really is. In the next chapter we will be looking at just how Jewish it is.

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[488] We have alluded to the anti-Jewish feelings and expressions of contemporary Christian Hebraists. For a vivid description of the anti-Jewish attitudes of Erasmus and others see Heiko A. Oberman, "Three sixteenth-Century Attitudes to Judaism: Reuchlin, Erasmus and Luther" in *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, edited by Bernard Dov Cooperman.

Chapter VI: A More In-depth Look at the Jewishness of the Dialoghi

Perhaps this chapter should not really be needed since we are mostly interested in the individual nature of the work and not what category it falls into. I have chosen to deal specifically with this question for the following reasons. Many contemporary scholars have insisted that the *Dialoghi* is very much a Jewish book and perhaps even a kabbalistic one. That is perhaps a reaction to the views of some earlier scholars who tended to view it as not particularly Jewish and as part of a more universal Renaissance *genre*. David Ruderman has enunciated the issues at stake at least as well as anyone.

> Unlike the case of Alemanno, however, there is no firm evidence that Leone ever visited Florence or that he ever met Pico before the latter's death in 1494. Yet without assuming that Leone knew intimately the cultural ambience of Pico's circle it becomes most difficult to comprehend the genesis of his well-known work, the *Dialoghi d'amore*...[489] In view of the seminal importance of Leone Ebreo to Renaissance culture, how might he be

[489] Despite his likely absence from Florence, Judah Abrabanel was apparently well acquainted with the court in Naples where Renaissance thought had penetrated despite its relative absence outside. See Denys Hay, *The Italian Renaissance*, pp.164-165. And as Ruderman mentions later on in his article, a good clue to Judah Abrabanel's reception of Renaissance thought might be found in his relationship with his father and other contemporary Jewish thinkers. For the Renaissance in Venice see Ibid, pp. 177-178.

> understood in relation to the other expressions of contemporary Jewish culture discussed above?[490]
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> Even more than Alemanno, Leone seems to accept at face value the ideals and intellectual assumptions inherent in Pico's dual concepts of ancient theology and poetic theology. Leone, like Pico, believed in a universality of knowledge, upholding a vision of the commonality of all humanity that transcended the particularistic cultures and traditions of world civilizations.[491]

This theme of Jewishness may therefore be the psychological crux of our problem.[492] What is this dispute all about? While much energy has been spent attempting to differentiate Jewish people-hood from the Jewish religion, less

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[490] "Italian Renaissance and Jewish Thought," p.407

[491] Ibid, p. 411

[492] Moshe Idel in "Particularism and Universalism in Kabbalah" (pp.327-328) proposes the thesis that many of the more universalistic and philosophical kabbalists (Judah Abrabanel among them) were attempting the "Judaization of philosophy." One goal was combating "the theory, elaborated since Ficino and Pico, of the pagan origin of ancient theology, independent of, albeit similar to, the true religion as it was embodied in the Old and New Testaments." Now, that goal along with the other one of tracing the Platonic truths back to Moses may indeed be found in the *Dialoghi*. Yet it is also plausible to argue that this was not the wholehearted position of Judah Abrabanel but only a public one. There are so many philosophical interpretations of pagan myths and veiled references to Hermetic and Egyptian mysteries, not tied to any biblical concepts, to allow for such a simplified agenda. Obviously, the natural tendency would be to conceal pagan theological and philosophical concepts in favor of biblical ones, especially if the book was aimed at a Jewish audience and even if it was aimed at a Christian one. Therefore, we need to take very seriously any references to pagan beliefs and allow ourselves to entertain the possibility that Judah Abrabanel was actually propounding a theory of universal metaphysical knowledge, available not only through the Bible but also through pagan myths and mysteries.

has been devoted to the question of Jewish selfhood. The question of selfhood is always lurking around when we discuss earlier historical periods. We tend to think that people today are more individualistic and more enmeshed in their bodies than previously. Perhaps they are also more acculturated to norms that are less local, encompass an entire nation and may even at times be global in scope. In the past identity was more local. But of course there are always historical exceptions and Judah Abrabanel might have been one of them. We can never know how his own sense of his Jewishness interacted with universalism in his own self-consciousness. All we really have is the book (and some poetry) and there are some who would say that even if we had much more biographical information it should not affect our literary interpretation. Obviously he was a Jew and the scion of a very powerful Jewish-ly identified family. More significantly perhaps, he refers to Moses and Judaism on many occasions. Yet the book quite as obviously stands out as exceptional and quite dissimilar to most Jewish writings of the period. I have already briefly discussed the term "Jewish" in Chapter II. Although different people may intend different things by that word, the essential meaning has something to do with the Jewish people, in contrast to purely religious or intellectual phenomena. The relationship between Jewish people-hood and the Jewish religion is perhaps a more difficult question that this book is not designed to resolve or even explore in great depth. Nevertheless, and especially since we are dealing with a period prior to large scale secularization, we will also be discussing the kind of religiosity that one might expect from a Jew at that time. By calling it a Jewish book some might be assuming that it really coheres with some more or less normative form of Judaism, despite its apparent departure from that norm. That I think would be an

unwarranted assumption even if it were to turn out to be true. I also do not want to confound what some of us today might consider legitimate Jewish concerns with what was usually meant in the past by "Jewish."[493] I would like to look at the book critically without making such assumptions. Partly, that desire stems from the specific goal of this book: to investigate the relationship between the *Dialoghi* and Kabbalah. We have already seen that much of kabbalistic literature is extremely particularistic and not what one would ordinarily call universalistic while the *Dialoghi* appears to be the very opposite.[494] In that regard, it shares conceptual problems with all Jewish philosophy, which straddles universalistic and particularistic concerns.[495] We will have more to say about that later on.

Previously, we compared themes in the *Dialoghi* with those of earlier Jewish literature. This chapter will look more closely at the actual text of the *Dialoghi* as it relates to the

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[493] For example, some of us might believe that Jewish people are peculiarly concerned with promoting world peace, eradicating starvation, dealing with global warming, etc. Even if that were correct we still would not label those concerns "Jewish." They simply fall outside of those particularistic characteristics that historically have been considered as such. This would be the case even if a good argument could be made that Judaism not only should but by its inner dynamic does indeed concern itself with them. Although this may at first appear to be a non-substantive terminological prescription, a little thought might convince one of the usefulness of making this distinction. It simply involves using words in the manner in which they usually are employed.

[494] We have already acknowledged the correctness of Moshe Idel's work in "Particularism and Universalism in Kabbalah" and do not desire to deny that some thinkers under the influence of Kabbalah were universalistic. Nevertheless, we have also previously noted that even Idel (p.334) admits that the particularistic strain of Kabbalah was more "creative" and I would add: more authentic.

[495] For a good discussion see Leon Roth, *Is there a Jewish Philosophy?*, pp.1-14.

Jewish people. That latter subject, as already stated, ordinarily helps to define whether or not a work of literature is to be classified as Jewish. Admittedly, this is not a complete definition of literary Jewishness since a Jewish ethnic flavor may also predominate and override a lack of explicit concern for the Jewish people.[496] And Jewishness, thus defined, is also not co-terminus with Judaism, as the latter contains an abundance of universalistic elements, both doctrinal and affective. We have already discussed the usefulness of Boccaccini's distinction between Jewish and Judaic. But there are some who argue that Judaism is more than a religion and that draining out the aspect of people-hood from it removes a vital element. It should be obvious that there is an axiological element in this debate. We, however, are more concerned with the manner in which Judaism has historically been defined. Since the medieval period and especially due to the influence of Saadiah Gaon and Maimonides, doctrinal elements have predominated in certain readings of Judaism, perhaps to an extent that was not present previously. Nevertheless, the vital connection between Judaism and the Jewish people has endured. The more central historical features of Judaism may be behaviorally, ethnically and identity based rather than doctrinally based. This assessment has nothing to do with what I might consider good and may even have its disadvantages, as I have already indicated. Nor do I make any essentialistic claim here because quite possibly this feature could change into something more universalistic. It is also quite common that

[496] As is normal in technical jargon, words are chosen for a specific purpose and not simply out of traditional usage. When we call something by a specific word we are usually attempting to include it in some larger class or exclude it. If we are trying to do the former, similarities prevail over differences. So, terminological disagreements may ultimately boil down to existential decisions.

Jewishness as a mostly ethnic or cultural phenomenon (broadly defined) is conflated with Judaism as a religious phenomenon as a result of the fact that so many contemporary Jews are either non-religious or anti-religious.. Even if we were to define "Judaic" in a somewhat different manner than Boccaccini does and include more elements pertaining to the Jewish people, there is still a distinction to be made.[497] Of course we cannot provide a full discussion of this distinction between Jewishness and Judaic or whether it is a valid one, which many have denied. Nevertheless, it is something of interest for reasons that should soon become apparent if they are not already so.[498] Therefore, to the extent that Judaism is conceived as a quasi-universalistic religion we will not really be evaluating the Judaic features of Philo and Sophia. Nor will we be opining on the intended audience. We will be looking at the actual literary characters of the dialogues (Philo and Sophia) and their Jewishness. This will be a more down to earth examination than what was performed previously even though it is still on a

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[497] Where one draws the line is sometimes difficult to determine. Early Christianity was obviously both Jewish and Judaic. Gentile Christianity is obviously not Jewish but there are differences of opinion regarding whether one ought to call it Judaic. The main argument in favor has to do with its descent from Judaism and the centrality of the Jewish people in Christian sacred history. What would we call a system of thought that mimics Judaism and/or is derived from it but denies the centrality of the Jewish people?

[498] It is generally agreed that Judaism is not to be defined along strict confessional lines. But some attribute this fact to the extraordinarily broad range of beliefs that can be found in Jewish history, including the *Talmud*, while others attribute it to some communal element that transcends beliefs altogether. I think that modern history makes this distinction appear more important than it ever has before. Today we have not only religious and ethnic Jewishness but also a national identity (Israeli) that is based upon Jewishness. Without taking a stand on this contentious subject, it should be painfully obvious that there is more than one way to define oneself as a Jew.

cultural/historical level and certainly has little or nothing to do with physical characteristics, DNA or genetics. So in order to even discuss "Jewishness" we need some implicit definition (or something analogous to a definition). That is not an altogether simple or easy matter but we can roughly define it as a consciousness of historical continuity and collective destiny among a group of people whose Jewish identity is affirmed not only by them but also by their neighbors or hosts. In other words, we cannot define either Jewishness strictly in terms of intellectual beliefs, as Philo of Alexandria at times did, any more than we can define it in terms of purely genetic characteristics, especially considering the new evidence provided us by DNA. Obviously, beliefs and accidents of birth do have something to do with Jewishness. But we can and should take into consideration ethnic (in the broad sense) and broad cultural characteristics, forged by historical factors, of what we could call the global Jewish community, which includes a rather large and diverse group of ethnicities and cultures.

We have already discussed the extent to which the *Dialoghi d'Amore* can (or should) be viewed as a work of Jewish philosophy. We remarked on the surprising lack of particularistic Jewish elements in the book. We have seen that scholarly opinion is mixed regarding its Jewishness. This may however have more to do with an underlying (and unacknowledged) disagreement about Jewishness than it does about the particular work. Seymour Feldman, for example, says that that it: "is in several respects a commentary on Plato's *Symposium* and is typical of other Renaissance works...Yet, as we shall see, it is nevertheless a "Jewish" commentary on Plato, just as Marcilio Ficino's works on this topos reflects his

Christian commitments."[499] Of course, that has to be correct to a degree. But we have also seen that both Collette Sirat and Julius Guttman thought it to be more of a work of general philosophy. Nowadays most people don't think of Ficino as a particularly Christian thinker (even though he was a priest) but as a Renaissance thinker and the analogy with Judah Abrabanel is a powerful one. If his intended audience had been non-Jews or Jews would it have an impact on the Jewishness of the book?[500] But perhaps the very need to classify them reflects an anachronistic agenda based upon more current ways of classifying philosophy and I am not completely sure whether or to what extent that question impacts greatly upon the major

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[499] See "Platonic Cosmologies," p.557. Feldman goes on to explain incisively how Judah Abrabanel's work fits in with Jewish and Moslem medieval philosophy, Philo of Alexandria and Plotinus but never fully explains why it is "Jewish" except to allude to the third dialogue's explanation of the birth of love. This perhaps is why he enclosed the word "Jewish" in scare quotes. On p. 580 he suggests that Abrabanel is liberated from "the Platonic prison in which he occasionally finds himself" by his "Jewishness," which allows for a more optimistic view of matter. This emerges out of Abrabanel's discussion of the circles of love involving the superior and the inferior. I have argued that the distinctively Jewish teaching in the book involves the love of the superior for the inferior. But since that encompasses both Judaism and Christianity and perhaps Islam, many might not view it as a distinctively "Jewish" teaching. He also mentions (p.580) that there is no "original sin" in Judah Abrabanel but we have noted that the origin of that "Christian" doctrine seems to lie in ancient Jewish thought and that it was rather muted in Renaissance Christian thinking. He ends by concluding that if Moshe Idel's belief is correct that Judah Abrabanel represents "a Jewish version of the 'ancient philosophy' or 'philosophia prisca' his enrolling Plato in the school of Moses is better seen as a marriage between Plotinus and Moses." (pp. 581-582). I agree with Idel on this important point.

[500] Ora Schwarzwald has claimed that the intended Gentile audience of Medieval translations of the Hebrew Bible render them not Jewish. See "On the Jewish Nature of Medieval Spanish Biblical Translations," p.136. I am not taking a position regarding whether Schwarzwald is correct or not but it should be obvious that there is a normative element in this attempt at defining Jewish writing.

issue of this book: the extent of kabbalistic influence. But I suspect there is a strong connection.[501] Whether this question is anachronistic or not, the issue of specifically Jewish culture and Jewish religion is one that did not simply arise in the modern post-emancipation world. I am sure that there were many isolated Jewish communities that were very different culturally from those that most of us know about today and perhaps they were also quite close culturally to their surrounding hosts but still Jewish from a religious standpoint and, most importantly, still maintained a particularistic concept of Jewish people-hood and identity. Indeed, a particularistic concern for Jews would seem to be found in all viable Jewish communities.[502] There is therefore a legitimate sense in which a complete or almost total lack of such concern disqualifies a *genre* from being considered really "Jewish" in an important sense of that term. But as our perusal of biblical and other Jewish literature showed, the *degree* of such concern varied widely; therefore, there is precedence for calling universalistic literature "Jewish." And there is also no question that Judah Abrabanel harbored such particularistic concerns to an extent, based upon his poetic utterances. Also important, however, is the historical context of

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[501] I would conjecture that the relevance of this question to our specific theme is as follows. If Abrabanel seems influenced by certain ideas that could be found in both Kabbalah and in non-Jewish literature, we might want to make a judgment regarding the actual influence and the author's intention. If we conceptualize it as a specifically Jewish work, that leads us to imagine kabbalistic influence. If we view it as a more general philosophical work, we might tend to focus on the non-Jewish influences.

[502] Even if we found an isolated Jewish community that believed there were no other Jews left in the world, this criterion would still apply because if you could prove to them that other Jews did in fact exist they would embrace them as fellow Jews. That is not to say, however, that all Jews consider their fellow Jews equal to themselves. That would be asking far too much.

the writing.[503] That latter criterion would of course move us in the direction of considering the *Dialoghi* a Jewish writing since Judah Abrabanel was not only a Jew but a member of a most influential, prestigious and powerful Jewish family. Even so, there is still the lingering question of the extent to which the book itself reflects typical Jewish attitudes and concerns. We will now attempt to think through the possible relationship between that question and the other one regarding kabbalistic influence and intent. But before we do that, I would like to review an excerpt from Dialogue I, which in my estimation does not reflect typical Jewish values and despite its nuanced structure may actually be in opposition to them.

> Philo: This desire of profitable things is called ambition or cupidity. But in a more moderate form it is called contentment or satisfaction of our needs, and is an excellent quality; or again it is called sobriety because content with necessaries. And sages say that he is truly rich who is content with what he has.[504] Whilst one extreme of this virtue is greed of the superfluous, so the other extreme consists in ceasing to desire even the needful, and this is called sloth.
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> Sophia: What is this you are saying, Philo? Are there not many philosophers who consider we

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[503] For example, if the *Book of Job* were not found in the Hebrew Bible there might be a very good case for disqualifying it as Jewish literature. If it had been written in the Middle Ages, it might have been Jewish, Christian or Muslim. It lacks Jewish content, as ordinarily defined, and never mentions the Jewish people even though it surely exudes Jewish values. Perhaps for that reason many early rabbis thought that Job was not a Jew.

[504] The Mishna (Sayings of the Fathers, IV:1) records Ben Zoma saying that the one who is truly rich is he who *rejoices* in his lot. There may also be similar sayings from the Stoics.

should abandon all wealth? And did not some in fact abandon it?

Philo: Such an opinion was indeed held by some Stoic and Academic philosophers. But in their case it was not sloth which overcame their desire, and their efforts, to supply their needs; but they purposed to turn to the life of contemplation. And they saw that riches are a great obstacle to profound and happy contemplation, because they preoccupy the mind, and distract it from its speculative activity and from that contemplation wherein consists its perfection and happiness. But the Peripatetics hold that one should acquire wealth as a necessary condition of a virtuous life, saying that, though riches are not virtues, they are at least instruments of virtue, since without a sufficiency of means we could not practice generosity nor munificense nor engage in alms-giving or other charitable works.

Sophia: But would not a good disposition of mind suffice in regard to deeds of virtue like these, and readiness to perform them whenever we should have the means? In that way a man might be good without any wealth.

Philo: No: such a disposition without works is not enough; for virtues consist of habitual well-doing and are acquired by persevering in good works. And, since it is the case that such works as these cannot be performed without means, it follows that without means we must lack such

virtues.

Sophia: But why did the Stoics not realize this? And how can the Peripatetics deny that wealth distracts the mind from happy contemplation?

Philo: The Stoics allow that certain domestic and civil virtues cannot be acquired without means. But do not imagine that happiness[505] consists in means rather than in the intellective and contemplative life, for the sake of which we ought to abandon wealth and take heed lest the virtues that derive from wealth be changed into vices, instead of into other virtues more exalted and nearer to supreme happiness.[506]

What we see here is Philo initially defending the Aristotelian view of ethical virtue and Sophia denigrating it. It is obvious that the Aristotelian rationale regarding the acquiring of good habits can be easily applied to the normative Jewish view that it is actions that count most and not intentions. And the pursuit of wealth obviously facilitates the exercise of certain benevolent

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[505] The new English translation's rendering of this as: "But do not be deceived in understanding what happiness is for them..." (p.36). The Italian text reads: "*Ma non t'inganni che consista in quelli la felicitá.*" (p.15). But in fact on many occasions Philo makes it clear that ultimate happiness consists in something other than action: union with God.

[506] See *The Dialoghi*, pp.13-14. The conflict between Aristotelian ethical virtues and Roman Catholic vows of poverty and deprecation of wealth is apparent here even if the Stoics are used as the adversaries. Jewish thought also generally views wealth as a good thing, even though Medieval Jewish values tended towards the ascetic. Certainly, Jewish thought extols good works (*mitzvoth*) above almost everything else. What is obvious here, however, once one reaches the end of the discussion is not only that Sophia was initially persuaded by teachings that deprecated wealth but even Philo, who assigns wealth some value, admits that not only wealth but even good works are not very close to the supreme happiness.

virtues.[507] Therefore, Sophia seems quite far from the Jewish view and Philo quite close to it. Yet in the end Philo comes to agree that the ethical virtues are only penultimate at best and that supreme happiness is closer to the intellective and contemplative virtues.

The Relevance of Jewishness to Kabbalistic Influence

The first thing I would have to say is that if the relationship with Kabbalah were more or less unconscious or unintended, the Jewishness of the work would have little bearing or relevance. We are all influenced by currents of thought that we might even consciously disavow or at least would not be overly concerned to participate in. Even if Judah Abrabanel had been relatively unconcerned about traditional Jewish thought (an assumption that I find almost impossible to accept), he might still have been *unconsciously* influenced by Kabbalah. That influence might even have been the result of non-Jewish Renaissance thought and Christian Kabbalah. But I think that when people attribute kabbalistic doctrines to Judah Abrabanel they usually believe that he was quite conscious of them and indeed had some kind of hidden agenda in promoting them in some way. Now let us assume that he was quite consciously a kabbalist of sorts. I would venture to say that if that were the case, he almost surely would have been promoting a more or less traditional Jewish agenda as well, unless he (like Pico della Mirandola) was promoting a Christian agenda. Why

[507] This must have been on Judah Abrabanel's mind. His father lamented his involvement in politics and economic activities and resolved to devote his life to intellectual and religious pursuits. But soon enough he found himself again immersed in them. Perhaps Judah found medicine more conducive to his religious/philosophical concerns.

do I say that? I readily admit that today there are those who promote Kabbalah in the absence of any traditional religious affiliation or orientation. They extract from or import into that traditional Jewish teaching something more universalistic. But we need to place Judah Abrabanel in his own time and place. For example, no matter how creative, broad-minded and innovative Pico della Mirandola might have been, he still remained a loyal Christian (even if the Church might not have always agreed with that). Those thinkers did not live in modern times when it is possible to live without a religious affiliation altogether or even to have quite free and tolerant dialogue with members of other faiths. Since we have no good reason to believe that Judah Abrabanel ever converted to Christianity, the best assumption is that he remained a loyal Jew. Now if a loyal Jew wrote Jewish philosophy in that period there was a fairly high probability of being favorably inclined towards Kabbalah, even if he failed to reveal everything that he knew. On the other hand, if a loyal Jew were to write for a primarily Christian audience, there seems much less likelihood that his agenda would be kabbalistic, even if he held kabbalistic views. The reason for that is the prevalent belief that such secrets are not meant for even average Jews, let alone Gentiles.[508] But there was also a significant probability of his being indifferent or even opposed to Kabbalah. We must look at the dialogues themselves.

It is fairly well established that Philo portrays himself not only as a member of the Jewish people but also as a follower of Moses. His fairly numerous assertions regarding the primacy of the teachings of Moses regarding creation and

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[508] For a good discussion of this, see Brian Ogren, *Renaissance and Rebirth*, pp.163-169.

other subjects seem to brand him as not only a Jew by birth but also by virtue of religious consciousness and belief. We have seen, however, that under at least some interpretations Philo, as a literary character, could possibly have been construed to be a Christian convert of Jewish descent, just as Judah Abrabanel himself was called a convert (probably wrongly) in the second edition of the book. At any rate, from almost the very beginning and for various reasons, the Jewishness of the work has frequently been questioned. Aaron Hughes expressed it well.

> These two features—embracing Renaissance ideals, and writing in Italian—have led many to debate the "Jewishness" of the work. Because Abravanel seems to have been completely unconcerned with the venerable medieval philosophical antagonism between faith and reason, and because of the overwhelming positive response of the *Dialoghi* among a non-Jewish reading public (and concomitant rejection by his immediate Jewish contemporaries), some have questioned whether this work belongs in the "canon" of Jewish philosophical works. In what follows I want to make the case that if such a "canon" exists, then this work clearly belongs in it, and also to demonstrate how, despite the virtually unprecedented universalism that we encounter in it, the *Dialoghi*...represents a distinctly Jewish response to trends in the larger intellectual cultures in which Jews found themselves.[509]

[509] See *The Art of Dialogue in Jewish Philosophy*, p. 108.

As we will see in Chapter VII, Judah was not "completely unconcerned with the venerable medieval philosophical antagonism between faith and reason." Still, such a concern does not make him a Jewish philosopher. Hughes goes on to say that like Messer Leon, Abrabanel's goal was "to take Renaissance ideals and show how they are found most perfectly in the prophetic tradition associated with the Hebrew Bible. Not only is biblical rhetoric every bit as good as that found in classical and Renaissance sources, it is also prior in time..."[510] Although I agree somewhat with his premise regarding the author's intentions, I am not quite sure his conclusion follows. We have not really defined "Jewish philosophy" yet and surely we could find other thinkers who were not Jewish but also defended the "prophetic tradition" and "biblical rhetoric" yet we would not call their writings "Jewish." Certainly such scholars could be easily found today and in the recent past, but perhaps far less easily in the Renaissance. And since the Jewishness of the author is indeed a necessary, but not sufficient, criterion for Jewish philosophy, we are still perplexed. Is Jewish apologetics necessarily Jewish philosophy? Does it matter who the author is? Does it matter who the intended audience was? If Judah Abrabanel, even assuming he was a Jew, had intended to write a philosophical book for Jews and his intention was to impress upon them the profundity of both ancient pagan wisdom and medieval/Renaissance Christian thought and their fundamental agreement with the Jewish "prophetic tradition," would we still call it "Jewish Philosophy"? I do not have an answer for this but I would argue that Judah Abrabanel belongs in an area

[510] Ibid, 111

situated on the border of Jewish philosophy and general philosophy and populated by a very small group, most noticeably ibn Gabirol and perhaps Philo of Alexandria but definitely not including Maimonides and most other Jewish philosophers. Ibn Gabirol's metaphysical work was ambiguous enough for some to believe it was Christian or Moslem. Philo of Alexandria's writings were not quite so ambiguous but his emphasis on beliefs and experiences, over people-hood (as we have roughly defined it), is similar to Judah Abrabanel's book. That anomalous quality of the *Dialoghi* is really the important issue, not whether we ultimately choose to call it "Jewish."

How Jewish is Philo?

This may seem to be an outrageous question. He constantly reminds us of his Jewish ancestry and his allegiance to Moses. Many modern commentators, most authoritatively Angela Guidi, have emphasized the Jewish teachings of Philo.[511] This is a good corrective to a prior assumption that the work deviates markedly from normative Judaism. But it is our job to inquire regarding evidence and not simply take common prejudices or conventional wisdom for granted. Guidi also points out that Philo (J. Abrabanel?) was heir to the Solomonic as well as the Platonic wisdom tradition and that both had their erotic components.[512] This is all undoubtedly true. Furthermore, given a broad enough definition almost *all* Western thought is partly Jewish or at least Judaic. And the kernel of truth behind the myth that Plato had been influenced by Moses is the fact that the medieval and Renaisance access to Plato ran through the Neoplatonic and Abrahamic traditions. But in contrast to

[511] See her *Amour Et Sagesse*, p.116.
[512] Ibid, 120-122

much of Western thought, which often failed to acknowledge in indebtedness to the Jewish people, Kabbalah was outwardly and aggressively Jewish. So despite the utterly annoying perplexity of what it means to say that an author or protagonist is "Jewish" this ancillary question may impact greatly on the kabblistic hypothesis. It can be intelligibly asked just as we sometimes ask to what extent a "Jewish" novelist's thoughts are really Jewish or whether his or her Jewishness is merely an ethnic flavor that is incidental to the real theme of the novel. That could even be the case with one who has a strong "Jewish identity," assuming it is an ethnic and not a religious one. In other cases a non-religious Jewish identity could be essential both to the theme of the author and to whether we call his or her writings "Jewish." In the case of the *Dialoghi* there are no unambiguous mentions of any cultural or ethnic aspects of Jewishness. The discussions of the Jewish people are always in religious, intellectual/philosophical contexts. But even those discussions, as significant as they may be, do not necessarily make this a Jewish book. In Boccaccini's terminology, it could be Judaic but not Jewish. One should recall that Pico della Mirandola also praised Moses profusely but in the end seems to have used him as his own spokesman.[513] For that reason and especially because he was a devout Catholic we would not say that Pico's thought was Jewish, even though he surely knew quite a bit about Judaism and was quite interested in it.

There is an extraordinary statement to be found in the *Mishna* tractate *Abot* III: 17-18, attributed to Rabbi Akiba, one of the most (perhaps the most) influential early rabbis, which I have already quoted. I will now quote it again.

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[513] See the *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, pp. 232-233.

> He used to say: Beloved is man in that he was created in the image [of God]. Greater love was proved to him in that he was created in the image of God, as it is said (Gen. IX. 6): — In the image of God made He man. Beloved are Israel in that they are called sons of God. Greater love was proved to them in that they were called sons of God, as it is said (Deut. XIV. 1): — 'Sons are ye to the Lord your God'.
>
> Beloved are Israel in that there was given to them a precious instrument. Greater love was proved to them in that there was given to them the precious instrument whereby the world was created, as it is said (Prov. IV. 2): — 'For good doctrine I give you, forsake not my Torah.'[514]

This extraordinary passage, the influence of which on Rabbinic Judaism is immense, teaches two very interesting doctrines. Firstly, it distinguishes between being created in the image of God and being called sons of God. The former is an ontological condition of all human beings but the latter is something that is told, called, believed, etc. In modern language, it is more existential than ontological. Only Israel (to the best knowledge of the early rabbis) was called and told that they are sons of God. The second doctrine is even more extraordinary and, while widespread, far less prevalent or normative. God's *Torah* (the *Pentateuch*) was not only given to the Jewish people as a teaching, but was the instrument by which the world was created or (less likely) the vessel within

[514] This translation is from R. Travers Herford, *The Ethics of the Talmud: Sayings of the Fathers*, p. 87. The final word (not final in the Hebrew) may also be translated as "my teaching and most probably is the correct interpretation within the context of the wisdom literature."

which it was created.[515] The reason I dwell on this passage is that it forms a basis for some extremely characteristic teachings of traditional rabbinic Judaism. Firstly, as we saw previously, there is a sharp line drawn between the Jew and non-Jew. Secondly, the *Torah* (Pentateuch) is at times viewed in this most extraordinary manner as something that not only existed prior to creation (there were a number of such things according to the *Talmud*) but also as an essential instrument of creation or even as the ontological foundation of the universe.[516] That latter belief is quite extraordinary and we don't know exactly how widespread it was but it certainly became quite influential.

These aforementioned doctrines are simply not to be found anywhere in the *Dialoghi*. Philo does indeed claim, in accordance with Jewish tradition, Hebrew to be "the mother and source of all other languages" (p. 96). He attempts to prove (wrongly) by the Hebrew word for heaven (*shamayim*) the conflicted presence there of both fire (*eysh*) and water (*mayim*).[517] But he also mixes his discussion of the Bible with Greek mythology. He even speaks of the biblical creation story

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[515] While the latter interpretation is a possible literal translation of the text, it is untraditional. It cannot be completely ruled out since there are religious schools that hold sacred texts to be both eternal and essentially divine such as some interpretations of the divinity of the *Rigveda* and some Islamic conceptions of the *Koran*.

[516] There are even *midrashim* that describe God as consulting the *Torah* prior to creating the universe. A literal reading would indicate that not only did God create the *Torah* prior to the rest of the creation but that it is at least some kind of model or blueprint or even some sort of independent authority.

[517] The word *shamayim* is now believed to be related to the root *shamah*, now found only in Arabic. Ironically, the search for the perfect primeval language in ancient biblical Hebrew may be more closely related to the ethos of Latin literature than to early Hebrew itself, where grammar and word meanings are rather fluid. For a discussion of the severe prescriptive nature of medieval Latin literature see Jeffrey Schnapp, "Dante's Sexual Solecisms: Gender and Genre in the *Commedia*"

in the same breath with the births of Diana and Apollo (p. 144). At most, Abrabanel's Philo refers to the teachings of Moses as both true revelation and useful for salvation (redemption). But never does he identify the *Torah* as a creative intermediary between God and His creation. Hence he seems to reject any strong doctrine of *Torah* as *Logos*. But that is not to say that he lacks a *Logos* doctrine. This throws us back to a most basic prejudice that Judah Abrabanel may possibly have inherited from his father: the overarching importance of only two beings: man and God. While this prejudice by itself does not constitute a denial of the Jewishness of his philosophy, when it is turned into a coherent philosophical doctrine it should be recognized as a partial repudiation of much of Jewish tradition, which emphasized the essential sacredness of such things as the Holy Land, the Jewish people, the Hebrew language, the Sabbath and the *Torah*. Philo comes across in the dialogues as one extremely knowledgeable of Jewish tradition but also selectively ignoring vast areas of it, which might possibly signal a covert rejection of them. This seems to be true even regarding the *Torah*, which he tends to interpret Platonically and allegorically. In other words, even if he did equate *Torah* with *Logos* it would have been a more abstract notion of *Logos* that would constitute the essential reality of *Torah* and not its specific narratives or commandments.[518]

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[518] This raises a question regarding whether the authors of the *Midrashim* and some of the kabbalists, who often interpreted the *Torah* allegorically or metaphorically shared such a disregard for the actual text. This is a complex and difficult question that really deserves a more expansive answer than we can give here. Nevertheless, we can say that almost all interpreters of the Bible are selective regarding literal and non-literal readings. While no influential school is wedded to a complete literal interpretation, some are much more attached to such concrete entities as the Land of Israel, the Jewish people, the biblical commandments, etc. Even the most outrageously allegorical traditional Jewish commentators place those entities in explicitly

Is Sophia Necessarily Jewish?

The question we now ask is whether Sophia is obviously Jewish. This may appear, at first blush, to be irrelevant and insignificant. From a purely religious or philosophical perspective it would be. Nevertheless, we think it has some relevance to the Jewishness of the work. But in comparison to Philo we will ask the question in a somewhat different way. Unlike Philo, who is undoubtedly a Jew and also quite knowledgeable (Jewishly), she surely lacks the latter characteristic. We saw that in the third dialogue she sided with Plato and denied that God could love. That places her outside normative popular Jewish discourse but not necessarily outside of Jewish philosophical discourse. With Philo we were also concerned regarding to what extent his teachings cohered with and were similar to normative Jewish teachings. Regarding Sophia, however, we shall be asking whether she is necessarily a Jew at all. We have already seen that Jewish authors of the Renaissance sometimes extolled non-Jewish women. And, even if Sophia was supposed to be Jewish, as a literary device Judah Abrabanel might have portrayed her as ignorant of Jewish tradition so as to highlight the knowledge and teachings of Philo. But we could also ask why it is that she seems so much more knowledgeable regarding Pagan mythology and philosophy than she is regarding Judaism. If the goal of the book is to reconcile Judaism with mythology and philosophy, she could easily have been portrayed as one knowledgeable about Judaism but relatively ignorant of philosophy and mythology and requiring instruction in them. That might have made more sense, especially if Abrabanel had meant to target a

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high regard. Judah Abrabanel, however, does not seem to do so to nearly the same extent in his philosophical writing and even downplays them.

Jewish audience. But if he were targeting a non-Jewish audience, the converse might have been a better method. There is also the obvious social difficulty of portraying a Jew in love with a woman who might possibly not be Jewish. That being the case, one might have expected her to be even more pronouncedly Jewish. The fact that her religious affiliation is not crystal clear is itself a perplexing problem.

I will argue that the character of Sophia is meant to portray one who is rather ignorant of Judaism but someone who both Jews and non-Jews could possibly identify with. Her knowledge of pagan mythology and philosophy is incredible but she displays no correlative knowledge of Jewish sources. She makes some statements that seem philo-Semitic but her religious identity is somewhat ambiguous. Nevertheless, she does make some statements that could indeed be interpreted as stemming from a Jewish identity but not nearly to the same extent as those of Philo. I will also argue that many interpreters of the book were so eager to put a Jewish stamp on it that they jumped to conclusions both regarding the kabbalistic provenance of certain doctrines as well as the Jewishness of the protagonists. In my opinion, there is little in the book to conclusively confirm that Sophia is Jewish but also no real evidence that she is not. She certainly does not make any statements that might brand her as a Christian. Nevertheless, the statements she does make that seem to brand her as a Jew could also be interpreted in a more generic fashion. In order to flesh this out, I will inspect the sayings of Sophia that could reasonably be construed as specifically Jewish. My underlying methodology is that vague or abstract references to God mean little but more specific references to the Bible, Moses, etc. may deserve some more investigation. All such explicit references are to be found in Book III, something interesting in itself. The

first two books contain a great deal of philosophy and mythology but really no Judaism. If it were possible for a reader to have completed dialogues one and two and still not view this as a Jewish book, we should note this as a rather interesting feature of the work. The fact that the Mosaic tradition is brought out in Book III as a solution to some of the problems discussed in those earlier books is also quite significant. It differs radically from most Jewish literature, which tends to refer to Jewish tradition from the very beginning and not as a *deus ex machina* at the end. It points to the unique and enigmatic nature of the book, straddling as it does the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds. It is also correlative with the personality of Sophia, who begins with great analytical ability and philosophical acumen and ends with the esoteric religious knowledge of Philo added to them as a crowning glory.

We will now begin our inquiry regarding the question: Is Sophia obviously Jewish? Let us look at the following statement by Philo: "according to their rites, the Hebrews must number seven weeks from the day of their exodus from Egypt, making forty-nine days; and on the fiftieth day they celebrate the feast of the giving of the law[519], which God vouch-safed to give to be a universal law for all people." (p.293). Why does he

[519] The holiday of *Shavuot* or Pentecost is never referred to in the Bible as a commemoration of the giving of the Law of Moses. In fact, it is specifically referred to as a wheat harvest festival. The rabbis came up with the conclusion regarding the giving of the Law rather late, though it might possibly have been based upon earlier traditions. Philo of Alexandria, for example, does not mention it. The New Testament, however, may testify to such a tradition since in the *Acts of the Apostles* the early Christians receive the Spirit on Pentecost, which may be a parallel to the receiving of the *Torah*. At any rate, this statement of Philo clearly reflects rabbinic and popular Jewish culture.

say "their rites"[520] if Sophia is also Jewish? On page 183 he refers to "our own Egyptian[521] Rabbi Moses" referring of course to Moses Maimonides. The word "our" could possibly refer to both him and Sophia but perhaps only to him and the Jewish people, of which she might not even be a part. And if Sophia were an even minimally knowledgeable Jew would she not already know about Passover and Shavuot?

My conclusion is quite tentative but I hope to show where others have jumped to unjustified conclusions. If, however, it is not at all obvious that Sophia is Jewish and fairly obvious that Philo is, this points to even more ambiguity in the

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[520] The Italian text (p.249) reads: "*li riti degli ebrei.*" The new English translation (p.239) more correctly therefore reads: "rites of the Jews."

[521] It is interesting that he refers to Maimonides as "Egyptian" since Maimonides referred to himself as "Spanish." Pico also referred to Maimonides as Egyptian in his *Apologia* (*Opera Omnia*, Basel, 1557, p.178). I found this in Brian Ogren, *Renaissance and Rebirth*, pp.221-222, where one can find the original Latin and Ogren's translation. This may indicate some significance of Egypt to these Renaissance writers, perhaps related to Hermeticism. Or perhaps it is simply a mimicking of Thomas Aquinas' terminology, which is actually quite likely. It is not as if people in the Renaissance would have had any reason for associating Moses Maimonides specifically with Egypt as perhaps his own contemporaries and 13th century figures might have had, since he lived in Egypt and served Saladin there for many years. On the contrary, historical consciousness has tended to associate Maimonides with Spain, his birthplace, and only secondarily with North Africa, where he sought refuge. Also interesting is the fact that Abrabanel mentions the exodus from Egypt in the context of Passover and Shavuot but fails to give it the normal overarching significance that it has always had in Jewish thought, as a divine rescue from darkness and oppression. Is it possible that Abrabanel wants to associate Egypt with something mysterious but essentially positive — perhaps the Hermetic tradition? Although this takes us a bit far afield, the original Moses was sometimes associated in Hellenistic literature with Hermes. See J. J. Collins, *Between Athens and Jerusalem*, 37-46. Despite the general Jewish dislike for Egypt and all things Egyptian, the Bible records an underlying respect for Egyptian wisdom in I Kings, 5:10 where Solomon's wisdom is compared favorably to "all the wisdom of the Egyptians." This coheres with the general impression of the ancient world regarding the Egyptian mysteries.

book itself, something that we always knew existed but perhaps have not always seen in its starkness. At the very least it points to the possibility of intimate and intense inter-faith dialogue and at most to a not too subtle love of a Jewish man for a woman who may not be Jewish. I do not mean to imply that Judah Abrabanel was personally condoning love affairs between Jews and gentiles. If Sophia is not clearly Jewish, a likely literary purpose would be to show the non-Jewish world that they have much to learn from Judaism. Yet the achievement of that purpose would pay the rather heavy price of appearing to condone a suspiciously intimate inter-faith relationship.[522] But, as he shows in his exposition of pagan mythology, he also seems not to be overly concerned with other traditional Jewish opinions. As a matter of fact, even if we were to ultimately conclude that Sophia is indeed Jewish, her relative lack of Jewish knowledge renders her an incongruous potential mate for a learned and committed Jew such as Philo.

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[522] This would not be the first or only time that a Renaissance philosopher would make daring, even if veiled, allusions to prohibited physical relationships as something of spiritual value. For an interesting discussion see Anthony Levi, *Renaissance and Reformation*, pp. 121-125. In Levi's view, Ficino was quite daring in this respect (in the *D'amore*) and others, including Judah Abrabanel shrunk from this stance, reestablishing a stricter separation of physical and spiritual love. Regardless of the correctness or not of Levi's interpretation, there is reason to believe that Abrabanel might have been expressing two different attitudes towards physical love and therefore of the attraction of Philo for Sophia, which surely appears to be partly physical. According to this (admittedly conjectural) interpretation, Sophia holds the more traditional medieval opinion that physical love adds little or nothing to spiritual love and Philo holds the new Renaissance (and ancient Greek) belief that the physical and the spiritual can be linked, the former according to the Greek view as a means to the latter and in Philo's view as a completion of it. So, combining that conjecture with the other one that Sophia is not Jewish yields a perception that the Jewish man has a crush on the non-Jewish woman and is rebuffed by her, as she is only interested in his spiritual gifts. Whether or not that was the author's intention, such an appearance would be interesting nonetheless.

Of course the aforementioned examples underscore my opinion that this book was probably not addressed to Jews at all. As another example, Sophia is apparently aware (p. 55) of the biblical story of Amnon and Tamar, half siblings (son and daughter of King David) who had a brief sexual relationship. This story would perhaps be as likely to be remembered by Gentiles as by Jews, especially since it does not reflect favorably on the family of King David or on the king himself.[523] And she shows no evidence of knowing anything of the

[523] The entire discussion of this case of incest and rape seems strange as an example of purely carnal love since it appears on the surface to be so much more pathological than normal carnal love or lust in general. See *2 Samuel*, 13. Philo's response (p.56) shows a great deal more appreciation of the exceptionality of that case. He uses it as a paradigm case of love "engendered by desire or sensual appetite." While the Italian text (p.51) is somewhat difficult to understand, it seems to say at times that the love is caused by sensual desire and at other times that when the sensual appetite ceases the love also ceases. These are obviously not the same concepts though they may be coextensive at times. The new English translation (p.65) reads as follows: "Such love is imperfect, because it depends on a sinful and fragile source, and because it is the offspring of desire." The earlier translation (p.56) reads: "Such love is imperfect, deriving as it does from a source both inconstant and vicious: for it is a child born of desire." The case of Amnon and Tamar is mentioned in the *Mishna* (Ethics of the Fathers, V: 19) and there it is described as a type of love that is *dependent* upon some external consideration (such as sex) rather than one that is merely *engendered* by one. The *Talmud* (*Sanhedrin*, 21a) considers this case to be one of lust and a sexual relationship between two individuals who are from a halakhic standpoint not really siblings (despite having the same father) since Tamar was the daughter of a non-Jewish woman and had not yet converted to Judaism so the incest laws of *Leviticus* might not have applied to them. Judging from her brother Absalom's story, this may be a far-fetched justification for Tamar's contemplation in *2 Samuel* that they might actually marry after the rape (and presumably after her conversion). But whether we accept this justification or not, from at least one Jewish standpoint this might seem to legitimate a love affair and marriage between a Jewish man and a (currently) non-Jewish woman. But as mentioned previously, Sophia seems to know nothing of these Jewish commentaries and even Philo does not specifically reveal them even though his opinion is suspiciously similar to that of the *Mishna*.

Talmudic commentaries associated with that sordid affair. Perhaps that could be explained by the fact that women traditionally did not study the *Talmud* but in one such commentary (*Sanhedrin*, 1c) is to be found the opinion that as a result of that episode David enacted a law against a man and an unmarried woman being secluded. Are Philo and Sophia perhaps violating that very Talmudic law? That would be quite ironic.

The next quote is from page 277. Philo is discussing the origin of divine love towards humankind and from whence it originated since "men have for many thousands of years been uncertain as to when the world was created".

> Sophia: Explain this doubt which has troubled men's minds concerning the time of creation of the world, and we shall straightway understand the difficulty which depends upon it as to when love was born; for once it has been clearly stated you will find the way to a solution more quickly.
>
> Philo: Listen and I will tell you. All men grant that the supreme God, the father and creator of the world, is eternal without any beginning in time; but they are divided in their opinion concerning the creation of the world, whether it exists from eternity or was produced at some later time. Many philosophers hold that it was produced from eternity by God, and is like God in that it never had a temporal beginning, and amongst them, the greatest philosopher, Aristotle, and all the Peripatetics.
>
> Sophia: And what difference, then, would there be between God and the world if both existed

from eternity?

Philo: The difference between them would still be great, because God would have been the creator from eternity, and the world would have been created from eternity: the one the eternal cause, the other the eternal effect: but the faithful and all those who believe in the sacred law of Moses hold that the world was not created from eternity, but *ex nihilo* in the beginning of time, and certain philosophers also seem to believe this. Amongst them is Plato, godlike in his wisdom, who in the Timaeus, says that the world was made and begotten of God, and created out of chaos, that confused material which went to the making of all things. And though Plotinus, his follower, tries to reconcile him with the theory of the eternity of the world, saying the Platonic generation and production of the world is understood to be from eternity, yet Plato's words seem to assign to it a beginning in time, and it was understood thus by other illustrious Platonists. It is certainly true that he makes chaos, out of which everything is made, to be eternal, that is eternally created by God. And this the faithful do not believe; for they hold that up to the time of the Creation God alone existed[524] without the world and without chaos, and that the omnipotence of God created all things out of nothing in the beginning of time.

[524] It is interesting that Philo does not seem to know about the Talmudic discussions of the things that God created prior to the creation of the physical universe.

> And indeed Moses nowhere gives any clear indication that he held matter to be coeternal with God.

It should have been obvious in the Italian Renaissance that not only Jews believed in the biblical (rabbinic?) doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*. Orthodox (in the broad sense) Christians also held to such a belief and perhaps that is why Philo might be distinguishing between the faithful and those who believe in the Law of Moses. But perhaps this is merely a literary devise and does not imply two separate categories. If that is the case, then perhaps Jews and Christians are both "faithful" and believers in the "Law of Moses" or, alternatively, only Jews are among the "faithful" while both qualify as "believers." At any rate, if Sophia were a faithful Jewess, her knowledge of Judaism would seem to be much less than her knowledge of philosophy, mythology, etc. She asks for the "reasons" in favor of these three opinions: the Platonic, the Aristotelian and that of the "faithful...who believe in the sacred law of Moses." It does not seem to occur to her that the latter belief could simply be a matter of tradition or faith, not requiring reasons. Would her perceived need for reasons be the opinion of most Jews?

The previously cited dialogue has far more interesting ramifications than simply the religious identity of Sophia. Is the opinion of the "faithful...and those who believe in the sacred law of Moses" also the opinion of the Kabbalists? It should be obvious from our previous discussion of the *Zohar* that Judah Abrabanel's doctrine of creation *ex nihilo*, which he appears to derive from the teachings of Maimonides, is not the teaching of what has come to be the main fount of Kabbalah just as it is not the same as the theory of ibn Gabirol. The difference, however, is that Abrabanel specifically refers to ibn

Gabirol's views on creation and either distorts, misunderstands or perhaps interprets them creatively but never actually refers to the position of the *Zohar* or other kabbalistic texts on creation.

The next appearance of possible Jewish identity in Sophia is to be found on page 280 and is indeed at first blush an explicit avowal of Jewishness but, for the same reasons previously cited, may not be.

> Sophia: These arguments of the Peripatetics seem to be not without foundation, more especially the theological reasons derived from the eternal nature of the divine Craftsman, and of the end of His voluntary creation. What do the Platonists say, and we who all believe in the sacred law of Moses,[525] which assigns a beginning in time to the universal creation *ex nihilo*?

After a long explanation by Philo, which combines the Mosaic view and the Platonic one ("the heavens and first matter are naturally neither generable nor corruptible" but "created out of nothing...by miraculous and divine agency") there is a discussion of whether the world is eternal or temporal. Philo says it is both since it has a beginning in time but no end.

[525] It should be noted that it is not at all clear that the "law of Moses" (Jewish *halakha*) teaches belief in creation *ex nihilo* as a positive commandment. It may however logically entail a belief in some sort of creation. See Gluck, "Maimonides' Arguments for Creation *Ex Nihilo* in the *Guide of the Perplexed*" *Medieval Philosophy and Theology*, Vol. 7, no. 2. Nowadays some would question whether the *teachings* of Moses (the Bible) contain the doctrine of creation explicitly and would rather ascribe it to the rabbis. Nevertheless, in medieval and Renaissance times the doctrine would have been attributed to the Bible. The word "law" was also more broadly used as a synonym for "teachings" as when Judaizers were accused of (or even admitted to) rejecting the Law of Jesus for the Law of Moses. Jesus never promulgated his own law but only commented upon the Law and teachings of Moses.

Sophia asks again regarding "reasons" for such a belief on page 282.

> Sophia: Your reasons will suffice to defend me from the Peripatetic, though not to attack him, and Plato can use the very same in his own stead. But what cause had Plato to make chaos eternal, since God in His omnipotence can create it out of nothing, and the whole world from it, as we believe?
>
> Philo: Since it is sufficient that faith should not conflict with reason, we have no need of proof, for then we should have knowledge and not faith; and it is enough to believe steadfastly that which is not disproved by reason. Plato, however, made first matter eternal in order that the Mosaic account of the Creation might be upheld by the reason of philosophy; for he wished to be and to appear a philosopher rather than a believer in the Law.

This discussion suggests some possible disagreement or misunderstanding about faith and reason that we will re-examine in the next chapter. Sophia now begins to ask penetrating questions regarding Philo's Jewish account of creation. On page 284 she states: "Although I will grant you that chaos has existed from eternity, I will not therefore concede that it was created by God." Sophia has difficulty believing that anything can be both created and eternal or indissoluble. On page 288 she asks: "And you believe that God Who made the heavens to be dissoluble by nature would make them indissoluble, contradicting the very nature of His own work, and appearing to pass judgement on Himself?" Philo now explains

the dissolution of the creation.

> Philo: For six thousand of the seven thousand years Chaos continually brings forth the lower bodies, and when her period is completed, she is said to gather all things within herself, and to rest during the seven thousandth year; and in that time she again conceives a new generation for another six thousand years.
>
> Sophia: How many of these seven thousand years have passed?
>
> Philo: According to Hebrew tradition, we have already reached the five thousand two hundred and sixty second year from the beginning of Creation, and when the six thousand years are completed the lower world will be dissolved.[526]

On page 292 there is another exchange regarding Jewish traditions. It is a continuation of the previous discussion about the dissolution of the lower creation every six or seven thousand years and the heavens every forty nine thousand years, which is also predicted by the astrologers. It should again be obvious that if Sophia is Jewish, she is a quite unknowledgeable about her own tradition in comparison to her knowledge of philosophy and pagan mythology. Not only does she not know anything about Kabbalah (which one might actually expect) but seems never to have even heard of it! Nor does she know much about *Midrash* and Philo needs to explain to her some fairly familiar Hebrew words. This, of course, is far less telling than

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[526] According to the *Babylonian Talmud, Sanhedrin*, 97a, Rabbis Kattina and Eliyahu said that the world would exist for six thousand years.

the fact, previously alluded to, that Philo feels the need to tell Sophia about Passover and Shavuot, two major Jewish holidays.

Finally, let us look at Sophia's final words on page 467.

> For as the divine beauty withdraws the lover into intellectual and spiritual union with itself, and yet returns his love, so I would not deny that I love you and desire union with your intellect—not that your intellect should be joined to mine, but mine to yours, as the lesser to the more perfect. And this you cannot doubt when you consider with what care I study your every thought, and how I rejoice to learn of your wisdom. Of that other union of the body which lovers are wont to seek,[527] I do not believe, nor do I wish that we ought to feel any desire: for as spiritual love is full of goodness and beauty, and all its effects contribute to our happiness and well-being, so corporeal love seems rather to contain naught but evil and ugliness, and its effects for the most part to be pernicious and hurtful....

[527] The Italian text reads: "*che sogliono desiare gli amanti*" and the new English translation on p.359 renders this "lovers always seek." I will leave it to those who know more Tuscan to decide but Pescatori's translation seems to be an even more extreme repudiation of romantic love since it fails to allow for any non-carnal romantic love. Perhaps this only applies to males and in this case the lover is indeed a male but we already know that the lover is quite likely to be female.

Now, we know that many Jews in the medieval and Renaissance periods were quite ascetic by modern standards, but is this any way for a good Jewish girl to talk?[528]

Our conclusion is that Sophia, unlike Philo, could or could not be Jewish but that if she is she is not exactly a sterling example of what a traditional or believing Jew should be. This fits in with the overall ambiguity of the work yet would also be consistent with Aaron Hughes' aforementioned view of the work as a kind of apologetic defense of Jewish tradition even though perhaps aimed primarily at non-Jews.

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[528] While virginity prior to marriage was prized in traditional Jewish societies, it was quite unusual for a Jewish woman to adopt such a starkly anti-sexual stance. Indeed, Jephthah's daughter bewailed her virginity when she thought she would die as a virgin (*Judges*, XI: 37). We do not know of any female version of perpetual celibacy among the Essenes or any other historical Jewish group, with the possible exception of the early Christians. While there is some disputed evidence of female skeletons at Qumran, the only scholar I have found who believes that there were celibate women there is Linda Bennett Elder, "The Woman Question and Female Ascetics among Essenes." See Ziv Hellman, "The Qumran Quandary" for a lively debate among many Dead Sea Scrolls scholars regarding women, celibate or otherwise, at Qumran. Also of interest are the contrasting Jewish and Christian interpretations of the Jephthah story. While Jewish sources considered that for a woman to die a virgin is somewhat of a misfortune, Christians tended to see it as a virtue. It is true, however, that Sephardic tradition allowed for Jephtah's daughter to spend the remainder of her life cloistered and serving God (like a nun) unlike Ashkenazic tradition, which generally held that she was sacrificed. This might allow for a somewhat more positive view of celibacy but still not quite as extreme as the anti-sexual statement of Sophia. For an excellent discussion of traditions surrounding Jephtah and his daughter see Elisheva Baumgarten, "'Remember that glorious girl': Jephtah's Daughter in Medieval Jewish Culture."

Chapter VII: The Actual Encounter with Kabbalah in the Dialoghi

So far we have only discussed the relationship between philosophy, Kabbalah and Judah Abrabanel in somewhat abstract terms. We would now like to look at what Abrabanel actually said about Kabbalah in the *Dialoghi.* If you are interested in what someone thinks about something, a good place to begin is with what he or she actually says about it. Given the title of this book, it is somewhat ironic that what Judah Abrabanel actually says about Kabbalah does not really amount to much and might seem to hardly merit an entire chapter. But I have decided that given all of the conjectures, tentative conclusions, etc. that some have made regarding Abrabanel's kabbalistic agenda and similar cognitive processes that we are all guilty of, the actual words of Judah Abrabanel on this subject should be given a great deal of prominence even if they are few indeed. Let us begin with the explicit words of the text. That may only be a beginning but at least it establishes some grounding in fact. I have already advised the reader that I would not subject Judah Abrabanel to a great deal of investigative conjectures but I do think it is legitimate to compare his explicit statements with other more nuanced ones and to ask questions regarding any discrepancies. Unfortunately, those explicit and literal statements have sometimes been completely sacrificed for the sake of far more speculative approaches. While these literal quotations do require a great deal of interpretation, I think we must look at them quite closely and dispassionately in order to avoid premature conclusions. After all, we often choose between rival explanatory theories on the basis of parsimony. An explanation consonant with what a person says would seem to me to be both

simpler and superior to one that is inconsonant with the author's statements, as long as they both have equal explanatory power. A simpler explanation requires fewer additional assumptions. That preference for simplicity is the norm in science and is also the case for many of us who deal with matters that are not strictly speaking scientific. However, if a person were to truly understand that principle of parsimony and still insist that he or she rejects it and prefers more complicated theories (other things being equal) I could not refute it. This is simply a basic intuition that cannot really be proven. I don't think that anyone has ever shown that more parsimonious theories have a lower probability of being wrong though they may be more likely to be debunked. Perhaps it is an aesthetic intuition. It may even be important in the thought of Judah Abrabanel as well, despite the fact that he does indeed have a liking for elaborate mythological narratives. Although I do not intend to pursue this matter further, if Abrabanel accepted the principle of parsimony (even implicitly) we should be able to ask ourselves what the real purpose is of many of his elaborate arguments and narratives just as the rabbis found meaning in repetition of words in the Bible, a method that seems on the surface to defy parsimony but implicitly assumes it in the mind of God. A word of caution is required, however. Repetition, superfluous arguments and lengthy narratives are all literary devices that may have a persuasive function, in contrast to one of conveying substantive meaning. What might appear to be an explanation may really be a persuasive argument.

For our purposes, the following cluster of dialogue is crucial because therein Abrabanel comes as close as he ever does to endorsing some of the opinions of the kabbalists. One must keep in mind our earlier restriction regarding what we mean by "Kabbalah." We are assuming, of course, that

Abrabanel also restricted the use of that term. But if he extended it much further that would create additional problems since nowhere does he question the older esoteric traditions in the same way as he does the "kabbalistic" ones. His somewhat respectful treatment of such kabbalistic views is a partial endorsement that is combined with deep reservations and doubts. This is in stark contrast to the earlier discussion on pages 89-97 of astrological views that almost surely come from *Sefer Yezirah*, a much older Jewish mystical text. The following discussion can be found on pages 292-296 and I have reproduced almost the entire exchange with the exception of parts that are clearly extraneous or redundant and a section regarding the *Shemitta* and Jubilee years. The context for this discussion is the previous one regarding the cyclical destruction of the worlds. As we already discussed in chapter two, it is not entirely clear that Judah Abrabanel really believed in these seven thousand year cycles and alludes to a Platonic ideal reality that never decomposes but he does give the belief in the cycles a great deal of credibility and in the end links it to kabbalistic tradition. One additional warning regarding terminology might be useful. It would seem that the term "astrology" has a broader use than we are accustomed to.

The Discussion of Kabbalistic Tradition and Authority

> Sophia: This agreement with astrology is no mean proof.[529] But tell me whether these astrologers base this teaching on reason alone, or whether they have it on authority

[529] Note the superior reliability of "astrological" views to "kabbalistic" ones. Previously on p.291 Sophia states: "Astrology, therefore, confirms the sayings of these theologians."

Philo: I have already told you that in holding the world to be corruptible they believe they are supported by reason; but it would be difficult to find any philosophical reasons in assigning a time to this corruption, and they have only the testimony of astrology.[530] Many[531], however,

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[530] This statement: "they believe they are supported by reason; but... they have only the testimony of astrology" is quite significant and indicates to me that Abrabanel did not really consider astrology a universally valid science. Earlier on page 290 he seems to use the terms "astrologers" and "philosophers" interchangeably but it is also obvious that he does not accept all the opinions of even the greatest philosophers. This skeptical attitude might seem to conflict with the conventional wisdom that he not only believed in astrology but also taught it. Previously (pp.89-97) he endorsed astrological views without reservation. It is quite possible that he used the term "astrology" here as a very broad one, encompassing views that he was thoroughly in favor of as well as others that he was skeptical of. As an original thinker he would be skeptical of some traditional thinking. Augustine also accused the "astrologers" of promoting a cyclical view of creation. The fact is that astrology was widely accepted since at least the third century BCE (and still is in some places). Abrabanel was surely aware that one of his heroes (Maimonides) had utterly opposed it. That was relatively rare in the Middle Ages despite the fact that Augustine had also bitterly opposed astrology but there were medieval and Renaissance thinkers who expressed reservations regarding astrology, despite the fact that it was generally accepted. See George Sarton, *Six Wings of Science in the Renaissance*, pp.72-74. Thus Judah Abrabanel's views seem to fit into a broad, normative view of astrology at the time and yet he still was able to be critical of it. It was far less controversial than Kabbalah and was generally considered scientific and rational and not based on faith. For a discussion of its widespread acceptance by late medieval Italian medicine (despite the reservations of some regarding its conflict with free will) see Nancy Siraisi, *Taddeo Alderotti and his Pupils*, pp. 139-145.

[531] This rendering is problematic and eliminates an important distinction. The new English translation (p.238) renders this: "But both say they have it on divine authority..." This is a more literal translation of p.248 of the Italian text: "*Ma l'uno e l'altra dicono avere per divina disciplina...*" On pp.247-248 the Italian text refers to "*astrologi*" and "*teologi*"; our text (and the new English translation) render it as "astrologers" and "theologians."

declare that they have it on divine authority, not only from Moses, the divine lawgiver, but originally from Adam, from whom the unwritten oral tradition, called in the Hebrew tongue Cabbala, signifying reception, passed to the sage Enoch, and from Enoch to famous Noah: who after the Flood, on account of his discovery of wine, was called Jajin, because in Hebrew this signifies wine; and he is depicted with two faces reversed, because he witnessed the age before and after the Flood. He bequeathed the tradition, with much other information concerning human and divine matters, to the wisest of his sons, Shem, and to his descendant, Heber, who were the teachers of Abraham, called Hebrew by

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Who those "theologians" were, however, is not clear. He may be referring to the kabbalists but if so why did he not specify them? Based upon the text (290-291) these are people who believe in the cyclical dissolution of the world after 49,000 years or 50,000 years. He fails to mention who they are but cites ibn Gabirol as a source of their doctrines and Sophia (p.290) calls them "philosophers." This inconsistency was based upon Philo's earlier claim that the theory of cycles was held by the pre-Socratic philosophers (p.288). Philo, however, is more concerned with the beliefs of later thinkers whom he calls "theologians" and on p.292-293 he details their beliefs. Why Abrabanel would have put the word "philosophers" in the mouth of Sophia is an interesting question. But we have seen that Sophia tends to view all religious claims from a philosophical perspective. Along with the astrologers, these theologians believe in divine revelation "not only from Moses...but from Adam, from whom the unwritten oral tradition, called in the Hebrew tongue Cabbala, signifying reception, passed to the sage Enoch, and from Enoch to famous Noah...And the tradition is said to have been handed down successively from Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Levi to the Hebrew sages, or Cabbalists..." Perhaps these "theologians" were Christian kabbalists whom he had encountered. It is interesting that the Mosaic revelation to the Jews is merely termed a written confirmation of a previously existing (and more universal yet esoteric) oral tradition.

Heber his forefather and master. Abraham also knew Noah, who died when he was fifty-nine years old. And the tradition is said to have been handed down successively from Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Levi[532] to the Hebrew sages, or Cabbalists[533], who say that it was confirmed by Moses through divine revelation, not only by word of mouth, but also in many passages in Holy Writ with true and unfailing witness.[534]

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[532] This mention of Levi is strange. Although some of the descendants of Levi (the descendants of Aaron) become priests and the rest who did not perish in the rebellion of Korah become officiants of the cultic practices, there is no mention of this until the time of Moses at the earliest. In fact, the Bible does not seem to look upon Levi in a very favorable manner, judging from Jacob's blessings of his children. Obviously, there is some esoteric tradition that is being referred to here. Interestingly, it could be interpreted as depreciating in value the Mosaic revelation as it states that it was "confirmed by Moses through divine revelation." It seems that these teachers believed that the *Torah*, rather than bringing new information, merely confirmed ancient esoteric teachings. Although there may be other explanations, the *Book of Jubilees* considers the election of Levi to be a matter of some importance and mentions another blessing of Jacob, through which the priesthood was transferred from him directly to Levi. See James Kugel, *The Ladder of Jacob*, chapter 5 for an excellent discussion.

[533] The new English translation (p.239) reads: "the Hebrew sages called Kabbalists..." thus avoiding the impression that all Hebrew sages were Kabbalists. This is a more faithful rendering of the Italian text (p.248), which reads: "*li sapienti degli ebrei chiamati cabalisti...*"

[534] It should be noted that this long listing of an unbroken tradition seems to endorse the most literalistic acceptance of biblical genealogy and midrashic elaborations is combined with sayings such as "Many...declare that they have it on divine authority" and "the tradition is said to have been handed down" or referring to the kabbalists "who say it was confirmed by Moses." Such statements do not exactly inspire confidence, in contrast to his earlier endorsement of other astrological views on pp.89-97 where he simply assumes that he is dealing with an authentic tradition.

Sophia: If these things which you have told me are contained with some colour of truth in the sacred writings of Moses, and are thereby of greater value, will you not add to my pleasure and explain them to me?

Philo: I will tell you what these teachers allege[535], although I do not counsel you to believe it, for the evidence of their texts is not clear, but full of obscure meaning;[536] and my purpose is purely to do your pleasure, for I am somewhat digressing from our subject.[537] Moses, as you are aware, says that God created the world in six days, and on the seventh day he rested from all His Labour, in commemoration of which He commanded the Hebrews that in six days they should do all that they had to do, and on the seventh day should rest from all manner of work. These theologians say that days required for the divine creation of the lower world each represent a thousand years, as David also says, 'a thousand years in thy sight are but as yesterday'. Therefore the six ordinary days occupied in the work of the divine creation are equivalent to the six thousand years in which the

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[535] Neither the Italian text (p.249), which reads: "*dicono*" nor the new English translation (p.239), which uses "say" quite agree with the word "allege." Nevertheless, given what comes afterwards, it is not an inaccurate description of Philo's view of their sayings.

[536] The Italian text (p.249) reads: "*figurativa*" and the new English translation (p.239) renders it "figurative."

[537] This translation does not give the complete disclaimer that is found in the Italian text (p.249) which states: "*e io in questo sarò solamente per compiacerti narratore...*" See the new English translation (p.239) that reads: "and my role in this - in order to please you - is purely of that of a narrator."

lower world flourishes; and the seventh day of rest is assigned to Chaos when the work of producing the lower world ceases. Again, according to their rites, the Hebrews must number seven weeks from the day of their exodus from Egypt, making forty-nine days; and on the fiftieth day they celebrate the feast of the giving of the law, which God vouch-safed to give to be a universal law for all people. This is said to represent the seven renewals of the lower world in forty-nine thousand years, and the new conception of the whole universe. Further it is said that Moses not only signified this in the term of service, but also in the number of years, one year representing a thousand; for astrologers hold the Great Year of the heavens to be a thousand years. Wherefore Moses in his law commands that the earth be tilled for six years, and on the seventh that it be left idle, untilled and unfenced. The Cabbalists say that the earth represents Chaos, which the Hebrews commonly call earth, and likewise the Chaldeans and other Gentiles; and therefore the Mosaic law will signify that Chaos must conceive those things which are subject to generation for six thousand years, and in the seven thousandth year she will take her rest, when all things become confused together in promiscuity without individuation...[538]

[538] The notion of the universe lasting six thousand years comes directly from the Talmudic tractates *Abodah Zarah*, 9b and *Sanhedrin*, 97a,b. The rabbis equate a biblical day of creation with a thousand years, which of course

Sophia: How can they make Moses of their opinion when he so clearly says: 'In the

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opens up a great deal of speculation regarding what they meant. But in *Sanhedrin*, 97b a curse is proclaimed by R. Samuel b. Nahmani (in the name of R. Jonathan) on those who attempt to calculate the end of days. Nevertheless Rabbi Hanan b. Tahlifa spoke of a six thousand year cycle followed by a thousand year Sabbath, after which the world would be renewed. Warnings and deprecations regarding predicting the coming of the Messiah and/or the end of days can also be found in Spanish medieval authorities such as Nachmanides, often in response to Christian missionaries, many of whom were fairly learned apostates. See Amparo Alba Cecilia and Carlos Sainz de la Maza, *La Segunda Epistola de Alfonso de Valladolid* for an interesting discussion. Isaac Abrabanel also discusses this theory in his commentary on *Genesis*, I:1-2. The belief that the universe lasts six thousand years probably derives from the ancient sexagesimal system. That may come from an ancient astronomical observation that every sixty years Jupiter and Saturn return to the same relative places in the sky. There are sixty minutes in an hour and sixty seconds in a minute. There are also approximately 60 times 6 days in a year. In the Zoroastrian tradition, there are three two thousand year phases. The first two are creation and mixture. The final period is separation. Zoroaster was born at the end of six thousand years. The Hindus divided the day into 60 *ghatikas*, which are further divided into 60 *vinadikas*. They also divided their year into six seasons. In the Bible there are of course six days of creation. The introduction of the sabbatical period and the explicit mention of other worlds following temporally are somewhat idiosyncratic, however, and Seymour Feldman (Platonic Cosmologies, p.563) points out that according to both Scholem and Idel this reflects kabbalistic sources. Interestingly, Abrabanel has Philo attribute this view to "philosophers before Plato, of whom he was a disciple" (p.288). In *The Republic* there is a discussion of 36,000 year cycles (Book VIII, 546-547). He also discusses this "perfect number" in *Timaeus*, 39d. If this was something that Abrabanel thought Plato learned (indirectly) from Moses, it is surprising that it is not mentioned. The notion of cosmic cycles was also extremely widespread in Stoic and Neoplatonic circles. See R.T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, p.77. The most commonly calculated Neoplatonic "Great Year" was 36,000 lunar years. See Michael J.B. Allen, "The Ficinian Timaeus and Renaissance Science," p.241. What is particularly interesting is the total lack of comprehension among such authors as Abrabanel and Ficino that these creation and destruction cycles are essentially pagan, something that Augustine had already discussed in the 12th book (ch.11) of *The City of God*.

beginning God created the heaven and the earth'? For this statement seems to include chaos in the rest of creation.

Philo: We place a different interpretation on the text.[539] The expression 'in the beginning' in Hebrew can mean 'before'; therefore you may say, 'before God created and separated the heaven and earth' (i.e. the terrestrial and heavenly world) from chaos, the earth (i.e. chaos) was empty and void. This is also a more accurate rendering, since the text says it was confused and rough, which means hidden, and it was like an abyss of many dark waters over which the divine spirit breathed, like a mighty wind over the ocean, giving light to the dark, secret and hidden waters, and drawing them forth in successive waves. Thus did the spirit of God, which is synonymous with the supreme intellect filled with the Ideas; which being communicated to gloomy chaos, created in it, drawing out the hidden substances, and enlightening them with Ideal formality...And in this way, as I have

[539] Here according to this translation he seems to be clearly endorsing an assumption of the kabbalists, if not their conclusions. The Italian text that I used (p.250) also reads in the first person plural: "*Leggiamo nel testo altrimenti*". The new English translation (p.240), however, reads: "They read different things into the text." There is no explanation for this. At any rate, in note 110 (p.401) the new English Translation cites the *Zohar*, *Bahir*, Isaac the Blind, Azriel of Gerona and Nahmanides (all kabbalists) as having similar views. The doctrine cited from the *Zohar* is particularly perplexing as it is alleged that "earth is identified with Shekhina, and she was just matter (*Tohu*) in a chaotic state, before form (*bohu*) emerged from her."

shortly explained to you, the Hebrew sages understand the story of the Creation according to the testimony of Moses, and believe that it proves that before the Creation chaos was indeterminate and afterwards was divided into the whole universe.[540]

Sophia: I am content that you are able to reconcile Plato's opinion with that of Moses and the Cabbalists, and as you say, it is enough that I should know of the existence of this opinion, since neither absolute reason nor limited faith forces me to give it credence.[541]

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[540] Miranda views this as "an unequivocal recourse to the *kabbalistic* tradition" (p.696). But the doctrine Miranda believes to be crucial here is the pre-existence of chaos as a primordial feminine principle and on the next page refers to it (matter) as "the *feminine* aspect of the divine." But that "thesis" is at least as plausibly that of ibn Gabirol. Interestingly, after previously referring on numerous occasions to kabbalistic influence, Miranda (p.692) opines: "Leone Ebreo, unlike the Kabbalah, does not experience the need to postulate entities like the *sephiroth* or, unlike Neoplatonism, the *Enneades*, in order to preserve the *unicity* of divine Being." And on the very next page he states: "According to the interpretation of Marco Ariani, it is possible that part of Leone Ebreo's effort in this process was simply to dissimulate the *kabbalistic* dimension of his own culture by verting it into a *Neoplatonic* form. This makes him a disciple more in tune with the teachings of Marcilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola than with the famous Jewish masters of Gerona..."

[541] This is not really a literal translation of the Italian text that I have used; the new English translation is more literal. The Italian text (p.251) expresses Sophia's perception that Philo has made Plato a follower of both Moses and the kabbalists and the new English translation (p.241) renders Plato a follower of Moses and himself a kabbalist. The first appearance of the word "opinion" is not to be found in the Italian text but it later mentions "*posizioni*," which the new translation renders as "assumptions." It seems obvious to me, however, that "this opinion" (*posizione*, assumptions) is that of the kabbalists and their interpretation of Moses, and not necessarily the authoritatively correct interpretation of Moses or even the interpretation of Philo (Judah Abrabanel?), which is a philosophical interpretation attempting

Faith and Reason

Sophia enunciated a fundamental principle in that dialogue. It may also be a basic principle for most medieval Jewish philosophers, depending upon how we define "reason" and "faith." The principle and its two possible interpretations go something like this. There are two basic sources of truth: reason and faith. Now within the broad category of reason there may (according to one's interpretation) be other things such as experience or perception (but astrology does not seem to be one

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to reconcile Plato, Moses and the kabbalists, albeit with a full measure of skeptical doubt. Sophia seems to approve of Philo's harmonization of the three (which is another indication that it might indeed be the view of Abrabanel) but she remains skeptical of the "credence" of the kabbalistic doctrine. In other words, she seems to be saying that she likes this explanation but (like Philo) may not really believe it. Needless to say, simply quoting the first phrase out of context (whether in English or Italian) gives a completely misleading impression that she (and he) is in sympathy with the kabbalistic doctrine and its claim for authenticity. I provide the Italian and new English translation of this passage.

> Italian (p.251) *Mi piace vederti fare Platone mosaico e del numero de' cabalisti; bastami questo per notizie, come dici: poi che nè assoluta ragione nè terminata fede mi costringe a queste tali credulità. Ma dimmi, con queste loro posizioni possono forse più ragionevolmente solvere li sopra detti argumenti d'Aristotle che li fideli, li quali credeno la creazione del mondo una volta sola?*
> New English translation (p.241)-I like seeing you make Plato a follower of Moses and placing him among the Kabbalists. This information is enough, since neither absolute reason nor a particular faith forces me to believe it. But tell me if, perhaps, their assumptions can resolve in a more rational way those Aristotelian arguments than those of the faithful, who believe that the world was created once only?

I would only remark that despite the superiority of the new translation, one could question the translation of "*terminata fede*" as "particular faith." Although every faith is particular, the clear meaning (arguably) is "limited."

of them). That is because we often speak of belief in accordance with one's experience as being reasonable. And within the category of faith there may also be an experiential element, as well as a rather complicated theory of trustworthy tradition since we sometimes restrict "reason" to inferential thinking and faith might then be restricted to the immediate testimony of experience or tradition. So the common agreement with the following formula may mask disagreements regarding what constitute reason and faith. If the two main sources (reason and faith) agree, that is all the better for them. When the two sources seem to be in conflict, that disagreement then functions as a goad to inspect the sources, one's reasoning and their apparently conflicting testimony. It then promotes independent thought, even if it gives no sure guidance.

It certainly seems from the prior exchange between Philo and Sophia that Abrabanel restricts faith to traditional authority alone and perhaps that is why Sophia calls faith "limited." Under this interpretation, he would include personal religious experience under "reason" and perhaps that is why she calls it "absolute." This is important because we have already seen that Judah Abrabanel placed great stock in religious experience as well as reason. Hence, mystical experience would be an ally, if not actually a constituent, of reason. We will discuss the limits of faith again shortly.

When reason tells us one thing and traditional authority is not clear on the matter, there should certainly be no problem under that aforementioned principle. The final possibility is that traditional authority endorses one view and reason is not clear about it. One might think that the benefit of the doubt goes to sacred tradition and Sophia's words underscore that assumption. Her first guess was that the kabbalists' teachings

must surely be supported by reason (which might include experience) but wonders whether they also believed them on the basis of authority (perhaps because she has not noticed them in the Bible). Philo implies that such a rational basis is not the case even though some of them indeed believe there is rational warrant for their beliefs. But many of them (the kabbalists) do view their doctrines as sacred tradition. She is now eager to learn more because they would be "thereby of greater value." But Philo must tell her that such an ascription to authority is also open to serious doubts. We certainly get the impression from Philo that the kabbalists (unlike the philosophers) have never really examined the foundations of their beliefs. He does agree to tell her of their beliefs despite calling it "digressing" and stating: "I will tell you what these teachers allege, although I do not counsel you to believe it, for the evidence of their texts is not clear, but full of obscure meaning..."

It is interesting that Abrabanel in the guise of Philo seems quite literalistic in his treatment of "historical" or genealogical descriptions in the Bible. This is in stark contrast with his more allegorical approach to ethically and metaphysically related areas of biblical texts. He really seems to believe that Abraham knew Noah. This underscores the comparatively late development of critical historical thinking in the West in contrast to Philo's (Abrabanel's) quite profound grasp of philosophical concepts, the study of which was fairly advanced in his time. This should be kept in mind because though Abrabanel may have known much about medieval and Renaissance philosophical concepts, his historical knowledge (most notably regarding intellectual history) may be somewhat deficient and we should not assume he knows more than he does. We have already seen that he accepts without any apparent criticism the conventional view that Plato studied the

teachings of Moses, even though, as we have also seen, there were biblical scholars in his own day who doubted it.

Readers may be confused regarding Philo's initial words of caution about the opinion of the kabbalists ("I do not counsel you to believe it") and his subsequent defense of their position by alluding to a different way of interpreting the first word of the Bible: "*bereishit*."

> Sophia: How can they make Moses of their opinion when he so clearly says: 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth'? For this statement seems to include chaos in the rest of creation.
>
> Philo: We place a different interpretation on the text.

Who is the "we"? Is he including himself among the kabbalists? Or is he referring to a broader category of allegorical interpreters of the Bible? This might, therefore, be interpreted as attempting to placate the kabbalists and resisting their claims at the same time. His translation of that Hebrew word as "before," moreover, is not a specifically kabbalistic interpretation. It seems to me to be very close to Abraham ibn Ezra's interpretation as well.[542] Instead of considering the first

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[542] See Abraham ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch (Genesis) translated by H. Norman Strickman and Arthur M. Silver, p.30. "The meaning of the verses is this: When the creation of the firmament and dry land took place, the earth was uninhabited because it was covered with water." We have seen from the writings of Ficino how highly regarded were the commentaries of ibn Ezra in the Renaissance. Ibn Ezra was influenced by Hermetic doctrines. See Fabrizio Lelli, "Ermetismo e pensiero ebraico," *Bulletin de Philosophie Medievale*, 35 (1993) 92-103. The Hermetic tradition, which portrayed itself as of ancient Egyptian provenance, is now believed to be of much later Egyptian and Greek origin. For an excellent description and an up to date discussion of the various scholarly opinions see Paul S. MacDonald, *History of the Concept of Mind*, volume 2, pp. 93-114.

word of the Bible as establishing an absolute beginning it simply considers it as describing the beginning of a particular creation. The belief that there was a pre-existing substance prior to that creation described in *Genesis* (whether a created or emanated substance) is not unique to the kabbalists but characteristic of many Neoplatonic and Hermetic writings. Nevertheless, the Kabbalists were able to utilize that way of equating "in the beginning" with "before" for their own purposes.[543] Sophia's response is highly significant. She is (as is so often the case) the voice of reason even though she lacks the arcane wisdom of Philo. Does this perhaps signal a skepticism regarding such esoteric systems in general on the part of Abrabanel even though he seems fairly comfortable with them? She speaks of the opinion of "Moses and the Cabbalists" and repeats that it is enough to "know of it" since "neither absolute reason nor limited faith forces me to give it credence." She certainly does not really know it very well and perhaps does not even believe it, though she does "know of it."

That statement regarding absolute reason and limited faith alludes to a fairly sophisticated doctrine of the relationship between reason and faith (or tradition) that was discussed earlier. Not all modern thinkers agree with such a rigid

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[543] The same thing is true of another kabbalistic interpretation of "*bereishit*", which was sometimes translated as "with wisdom" by the kabbalists. Abrabanel also knows of this interpretation as is evident on p. 419, where it is attributed to the "Chaldeans." As a matter of fact, the first known appearance of this interpretation is in the Aramaic *Targum* (translation/commentary of the Bible) by Onqelos. This was obviously the source of all subsequent interpretations and is even acknowledged as such by Recanati and perhaps other kabbalists. See Wirszubski, *Pico della Mirandola's Encounter with Jewish Mysticism*, p.41. In terms of biblical Hebrew, however, this is untenable. The word "*reishit*" can mean "headship" but to convert that to "wisdom" is quite a stretch.

distinction, or if they do they may make even more of it as in Wittgensteinian language games or forms of life, or they may consider religious experience to be exempt from either rational or traditional warrantability. But we are interested in what Judah Abrabanel thought about it. He was a rationalist but he also relied upon tradition and religious experience. This is of great significance because, rightly or wrongly, many post-expulsion Spanish Jews believed that it was reason (embodied in Averroistic philosophy) that got them into that mess that they were in. But there were also those who believed that the great heritage of Spanish Jewry was intimately associated with the use of reason and that Kabbalah, therefore, was not in that best tradition of Spanish Jewry. We have also seen that Judah Abrabanel deftly maneuvers around that dispute by attempting to convince the reader that ancient esoteric traditions supplement both traditional religion and philosophy. You may recall that there was a prior discussion of this on page 282.

> Sophia: Your reasons will suffice to defend me from the Peripatetic, though not to attack him, and Plato can use the very same in his own stead. But what cause had Plato to make chaos eternal, since God in His omnipotence can create it out of nothing, and the whole world from it, as we believe?[544]

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[544] The specific Aristotelian doctrine in question is the eternity of the physical universe and the alternative being the "Platonic" doctrine of the eternity of chaos. Sophia contrasts both with the opinion of the faithful who believe God created heaven and earth at some point in time. The attacks on Aristotle had picked up steam since the writings of Valla in the mid-15th century and in particular the relationship between reason and religious faith had been severely questioned. This, however, did not signal a general disaffection for pagan wisdom. See Eugenio Garin, *History of Italian Philosophy*, volume 1, pp.189-218.

> Philo: Since it is sufficient that faith should not conflict with reason, we have no need of proof, for then we should have knowledge and not faith; and it is enough to believe steadfastly that which is not disproved by reason. Plato, however, made first matter eternal in order that the Mosaic account of the Creation might be upheld by the reason of philosophy; for he wished to be and to appear a philosopher rather than a believer in the Law.

Sophia at first thinks of Plato's opinion about creation and first matter as some kind of philosophical or scientific knowledge, which would require some "cause" (reasons or proofs); after all, Plato was a philosopher. Philo replies that faith does not require proof. It seems somewhat odd that Sophia, as sophisticated as she is, would not already know that. But we have already seen that she knows much more about philosophy than she does about religion and if she had been schooled mostly in the medieval syntheses, she may not have even understood faith in quite that way.[545] But what does faith require (according to Philo)? First it is necessary that it not conflict with reason and second it must be the account approved by Moses in the Bible. So it appears that such faith is a rather simple traditional one that does not require any esoteric interpretations or any personal experience.

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[545] Fideism was somewhat outside the mainstream of medieval religious philosophy. Perhaps this is a matter of degree but it appears the emphasis on personal faith (as contrasted with reliance upon tradition or authority) became more prominent around the time of the Renaissance and Protestant Reformation. Of course it was a feature of early Christianity as well.

Perhaps Sophia has not always been given enough respect as a spokeswoman for the most profound thoughts of Judah Abrabanel. First (p.282) Philo seemed to be endorsing pseudo-philosophical justifications of biblical accounts (by Plato). On page 287 Philo seems to allude to ibn Gabirol's belief that angels are composed of incorporeal matter (chaos). The conclusion (p.287) seems to be that the heavens are basically composed of the same matter as we on earth are and eventually will also decompose (pp.288-289). On page 292 Sophia asks whether these opinions are based "on reason alone, or whether they have it on authority." Philo then states that the astrological authorities he is referring to believed that they were basing themselves on reason but he has his doubts. His suggestion for the real provenance of those views, as we have already discussed is as follows (p.292).

> Philo: Many, however, declare that they have it on divine authority, not only from Moses, the divine lawgiver, but originally from Adam, from whom the unwritten oral tradition, called in the Hebrew tongue Cabbala, signifying reception, passed to the sage Enoch, and from Enoch to famous Noah: who, after the Flood, on account of his discovery of wine, was called Jajin, because in Hebrew this signifies wine; and he is depicted with two faces reversed,[546] because he witnessed the age before and after the Flood. He bequeathed the tradition, with much other

[546] There is an old medieval tradition that associated Noah with Janus, who had two faces and could also see both the past and the future. It is not clear if this has any relationship to the Talmudic notion of Adam having two faces prior to the separation of man and woman. So perhaps this is another example of unattributed Gentile influence.

> information concerning human and divine matters, to the wisest of his sons, Shem, and to his descendant, Heber, who were the teachers of Abraham...And the tradition is said to have been handed down successively from Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Levi to the Hebrew sages, or Cabbalists, who say that it was confirmed by Moses through divine revelation, not only by word of mouth, but also in many passages in holy Writ with true and unfailing witness.

I will now discuss some interesting suggestions that may be imbedded in this statement. It should be obvious that we are not dealing here with mere simple faith but with esoteric lore. There is an unwritten tradition centering on the person of Enoch, which gets transmitted to the more "famous" figure of Noah. That great and famous man is depicted with "two faces reversed." The tradition passed through him is later "confirmed by Moses through divine revelation." Sophia then qualifies her question with some interesting assumptions, followed by Philo's qualified disavowal of those teachings.

> Sophia: If these things which you have told me are contained with some colour of truth in the sacred writings of Moses, and are thereby of greater value, will you not add to my pleasure and explain them to me?
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> Philo: I will tell you what these teachers allege, although I do not counsel you to believe it, for the evidence of their texts is not clear, but full of obscure meaning...

But later on (p.296) Sophia comes up with a slightly different

view, which may be more philosophical and less apologetic.

> Sophia: I am content that you are able to reconcile Plato's opinion with that of Moses and the Cabbalists, and as you say, it is enough that I should know of the existence of this opinion, since neither absolute reason nor limited faith forces me to give it credence. But tell me if, perhaps, the Aristotelian arguments may not be solved more readily in the light of these assumptions than by those of the faithful who believe that the world was created once only.

Philo then goes on (p.296-297) to claim that even Aristotle thought that there were previous worlds prior to ours and then discusses a Platonic view of an original creation of two "parents" (apparently the Ideas or Form and Matter) that are eternal. What does Sophia really mean by juxtaposing "limited faith" with "absolute reason"? It is quite possible that Judah Abrabanel had devoted a great deal of thought to this subject even though it is not a very prominent part of his philosophical work. But it seems to be an underpinning of it. Perhaps Sophia is saying that the validity of reason is "absolute" but that of tradition only "limited." Perhaps this is something that Abrabanel himself would not have wanted to openly proclaim so he allows it to be said by the "lesser" participant in the dialogue in order to muffle it. There is always the natural tendency to think that Philo is the voice of Judah Abrabanel. But this opinion of Sophia seems to conflict with her previously expressed excitement about kabbalistic opinions that might be based on authority (tradition) "and are thereby of greater value." And that excitement was aroused after Philo expressed great doubts regarding whether those views were also endorsed by

reason so it could not mean opinions that are endorsed by both reason and tradition. The only way I can find of harmonizing these two statements is to conclude that (for her at least if not for Abrabanel) reason was "absolute" and not subject to challenge but authority (tradition, faith) while "limited" is in some interesting sense superior ("of greater value"). But such a strong distinction between reason and authority might well preclude their being confused with one another, that which Philo had earlier (approvingly) accused Plato of having deliberately done (page 282). That is also interesting since it appears from Philo's description that Plato was either knowingly confusing his readers or unconsciously deceiving himself. So perhaps Sophia gets the last word on this methodological subject and therefore could plausibly be construed as the voice of Judah Abrabanel here. Now what could it mean to say that authority (despite being limited) is superior or "of greater value" than reason? Faith (authority) could be superior in the sense that it is more accessible to the masses. That is a modern opinion that might seem out of place in the medieval or Renaissance periods although we did find it explicitly in ibn Tufayl and many find it implicitly in Maimonides. I am sure it could also be found in other writings of the period. But reason is universal among all peoples and revelation (according to Judaism) is confined almost completely to the Jews.[547] That view is also prominent in Christianity, despite the fact that the Jews were accused of rejecting an even greater authority than the prophets. Therefore, authority could be "of greater value" than reason because it is quite rare, more

[547] There are non-Jewish prophets in the Bible (such as Balaam) but they hardly have the authority of Moses and are in fact quite often vilified by the rabbis. This is in keeping with the general rabbinic view that while wisdom can be found in all the nations, *Torah* (divine teaching or law) can only be found in Israel.

profound and of particular interest, perhaps teaching truths actually inaccessible to reason. I would perhaps opt for the latter as the opinion of Judah Abrabanel in some areas. First he insists that Plato obtained his creation views from Moses. Then after seeding doubts about the Enochic and kabbalistic traditions, he refers approvingly to a rational doctrine of Plato regarding eternal creation. So Plato is inspired by divine revelation regarding creation yet makes it more rational by positing an eternal creation, which builds upon the more naïve notion of creation. It is also clear that reason is required in order to adjudicate not only which doctrines are impossible but also which conceivable but non-proven traditions are indeed authoritative. This discussion of "absolute reason" and "limited faith" indicates that Abrabanel (Sophia) might consider the *kabbalistic* interpretation of Moses somewhat controversial and perhaps not really authoritative since neither of the protagonists accuse it of being *counter* to reason, yet she still casts doubt regarding its authoritative nature. Hence, reason might be "absolute" in the sense that it determines what is demonstratively proven, what is irrational, what is merely a-rational and what are indeed authentic traditions.

Or perhaps Sophia (as a possible spokesperson for Judah Abrabanel) interprets what Philo has been alluding to as two or even three separate opinions: that of Moses, the interpretation of the "Hebrew sages" and the kabbalistic one that builds upon both of them. Let us recall that Abrabanel was insistent upon reconciling this view of chaos with the philosophy of ibn Gabirol. He may well have known that ibn Gabirol was no kabbalist (at least by the definition that we have adopted) since he lived in the 11th century. We never find him questioning the views of ibn Gabirol as he did regarding the kabbalists. But another interpretation comes to mind that might be at least

equally probable. We already saw Abrabanel's apparent naiveté regarding history. Therefore, we must not anachronistically impute our knowledge of intellectual history on to him. When he refers at the very beginning of this exchange to the "Hebrew sages, or Cabbalists" he may indeed have included such thinkers as ibn Gabirol and Abraham ibn Ezra in that category. He never mentions such specifically kabbalistic doctrines as the *Sefirot*, which might have specified which views he was actually alluding to. He does mention some opinions regarding the longevity of creation, which we have already seen exist apart from not only Kabbalah but from Jewish tradition entirely. Nevertheless, we do have some reason to believe that Abrabanel did distinguish between the kabbalists (as we have defined them) and those other mystically inclined Jewish philosophical thinkers. That is because he seems to place the latter on a higher epistemic level. He refers to the kabbalists claiming a direct transmission of tradition of their doctrines not only from Moses, but also from Abraham, Noah, Enoch and Adam. Such explicit traditionalist warrants for esoteric beliefs were not always prominent in the earlier philosophical thinkers even if they at times attempted to conflate philosophical (rational) and esoteric mystical knowledge (as in Maimonides' equating of physics with *maaseh bereishit*). In other words, religious thinkers in the philosophical tradition had some rough distinction between authoritative tradition, reason and esotericism. Perhaps that explains the absolute insistence of Maimonides on the primacy of the prophecy of Moses and the relative downgrading of all other traditional sources. Indeed we also find Judah Abrabanel placing the views of Moses on a very high epistemic level, even higher than Plato. In the 15th and 16th centuries generally, however, that ability to restrict traditional authority and separate it from reason was perhaps not

quite so strong. In fact those later philosophical writers quite often caved in to dubious "traditions" far more than did their earlier medieval forebears. As Herbert Davidson tells us:

> The majority of the fifteenth-century philosophic writers adduce the Kabbalah as an authoritative source of religious knowledge. The favorable disposition towards the Kabbalah is undoubtedly in harmony with the conservative attitude of mind evidenced by the writers in question, but it nowise symptomizes unphilosophical, mystical, or obscurantist proclivities on their part. The majority of the fifteenth-century philosophic writers simply consider the Zohar to be a genuine midrashic text and treat the Zohar and other kabbalistic books—taking the *Kabbalah* at its word—as authentic tradition...And Jewish Philosophy in the sixteenth century barely differs from Jewish philosophy in the fifteenth. Its affinity with Jewish philosophy in the fifteenth century is far greater than the affinity of Jewish philosophy in the fifteenth century with that in the fourteenth century, of Jewish philosophy in any comparable period with that in the preceding or succeeding period.[548]

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[548] See Herbert Davidson, "Medieval Jewish Philosophy in the Sixteenth Century," *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, edited by Bernard Dov Cooperman, pp.112-115. I will reiterate here my disagreement with Davidson's characterization of Judah Abrabanel as "somewhere towards the right on the issue of reason and revelation" in ibid, p. 118. We have seen the complexity of Abrabanel's thinking on this subject and the huge role of reason in deciding upon what is an authoritative tradition regarding revelation and what is not. It is true, however, that he seems to find a special niche for revelation that extreme rationalists could not. This may be a result

If Davidson is right (as he usually is), Judah Abrabanel was laboring in an environment in which Kabbalah was generally assumed to be a legitimate and fundamental *datum* of Jewish tradition. He on the other hand seems to be struggling with the distinction between reason, binding tradition and esoteric tradition. Therefore, his apparently positive evaluation of Kabbalah may not be nearly as significant as his more negative or critical stance towards it. We will have a great deal more to say about this in our conclusion.

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of his imbibing of Renaissance attitudes towards the a-rational, which also manifests itself in his teaching regarding love. Hence, the emphases on revelation and on love reinforce one another. This may at times give his teachings the appearance of being "somewhere to the right."

Chapter VIII: Moses or Plato?

No matter what the other influences upon Judah Abrabanel might have been Moses and Plato were in a sense[549] viewed by him as the original, seminal ones. I agree, however, with Seymour Feldman who ends his article on Judah Abrabanel by saying that: "his enrolling Plato in the school of Moses is better seen as a marriage between Plotinus and Moses.[550] But I would also qualify and amplify that somewhat. Firstly, "Moses" represents an entire tradition and not simply one man or one book. Secondly, "Plato" also represents an entire tradition, mediated mostly through Neoplatonism but not entirely so especially since the Greek texts were being rediscovered somewhat in the Renaissance. Also, there may be important post-Plotinian Neoplatonic influences.[551] But most

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[549] While the views of Plato and Moses were specifically articulated by Abrabanel, it is possible that he sensed earlier but less knowable sources in each. In the ancient world Egypt was often revered as the site of arcane mysteries. Even as late as the Renaissance, this belief endured. As R.T. Wallis states: "until Casaubon's dating of the *Hermetica* in 1614 the Platonic tradition was regarded as a later development of the pristine Egyptian wisdom of Hermes Trimegistus, the supposed original source of the *philosophia perennis*." See his *Neoplatonism*, p.170. It has been observed that there are many such hints of Egyptian and hermetic influence in the *Dialoghi* or at least hints of belief in their efficacy. The question arises as to whether Judah Abrabanel might have even believed that Moses obtained his wisdom via Hermes Trimegistus. Some legends placed Hermes either contemporaneous with or prior to Moses. Obviously if he had believed such a heretical doctrine he probably never could have expressed it. We will have to be content with his focus on Plato and Moses and specifically the latter as seminal figures. But mostly we should be looking at the views that he espouses, knowing full well that in his day the real provenance of such views was rarely known and it was commonplace to ascribe one's beliefs to ancient figures.

[550] "Platonic Cosmologies in the *Dialoghi D'Amore* of Leone Ebreo, p.582

[551] Although I have neither the space nor expertise to deal with this fully, I would like to point out two areas where later Neoplatonists might have come into play. Firstly, there is the expanded view of love. Secondly, there is the

importantly, we should keep this concept of a wide tradition in mind.[552] It is easy to lose sight of this because Plato has often been viewed in the narrow sense as the alternative to Aristotle just as the Inquisition sometimes viewed Moses as the antithesis of Jesus and Christianity. But in reality, of course, Moses was the original ancestral father of Christianity just as Plato was to Aristotelian philosophy. It is fitting, therefore, that in a book as universal as the *Dialoghi* the two thinkers who are specifically granted the most influence and authority are those two. In a very real sense they are also the two major founding fathers of Western Civilization. In fact for purposes of understanding the real significance of these figures we can view them as practically synonymous with revealed religion and reason, respectively.

Judah Abrabanel called Plato "godlike" (p.105) and "divine" (p.114).[553] This would seem to indicate a very high

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significance of a kind of faith as efficacious regarding theurgy. For a good, albeit brief, discussion, see R.T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, pp.153-155.

[552] This prevents us from asserting, as David Winston does regarding Philo of Alexandria that he "was fully convinced, rightly or wrongly, that the two traditions he sought to reconcile were really in mutual accord." See his "Philo and Rabbinic Literature," p.253. While Philo of Alexandria might have believed that, Judah Abrabanel knew too much about all the subsequent religious and philosophical traditions to have such a facile belief. His father's own struggles with the philosophical tradition and its imposition upon the biblical tradition could not have failed to have some effect. This forces us to probe beneath the surface statements that seem to equate Plato and Moses.

[553] The appellation "divine" (and similar ones) was fairly common in ancient Greek texts. Even Philo of Alexandria uses it in describing ancient philosophers as does Themistius and Simplicius. See Wolfson, *Philo* Volume I, pp 100-101. The use of such terminology is one more indication that Abrabanel might have been (at least indirectly) under the influence of quite ancient, possibly Greek, texts. His father also uses the term "divine" to describe Socrates in his Commentary on Deuteronomy, p.388. And Ficino also called Plato "divine." So, while there is nothing particularly innovative

respect for the philosophical tradition. Seymour Feldman, however, has pointed out some areas where Judah Abrabanel appears to reject Plato in favor of a medieval Aristotelian model: for example the immortality of the soul and transmigration of souls.[554] Given my interpretation of the meaning of "Plato", this would not be an anomaly. Earlier we discussed a case where Abrabanel favors an Aristotelian view of friendship over a more traditional Jewish interpretation of "love your neighbor as yourself" as well as the Aristotelian interpretation of the "inverted tree." While Judah Abrabanel consistently claims to be a follower of Moses, it is my contention, despite those Aristotelian lapses, that in at least one sense he is really more of a follower of Plato. Let me outline what I mean by that since it is not an altogether simple matter. When the literal statements of Plato and Moses conflict, but the meaning of the biblical passage is not entirely clear, he seems usually to opt for a Platonic interpretation. This seems obvious, for example, when Philo appears to believe in some kind of eternity of matter or chaos. But, regarding that belief, on page 277 he says: "And this the faithful do not believe; for they hold that up to the time of the Creation God alone existed without the world and without chaos, and that the omnipotence of God created all things out of nothing in the beginning of time. And indeed Moses nowhere gives any clear indication that he held

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in that use of language, it allows for some skepticism regarding whether Judah Abrabanel simply considered Plato to be a student of Moses.

[554] See Seymour Feldman, *Philosophy in a Time of Crisis: Don Isaac Abravanel: Defender of the Faith*, p.186. Regarding transmigration of souls, he definitely rejects Plato. Regarding the immortality of the soul, I am not sure but I have already expressed some doubts about it. Despite the correctness of Feldman's observations, given the Neoplatonic nature of medieval Aristotelianism and the distinction between Platonic myth and metaphysics, we should still consider Judah Abrabanel to be an essentially Platonic thinker.

matter to be coeternal with God." This reference to "the faithful" seems to me to be a sympathetic explanation for why they have certain beliefs but by no means an endorsement of those beliefs. The reason that they have them is not really because of the literal or metaphorical meaning of the biblical passages when exposed to careful scrutiny but the result of traditional or authoritative teachings. Of course, Judah Abrabanel would prefer not to disagree with such traditions if at all possible.

But when the meaning of the Bible is quite clear, Judah Abrabanel would most likely reject Plato if he and Moses were in conflict. Since so many biblical doctrines are not entirely clear, he turns out to be a Platonic thinker most of the time, even going against traditional rabbinic views on certain occasions even though he never states this explicitly. Yet in another very real sense his loyalty to Moses is supreme and this shows itself clearly in those areas where there is a clear biblical view, which quite often is in conflict with Greek philosophy. The best example, perhaps, is on pp.252-253 where he rejects Plato's assertion in the *Symposium* that God does not love in favor of the biblical doctrine of divine love. Yet even there, where the Bible seems clear, Sophia states: "they will not satisfy me unless they satisfy reason also" and goes on to explain that Plato's position is "more reasonable." Hence there is a preference for rational explanations even when the biblical doctrine encounters rational challenges. This is really not essentially different from the position of Maimonides and other medieval Jewish philosophers, who were quite willing to interpret the Bible allegorically at times and/or reject fanciful traditional interpretations, except that for most of those medieval thinkers Aristotle took the place of Plato in the *Dialoghi*. It would seem that for most such religious and

philosophical thinkers some religious principles are sancrosanct and others are not. Quite often, in fact, Abrabanel combines biblical and philosophical ideas in almost the same way as Maimonides, but often with a more mystical Neoplatonic flavor. For example, on pages 325-326 Philo discusses the union of the human intellect with higher angelic intellects and insists that such a union produces an enlightened soul that becomes a mean between the human and the angelic.

> Sophia: Yet I remember that you said that the souls of the holy fathers and prophets were united to the Divinity itself.[555]
>
> Philo: What I have now told you is in conformity with the philosophy[556] which seeks after the highest perfection to which man can attain by his own nature. But Holy Writ reveals to what loftier heights the human intellect may soar when, through the grace of God, it becomes His chosen vessel and prophet; for then it can be united[557] with the divine beauty directly, as one of the angels.
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> Sophia: Has every prophet attained to such a measure of the divine vision?
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> Philo: None, except Moses, who was the first of the prophets, because all the others received their vision through an angel, and their imagination

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[555] Italian text (p.275): "*furono copulate con la medisima divinità.*" New English translation (p.261): "copulated with the Godhead itself."

[556] Italian text (p.275) does not speak of a philosophy but "il *filosofo*," which obviously means Aristotle The new English translation (p.261) mentions "the Philosopher."

[557] Italian text: "*avere copulazione*," new English translation (p.261): "have copulation"

shared with their intellect in its union. Hence their prophetic vision came to them for the most part in dreams and in sleep with figments and patterns of the imagination. Moses, however, prophesied waking, with his mind clear and free from phantasy and united[558] with the Divinity, without the medium of angels and without (the intervention of) shapes or fancies, except on the first occasion when it was new to him. Wherefore Aaron and Miriam, the brother and sister of Moses, spoke against him, saying that they were prophets even as he. And God declared that they were not like him, saying to them, 'if God prophesy unto you, it is in a mirror or in a dream', to wit, through the mirror of the angelic intellect with a host of dream phantasies; and again: 'My Servant Moses is not so, who is faithful in all mine house. With him will I speak mouth to mouth, even apparently, and not in dark speeches; and the similitude of the Lord shall be beheld.'... [559]

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[558] New English translation (p.262): "copulated with," Italian text (p.275): "*copulato*"

[559] See *Numbers*, 12: 6-8, new and old JPS translations. The Masoretic text is slightly different from Abrabanel's quote, reading "When a prophet of the Lord arises among you, I make Myself known to him in a vision, I speak with him in a dream." (New JPS Translation). This is a more or less correct translation of the Hebrew of the Masoretic text, which clearly reads "to him" (ailov). The *Septuagint* is not very different: "If there be a prophet among you to the Lord, I will make Myself known to him by a vision, and speak to him in sleep." It is hard to understand how this could be rendered "if God prophecy unto you." Interestingly, the *Peshitta* (the ancient Eastern Aramaic text) reads as follows: "If you are prophets, I the Lord will reveal myself to you in a vision and will speak to you in a dream. This is closer to Abrabanel's quotation as it reads "to you" and alludes to the fact that Miriam

and Aaron were themselves prophets, something that the text implicitly assumes since they themselves state that God has spoken to them and God then indeed speaks to them (*Numbers* 12: 1-5). See Italian version: "*Se Dio profetiza a voi*" (p. 276) All of these translations mention "vision" and none mentions a "mirror," which does, however, have a possible basis in the Hebrew text. The Hebrew word *marah*, usually translated nowadays as "vision" could also mean mirror. See Italian version of the *Dialoghi*: "*in specchio e in sogno*" (p.276). A Talmudic *aggadah* uses the word "*aspaklaria*" (from the Latin word meaning looking glass) to describe it in *Numbers*, 12:6 and 12:8 (*Babylonian Talmud, Yebamot*, 49b). This was in the context of a conflict between the biblical statement that no one can see God and live and Isaiah's saying that he had indeed seen God. The conflict is resolved by stipulating that Moses saw God through a clear *askaplaria* while the other prophets saw through ones that were not clear. Sforno also read *Numbers* 12: 8 in that way and it also seems to be the denotation in the *Midrash Leviticus Rabbah*, 1:14. More decisively, see *Exodus*, 38:8, where the plural (*marot*) clearly means mirrors rather than "looking glasses" or "visions." T. *Pseudo Jonathan* (*Targum Yonatan*) also read the word in that way in *Exodus* but not in *Numbers*. Nor does the *Targum* of Onqelos interpret the word in *Numbers* in that way. Thus it seems that our current interpretation is in keeping with many ancient sources but not all of them. Sforno, an Italian contemporary of the Abrabanels (1475-1550) is a possible source or at least both he and Abrabanel may have had a common source. In addition, see the New Testament, 1 *Corinthians*, 13:12, where Paul's wording indicates a similar interpretation of the biblical text and a likely knowledge of the aforementioned *Midrash*, which gives this alternative reading to the one more common today. I thank Isaac Sassoon for his insights into those biblical and Talmudic texts.

Christian and Moslem thinkers used the metaphor of mirror as a means of describing a mystical experience, for example in the *Picatrix*, attributed to a 10th century Arabic mathematician, Maslama ibn Ahmad al-Majriti and translated into Latin under Alfonso el Sabio in the 13th century. For Meister Eckhart, the highest mystical experience is mirror-like as it involves seeing God through His eyes as He is seeing you. That is because ultimately only God exists. See Paul MacDonald, *The History of the Concept of Mind*, Volume 2, pp. 308-312, 409.

Obviously, Abrabanel uses that aforementioned ancient alternative midrashic reading for his own purposes. He uses the biblical and Talmudic references to "mirror" to propose a medieval philosophical concept regarding the Active Intellect and the human intellect, which is similar to that of Maimonides.

This is a biblical exegesis, which depends upon Maimonides for its basic philosophical ideas but adds a much more explicitly mystical motif regarding union (copulation) with God, not only regarding Moses but a much larger circle of prophets as well ("holy fathers and prophets"). Although he employs biblical quotations and Maimonidean interpretations of them, his ultimate conclusions seem to be more in line with Neoplatonic mystical doctrines.

Androgyny

I have used this term (androgyny) for lack of a better readily understandable one. Both "hermaphroditic" and "androgynous" are ambiguous terms. What I am referring to is not a hermaphrodite (a person with dual sexual characteristics) or a feminized man, both of which would have been harshly stigmatized both by the ancient Greeks and the rabbis of the Talmud and probably by Judah Abrabanel as well. Nor am I referring to a spiritual being that is neither male nor female, as Philo of Alexandria and John Scotus Eriugena might have championed. I am referring to a being with two distinct natures (or faces) that are male and female, can be split apart and according to some accounts can even mate with one another. This is an area where Plato tells a far more explicit story than does the Bible and Abrabanel, quite characteristically, sides with Plato and even attributes those views to Holy Scripture. Predictably, he also argues that Plato actually received this doctrine from Moses. One possible reason for this confusion is that there are *midrashim* that tell quite explicit tales regarding at least one person who was once dual sexed and later split apart and possibly (though less explicitly) about others as well. Whether such Talmudic views originally came from the Greeks or some other source, I cannot say. Many scholars, however,

have believed that the influence of Plato's *Symposium* or some similar text might have influenced Talmudic thought.[560] It is interesting however that Abrabanel never specifically refers to those *Midrashim* but only to Plato and Moses.[561]

The attribution of Platonic doctrines to Moses is quite traditional in Western civilization and was practiced by other Renaissance thinkers such as Ficino. What is particularly interesting here, however, is that the theory of original androgyny does not seem to be a signature teaching of Plato at all but merely the opinion of one person — Aristophanes — in the *Symposium*. I do not recall that fact being mentioned by others in this context but it seems to me to be quite significant and to demand some additional explanation. Why would this strange (and arguably uncharacteristic) Platonic view be of such great importance to Judah Abrabanel? One possible reason he might have had to stress such a tenuous doctrine was to resolve the conflict between the two creation stories in *Genesis* and he even alludes to that conflict. It also appears in Talmudic and kabbalistic contexts as well as in Plato and this combination might have been just too much to resist. He might also have wanted to take a stand regarding homosexuality, about which his hero Plato was at times ambivalent. In addition, the androgynous view does have a great deal of sex appeal, as

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[560] The Greek and Jewish views of gender are somewhat dissimilar. The Greeks seem to have had a greater recognition of masculine and feminine traits within each gender and the malleability of human beings as regards those traits and as a result of environmental influences. In both traditions the masculine was considered superior to the feminine but the biblical treatment of women appears to me to be more egalitarian than that of the ancient Greeks. In many of the early biblical narratives the views of the woman are vindicated over those of their spouses.

[561] It is also the case that Philo of Alexandria discussed the androgynous nature of Wisdom, the gender of which depends upon its role. For a good discussion, see Peter Schafer, *Mirror of His Beauty*, pp.48-50.

evidenced by its continued popularity today. Despite all those possible explanations, however, it is difficult to avoid suspecting that his motivations were even deeper and stemmed from some esoteric teaching that either he believed in or that others whom he was close to believed in.

We already learned from Philo (p.292) that Noah (like Janus) had two faces. We might also recall the opinion of Rabbi Judah in *MidrashTanhuna* that at least 10 of the sons of Jacob had a twin sister whom they then married. On page 343 of the *Dialoghi* Philo begins to expound upon the androgynous origin of the human race, as an explanation for the love between the two sexes. First he discusses Plato's *Symposium* and its mythological background. Sophia comments that it is a beautiful tale that must signify "philosophical beauty." That seems to be quite a compliment. Philo then remarks regarding its Mosaic origin and Sophia exclaims: "I never heard that Moses composed this myth." This is also interesting because once again it indicates Sophia's greater dependence upon philosophy than upon the Bible. Philo answers by describing the two human creation stories in *Genesis* and the fact that they contradict one another because in the first story Adam signifies both men and women but in the second story Adam signifies only the first man.

> Sophia: What, therefore, do you think is the meaning of these contradictions in the text?
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> Philo: This: that Adam, that is the first man, whom God created on the sixth day of the Creation, being a human individual, combined in himself male and female without division; and therefore the text says that God created Adam in His own likeness, 'male and female created He

them' — to denote that, being one individual, he contained in himself both male and female. Wherefore the ancient Hebrew commentators in their Chaldean commentary[562] here say, 'Adam

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[562] New English translation (p.277): "in their Chaldean language," Italian text (p.294): "*in lingua caldea*" Moshe Idel thinks that this "commentary" may be the *Zohar*. See *Kabbalah and Eros*, p. 89. His reasoning is that since this is Jewish Chaldean writing and the Talmudic writings about *du-partzufin* are in Hebrew, this may well refer to the *Zohar*, which was indeed written in Aramaic. He also argues that this would reinforce Judah Abrabanel's notion that Plato learned this myth from Moses. As further evidence Idel points out that Isaac Abrabanel was acquainted with *du-partzufin* and with the *Zohar*. These are all good conjectural arguments and should be taken seriously but we would still want to know why Judah Abrabanel was reluctant to specify that Jewish source. In fact Idel admits on the same page that there is "nothing intrinsically kabbalistic in the reference." That is true, especially considering the quite varying evaluations of the original state of unity. The "*Chaldean Commentary*" may possibly be *The Chaldaean Oracles*, which purport to be the teachings of Zoroaster, were widely known in the Renaissance, have come down to us in Greek manuscripts and bear a strong resemblance to kabbalistic, hermetic and gnostic teachings. See Pico della Mirandola's sixth and seventh conclusions regarding Zoroaster (Farmer, 488-489). The *Oracles* were translated from the Greek by Ficino and therefore were likely known to Abrabanel. The important question here for Abrabanel seems to be whether the first sin occurred as a result of the separation of the sexes or was a cause of it. If the former is the case the separation is something good that has some negative consequences. If the latter, the separation of the sexes was a punishment and therefore bad. See Pico della Mirandola's fifth conclusion regarding Zoroaster, where he refers to original sin (Farmer, pp.488-489). See Yehuda Liebes, "Zohar and Iamblichus" for a discussion of the *Zohar*, Iamblichus and *The Chaldean Oracles*.

According to Paul MacDonald, the Neoplatonists (presumably he means the pagan ones) considered the *Chaldaean Oracles* to be "the equivalent of Sacred Scripture." See *History of the Concept of Mind*, Volume 2, p.158. For their relationship to Middle Platonism, Christianity and Neoplatonism see R.T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, pp.105-108. *Although* the *Oracles* are not believed to be Jewish, they do mention Adam. Pico in a letter to Ficino claimed to possess them in the original Semitic language; they may however have been forgeries of Flavius Mithridates, the convert who helped him in Semitic languages. For their relationship to androgyny see Luc Brisson, *Sexual Ambivalence: Androgyny and Hermaphroditism in*

was created of two persons, the one part male the other female.' Moreover, the last text, which says that God created Adam male and female and called their name Adam, they interpret as meaning that Adam alone contained both sexes, and that there was first an individual called Adam, because the woman was never called Eve until she was separated from the male, Adam. And this was the source of that ancient androgen of Plato and the Greeks who was half man and half woman....[563] You will, however, find this

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Graeco-Roman Antiquity, chapter 3. For their relationship to Plato see his "Plato's *Timaeus* and the *Chaldaean Oracles*." For the relationship regarding them between Pletho, Ficino and Pico see Garin, *History of Italian Philosophy*, Volume 1, pp.222-224. Admittedly, all this proves nothing but we cannot know what manuscripts Judah Abrabanel saw and how he interpreted them since he refused to specify them.

Another possibility is this refers to *The Wisdom of the Chaldeans*, an old Jewish astrological text that counsels methods of inducing a woman to fall in love with a man by reciting a formula that includes "may her destiny be united with mine in the same manner as Adam was united to Eve. May she not have any chance to eat or to drink, or to sleep, or to stand, or to sit, before she is in love with me." See Moses Gaster, "The Wisdom of the Chaldeans: an Old Hebrew Astrological Text," p.344. That text is written in Hebrew, as are the relevant sections of the *Talmud* but perhaps what Abrabanel meant by "Chaldean commentary" was a text from Chaldea or Babylonia. Somewhat more challenging (in *The Wisdom of the Chaldeans*) is the desire for the woman to be united with the man like Adam and Eve were united and for her to be unable to eat, drink, etc. until she falls in love with him. Does this mean that she should first be united (perhaps back to back) until she falls in love and is liberated from that rather problematic position in which the man cannot help the woman or the woman the man? On that reading, Abrabanel's interpretation is quite different. Or perhaps the woman is first independent but the man wants her to become helpless so she can fall in love and she becomes united to him (cleaves to him) as the literal biblical text says.

[563] It should be noted that in the *Symposium* only some of the "androgens" are half man and half woman. Some are composed of two faces of men and

difference between the two versions: Moses holds the division to be for the better, because he gives us the saying, 'it is not good that man should be alone; let us make an help meet for him'.[564] And after the division he tells of the first sin of Adam and Eve through eating of the forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil for which they each received a distinct punishment. But Plato holds that man first sinned when joined together as male and female, and his punishment was this division into two halves, as you have already heard.

Sophia: It is indeed pleasing to learn that Plato drank of the waters of the sacred fount. But whence comes this difference, and why does he hold the division of man to be caused by and subsequent to his fall, contrary to the narrative in Holy Writ which makes the scission to be good and helpful to man and prior to his fall?

Philo: If you consider well, the difference will not be so great as it would appear; for Plato's intention is rather to uphold the Hebrew narrative than to refute it.[565]

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others have two faces of women. This was used to explain why some men and women favor the same sex while others favor the opposite sex.

[564] "Help meet" is from the King James Version. See the Italian text (p.295): "*aiutorio in fronte di lui*" and the new English translation (p.278): "a helper worthy of him." The former is a literal translation of the Hebrew while the latter is an interpretation base upon a wider reading of the text.

[565] Like so many pre-modern religious thinkers, Judah Abrabanel seems to have sincerely believed that Plato was under the influence of Judaism. Although the historical consciousness of Renaissance thinkers has sometimes been exaggerated, there was a growth in historical thinking

Abrabanel (on page 351) then goes on to expound a doctrine that is very profound but not exactly orthodox. Sin "causes division in man" just as "division in man produces sin." He even goes so far as to say: "sin and division in man are almost one and the same thing...the one always implying the other..."[566] But this seems to contradict his prior contention that God produced the division in man because he saw that "it is not good that the man should be alone"[567] This may be an important test of my earlier contention regarding the circumstances under

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among Jews as there was among Gentiles. See Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, "Clio and the Jews: Reflections on Jewish Historiography in the Sixteenth Century." But Judah Abrabanel seems not to have been decisively influenced by that trend. His typical medieval syncretistic falsification of intellectual history would naturally have led him to conflate some Jewish and pagan motifs. Thus we might expect him to defend kabbalistic views just as he defends and utilizes pagan mythology. This natural bias towards syncretism makes it all the more strange that he should warn regarding some kabbalistic views and whether there is a warrant for believing them (pp. 292-293). Why did he not simply put a good philosophical interpretation on their teachings? It is this kind of reasoning that first led me to suspect that he might have actually harbored strong reservations about Kabbalah, even stronger than those he actually expressed. We must remember that many of his co-religionists as well as Christian colleagues were strongly under the influence of Kabbalah. Perhaps if people in his day and age actually believed in pagan mythology he would not have been quite so accepting of it, just as his hero Plato warned against some of it. Perhaps his acceptance of it was a swipe against Christian theology and a support of neo-pagan thinkers such as Plethon who might have supported the re-introduction of pagan mythology. See Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and its Sources*, pp. 53-54.

[566] This appears to connote some deeper conceptual, rather than causal, connection between division and sin, which might make the pagan claim that separation of the sexes was God's punishment superfluous and would explain why that separation (viewed by the Bible as good) must have negative consequences. But such a view might also entail the inevitability of sin, something fiercely opposed by Jewish moralism, at least since the Talmudic period.

[567] *Genesis*, 2:18

which Abrabanel sides with Plato or Moses, because we seem to have here a clear doctrinal difference between the Bible and Plato. The Bible clearly endorses the relationship between man and woman as something essentially good while Plato (at least in the speech of Aristophanes in the *Symposium*) does not. Despite Plato's clear rejection of homosexuality in some of his later writings, the speaker in the *Symposium* who proclaims the androgynous origin of some of humankind also seems to endorse homosexual relations over heterosexual ones (at least on a spiritual level).[568] Perhaps the rejection of such a view may even have been a motivating factor in Abrabanel's rather confusing exegesis and explanation. Although he attempts to reconcile the Platonic and biblical viewpoints, he also seems firmly wedded to the notion that the relationship between the sexes, as we know, it is for the good.[569] But, interestingly, that

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[568] See the *Symposium* speech of Aristophanes (p.544): "men who are slices of the male are followers of the male, and show their masculinity throughout their boyhood by the way they make friends with men, and the delight they take in lying beside them and being taken in their arms. And these are the most hopeful of the nation's youth, for theirs is the most virile constitution." Needless to say, this quotation points out the oft-mentioned social constructivist nature of homosexuality as a social role. Nowadays we tend to consider homosexuals to be feminized males, despite their peculiar interests in some "masculine" roles and activities. Admittedly, this subject is confusing as long as one fails to recognize the strong influence of culture upon sexual roles. On the other hand, however, the physical and genetic evolution of males and females left certain strong hardwired tendencies in both that must have a powerful if not decisive influence upon their respective social roles to an extent that is often ignored by those modern scholars not willing to challenge current political correctness.

[569] The problem regarding whether sexual polarization is for the good could be viewed as part of the larger problem of whether the soul's descent into matter is for the good. Plato was apparently ambivalent about this or perhaps he held different views in the *Timaeus* and the *Phaedrus*. Plotinus appeared to view that descent as a necessity but even his attitude may have been somewhat ambivalent. See R.T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, pp.72-82. At any rate, the Jewish attitude, that was inherited by Christianity as well, views the material creation as something essentially good. This produces a

may not be the standard kabbalistic attitude, which (while surely rejecting homosexuality) tends to project the current separation of the sexes on to a cosmic — indeed a divine — screen, and one that has the appearance at times of a cosmic disaster, whether a result of human actions or not. This is what Gershom Scholem wrote about the exile or separation of the feminine aspect of God (the *Shekhinah*).

> In the earlier Kabbalah, for the most part, this exile is not described as originating in the first beginning of Creation. This development took place only with the Safed Kabbalah of the sixteenth century. The exile of the *Shekhinah*, or in other words, the separation of the masculine and feminine principles in God, is usually imputed to the destructive action and magical influence of human sin. Adam's sin is perpetually repeated in every other sin. Instead of penetrating the vast unity and totality of the *sefiroth* in his contemplation, Adam, when faced with the choice, took the easier course of contemplating only the last *sefirah* (since it seemed to represent everything else) separately from the other sefiroth, and of mistaking it for the whole of the Godhead. Instead of preserving the unity of God's action in all the worlds, which were still pervaded and governed by the secret life of the Godhead, instead of consolidating this unity by his own action, he shattered it. Since

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possible source of dissonance whenever a concept of descent of the soul into matter is combined with a biblical creation motif. It is resolved in various ways in Gnosticism, Kabbalah, etc.

then there has been, somewhere deep within, a cleavage between the upper and the lower, the masculine and the feminine.[570]

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[570] See *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, p. 108. It is the opinion of many that the Kabbalah is somewhat anti-feminine. While such a blanket statement is as inattentive to details as it is politically incorrect, I would argue that the burden of proof is on those who would like to maintain that the Kabbalah is more pro-feminine than its surrounding culture and traditional sources. I have indeed argued, however, that Judah Abrabanel, despite his obvious male chauvinism, is quite sympathetic to the feminine and that such a view might be attributable to a multitude of sources, the least likely of which would be kabbalistic ones. Therefore, I am forced to partly disagree with Rossella Pescatori. But I would first say where I agree. There is no doubt in my mind that the polarity of male and female is extremely important to Abrabanel, as she maintains. But I cannot follow her in her allusion to the female being somehow more spiritual, as she tries to find a commonality between a painting of Veronese and the views of Abrabanel. (*Images and Simulacra of the Soul*, pp. 141-142)

> The two polarities of the soul are represented as two different personifications. One is feminine, the woman who moves toward the light of God. Desiring a spiritual union with God, supreme intellect, she becomes the container of the knowledge and because of this she is wisdom, Sophia. The other is masculine, the man who is attracted to the darkness of matter. Desiring a carnal union with the objects of the reality he acquires the aspect of a 'beast,' (as in the pictures is represented by the lion skin that the male figure wears). The Cupid is Love, which acquires two aspects; a celestial Love, the one of the woman who desires God, and a terrestrial one, the one of the man, who focuses on material and corruptible goods... In some way, this painting seems to be an allegory of the soul according to what is theorized in Leone's *Dialogues*. At the center of the *Dialoghi d'amore* there is the Kabbalistic doctrine of the mystical union of love, which Leone Ebreo transformed into a very powerful element among the philosophical foundations of the system. A system based on gender polarities, whose duplicity resides in everything with the conclusion of a perfect androgyne unity. For Leone, primordial androgyny was first of all a lack of the power of division and a situation of

Philo's (Abrabanel's?) attempt to reconcile Plato's myth of the androgynous origin of some of humankind with *Genesis* may not be entirely successful if we view it as a causal connection between division and sin (as he initially appeared to view *Genesis*) or between sin and division, as he amended his view and as in Plato's myth. At any rate, Sophia is quite skeptical about this entire doctrine. This is interesting because she, while not always extremely knowledgeable, is portrayed as an intelligent and good person, and not what one might call a skeptic, at least in the pejorative sense. It seems to me that she might serve an important function here in Judah Abrabanel's strategy. While Philo is the repository of esoteric knowledge, she is often a bit dubious and combines that caution with a fair degree of philosophical knowledge and common sense. That combination makes her a useful partner of Philo, the more adventurous thinker, in the rational dialogical search for deeper meanings. Is it possible that Abrabanel himself was not really satisfied with this attempted reconciliation of a Platonic myth (that may not have even been the opinion of Plato) and an equally implausible Jewish myth that may not have been the real meaning of the Bible? Perhaps he was attempting to satisfy certain esoteric thinkers and at the same time subliminally raising questions about their doctrines. Perhaps he was saying that while there is something quite profound in this teaching, it should not be taken literally. This is what Sophia says on page 352 after Philo says: "All this you have heard, Sophia, and if you knew the allegorical meaning of both these stories you

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undifferentiated immobility. The split between the two opposite genders creates a tension that is the fecund force of the universe itself.

would see that although their form is different their meaning is the same."

> Sophia: Not only does the Platonic myth show that it was designed with some wise intent, but the Hebrew also, of the original union and subsequent division of man, proves that something more is implied of the nature of man than would appear on the surface. For I do not believe that man and woman were at any time other than divided into two bodies as they are at present. I pray you, Philo, tell me the meaning of the one and the other.
>
> Philo: The first purpose of the Hebrew narrative is to show that when man was created in a state of beatitude and placed in the earthly paradise he was male and female[571]; because the human species is preserved not in one individual but in two, that is male and female, and both together make an individual man embodying the whole human species and essence. Nevertheless these two individuals and parts of man in their blessed state were linked at the shoulders with their faced turned from one another so that their intercourse was not conducive to union in the act of generation, nor were their faces turned towards one another as is usual for this end. In truth, it was because they were far removed from such inclination that they were said to be united with their faces turned in opposite directions; to

[571] The Italian text (p.297) reads: "*se bene era maschio e femmina*" and the new English translation (p.280): "even though he was male and female."

> denote union not of the flesh, but of human essence and intellectual inclination, that is they were united in blessed contemplation of the Divinity, not in sexual intercourse and carnal delights, but in order that they might be of greater assistance to one another. The woman, deceived by the serpent, brought about the sin of herself and of her husband, and they ate of the forbidden tree of the knowledge of good and evil, which is carnal pleasure, seemingly good at the outset[572] but leading in reality to evil, for it diverts man from the path of eternal life and dooms him to mortality...This, therefore, is the first purpose of Moses in recounting the story of the union and division of man and his sin and punishment: to show that God had made him potentially divisible so that his two parts being turned face to face might the more easily come together in the union of the flesh, their inclination being diverted from spiritual to corporeal things.

This is rather strange. When man and woman were back to back they were in contemplation of God. They are turned face to face not only as punishment, but also to facilitate sexual intercourse. Yet animals copulate quite effectively without being face to face. Perhaps what he means is that humans were always separated by gender on this earthly plane and originally they were in rapt contemplation of God but after the first sin that rapture was replaced by the face-to-face love of man and

[572] Italian text (p.297): "*che è buona in apparenzia nel principio e ne l'esistenzia in fine è gattiva,*" new English translation (p.280): "apparently good in principle" Both seem somewhat incomplete.

woman. If that is the case, androgyny is raised to an ontological level but never really existed in physical reality, as Sophia originally suspected.

Some might argue that this androgyny myth is kabbalistic. It is certainly true that the kabbalists were quite interested in androgyny or *du-parzufin* (two faces), as the rabbis tended to call it. The former term as used in the *Talmud* is somewhat pejorative, denoting a sexually ambiguous and inferior being. The latter term as found in at least two places in the *Talmud* could be either good or bad. That is because there is not a great deal of commentary in the *Talmud* or early rabbinic literature regarding that supposedly original condition of humankind.[573] Perhaps this stems from a fundamental problem in the biblical text. The only way of reconciling the two creation stories in *Genesis* is to admit that while the original human was both male and female, God in his wisdom decided later to separate the two sexes into two distinct personalities. This seems strange, given the assumption that God is omniscient and omnipotent. Within Jewish literature, the kabbalists seem to have pursued this theme to a much greater extent than did the Talmudic literature and applied it on a much larger, more spiritual plane as somehow related to the separation of the *Sefirot*. Although Abrabanel never explicitly argues for such a kabbalistic explanation, as I read Philo's (Judah Abrabanel's?) argument, the original two-faced human was far more spiritual and indeed better than what we have now. Yet he also insists that the separation of humankind into male and female was for the good. In fact he asserts that they were partially separated even in the Garden of Eden: connected at the shoulders but two separate individuals, like Siamese

[573] See *Genesis Rabbah*, 8:1 and B.T. *Ketubot*, 8a.

twins. All those claims seem to parallel kabbalistic ideas. Yet Philo's view of Sophia's chaste beauty as sexually arousing also fits in with certain Renaissance motifs.[574]

I would now like to summarize (by way of quotation) some of the conclusions of Moshe Idel in a groundbreaking article entitled "Androgyny and Equality in Kabbalah."

> *Androgynos* is a term that has been adopted in Rabbinic Judaism in order to point to a human of complex sexual identity. This feature entails a negative overtone, which is why Kabbalists were less prone to resort to this term in their writings. Less conspicuous are their attitudes toward *du-partzufin.* This term indeed points to an entity created by God, and as such it should have been positive...Rabad's discussion is a relatively positive reflection on *du-partzufin,* though he does not imply the need to return to it...More explicit on the precarious status of *du-partzufin* is, for example, an influential commentary on the Pentateuch, written by R. Bahia ben Asher late in the 13th century in Catalunia...
>
> Even more explicit is an important mid-16th century commentator on the book of the *Zohar.* R. Shimeon ibn Lavi writes how it is a great secret that everything that is emanated from its source, and expounds thus:
>
> "[it] has no power to become fruitful if it does not return face-to-face to its source, because then it will become like a female who receives from

[574] See Jeanette Kohl, "Icons of Chastity, Objets d'Amour," pp.132-135.

> the male. However, while it does not return face-to-face it will not become fruitful...and the secret of the return is the existence of the world."
>
> The negative attitude toward the state of existence described as *du-partzufin* is manifest also in Moses Cordovero's *Pardes Rimmonim*...
>
> "...And behold, the lower union was for good and the higher one was for bad."
>
> Thus, it seems that several major Kabbalists made explicit statements that the primeval vision of *du-partzufin* had its negative aspects. Its back-to-back structure impeded procreation, one of the most important commandments according to many theosophico-theurgical Kabbalists.[575]

Hence, though Abrabanel may be using a kabbalistic motif of the two faces turned away from one another (assuming there is no other likely source) he at times interprets that primeval state in a practically opposite manner, as something spiritual and good. That applies to the quasi-separated state in the Garden of Eden and presumably even more so to a completely united state of spiritual or ontological androgyny. And he also has no problem using that word (*androgynos*) which the rabbis of the *Talmud* rejected. Hence he may possibly be confusing two different meanings of "androgyny." Or perhaps that term in his day only meant a truly unified human being and not a man of inferior (feminine) qualities. Yet as we also saw, he insists that the original separation of man and woman was something good and not a punishment. The

[575] See Moshe Idel, "Androgyny and Equality in the Theosophico-Theurgical Kabbalah" in *Diogenes* 208 (London: 2005) 27-38, 36-37.

goodness of the separation must apply basically to the original separation prior to (or while already in) the Garden of Eden. The subsequent complete separation, involving romantic love and sexual intercourse, is viewed by him somewhat less favorably but not altogether so. From a philosophical point of view (Sophia) it is clearly bad but from Philo's mystical point of view it completes his spiritual love for Sophia. This seems to involve Abrabanel in an ambiguous position regarding unity vs. separation, which might be explained by the need to reconcile a clear biblical teaching regarding heterosexual love (and perhaps the views of the kabbalists) with the views of Plato (or what he might have thought them to be). But aside from the admittedly vague descriptions of *du-partzufin* in the *Talmud* and the generally negative kabbalistic ones that he seems to reject, there is also another possible source and one that coheres much better with Abrabanel's somewhat positive but quite nuanced evaluation of androgyny. I quote John D. Turner.

> The application of the concept of human marriage to the achievement of unity with a transcendent reality is frequent in classical Judaism, where God is the husband of his bride Israel; the metaphor of marriage also appears in the NT, not only where Jesus refers to himself as the bridegroom, but especially in the Pauline corpus (I Cor. 6:15-17; 2 Cor.11:1-2, Eph. 5:22-23) as a symbol for the relation of Christ and the church. Although Christian Gnostics likewise draw on these biblical concepts, uppermost in their minds as well as those of Jewish Gnostics was the notion of the primordial unity of humankind as expressed in Gen 1:26-27, according to which Adam was created as a single

masculo-feminine being in the image of God.

The primordial sin or fault underlying human existence that had to be overcome was the creator's ignorant act of separating this originally androgynous into separate male and female persons. In the act of physical union, the offspring was thought to receive the human form from the male, while its physical and emotional essence was provided by the female. The same held for the spiritual world as well; spiritual perfection lay in androgyny, so when a spiritual being such as Sophia undertakes to produce offspring without a male consort, the result is defective, a formless abortion lacking the male element of form. This being the character of her offspring, both her son, creator of the natural world, and his cosmic product are likewise defective. The rectification of the creation depends on introducing into it a potential source of its reunification.

The Sethian myth conceives this to be accomplished when the image of God (Adamas), the original human androgyne, is primordially projected as the archetype upon which the creator unwittingly bases his own human copy. Once he realizes that his androgynous copy is superior to him, he splits it into male and female, but it is too late. In spite of the creator's attempts to subvert the primal couple, by reuniting themselves they can now re-create their original androgyny, which they do in the birth of

> Seth, the "other seed." Like the divine Adamas, he is a true ("triple," i.e., androgynous) male Child, as is the "immovable race" he engenders.[576]

I do not mean to suggest (nor do I even suspect) that Abrabanel believed in such an extreme Gnostic doctrine,[577] which degrades sexuality as originally meaningless and only acquiring significance from an "ignorant act" of the creator. But on the other hand, he does not unequivocally defend what might be viewed as the classical Jewish opposition to such Gnostic anti-sexuality, except in so far as he insists that the separation of the sexes is for the good and not a punishment. There were certainly no self-proclaimed "Gnostics" in the Renaissance period and perhaps there never even was such a self-defined group at any time.[578] But Abrabanel might have been under the influence of such a doctrine that had found its way into some other (possibly hermetic or kabbalistic)

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[576] Turner refers to the Sethian myths (*Zost.* NHC BIII, 1 131, 5-8). See his *Ritualism in Gnosticism*, pp. 111-112.

[577] Sethian myths tends to be more extreme than Valentinian ones in terms of emphasizing the malevolent intents of earthly powers and also more extreme in prescribed ascetic practices to be used as a remedy. See Karen L. King, *What Is Gnosticism?* pp. 158-161. It is difficult to know how influential those Gnostic schools were. These ideas may have existed in manuscripts that we no longer have access to. We still have much to learn about the relationship between Gnosticism, Judaism, Christianity and Kabbalah but it should be obvious that Abrabanel's views about sexuality do not appear to come directly from any of the more "orthodox" expressions of those religious ideologies and are somewhat idiosyncratic.

[578] We will not discuss extensively the concept of Gnosticism, its existence as an organized group or its prevalence except in so far as it has been widely viewed as being quite influential in both Christianity and Judaism (especially in Kabbalah and earlier mystical schools). Paul MacDonald speaks of a "common Gnostic image whereby primal human was thought to be *both* male and female" but does not give any precise evidence. See *History of the Concept of Mind*, Volume 2, p.226.

teaching.[579] We have already mentioned Philo of Alexandria and Eriugena as possible sources. Abrabanel does make a big issue about Seth as being "firmly fixed" regarding the "copy of the Divinity" or as Adam's own "intellectual likeness" and as being "father of a race of virtuous men" (p. 361). In fact Abrabanel then goes even further in pursuing what is essentially a pagan/philosophical myth of androgyny (superimposed upon the biblical account) on pp.362-363. Yet he also makes the astounding and perhaps contradictory claim that God opposes a purely spiritual nature for man in favor of a physico-spiritual one.

> Philo: Now that you have understood the allegory behind the Mosaic account of man's first disobedience you will find it but a simple matter to understand the significance of the Platonic myth. This teaches that men were first dual, half male and half female united in one body, that is intellect and corporeality were united in man in accordance with the original design of his creation, so that the corporeal and

[579] Many scholars believe that Hermetism antedates Gnosticism, which in turn antedates Kabbalah (as we have defined it). However, it is quite possible that gnostic views infiltrated Renaissance discussions of hermetic doctrines. Regarding the very efficacy of the term "Gnosticism" to refer to any actual group (in contradistinction to referring to a Christian heresy) I will not venture to opine but the term does appear useful in the history of ideas. An excellent discussion is to be found in Paul MacDonald, *History of the Concept of Mind*, Volume 2, pp.114-134. What seems clear to me is that Gnosticism is dependent upon biblical (or rabbinic) concepts on the one hand and Platonic ones on the other. That surely does not define it since the same can be said of all Western thought. But what I am trying to get at is that there may well have been proto-gnostic trends long before the classical texts of Gnosticism were created. Likewise, Gnostic tendencies outlived that classical period and were absorbed into other schools of thought, for example Kabbalah.

female half should be entirely subservient to the intellectual and male half, without division or opposition. Further the male nature derives form the sun and the female from the earth, and the whole androgyne was composed of both these parts, from the moon... And since the androgynes were very powerful, they sought battle against the gods; in other words, being entirely dominated by the intellect and rapt in the contemplative life without resistance or opposition on the part of the body, were almost equal to the angels and matched themselves against the disembodied intelligences; as David says of the creation of man, 'Thou hast made him a little lower than the angels', and Moses speaking in the name of the Lord, 'the man is become as one of us'— before his fall. Jupiter, therefore, casting about for a remedy, caused him to be divided into two halves, male and female. And the two parts are not infused intellect and character, as some imagine, but the male is the intellectual part and the female the corporeal part, and the two together make up the whole man. For man being entirely given up to contemplation became one with the angels and spirits, which is contrary to the purpose of the Creator, to wit, that he should be equally composed of mind and body; and when his nature became wholly angelic the human frame was destroyed and both the individual and the race would have perished. And this it is which Plato calls man's striving with the gods.

> Therefore he was divided, that is his body was made to offer some resistance to the intellect and the latter to incline to the necessary care of the body and its material nature, so that the life of man might be human rather than angelic."

Surely, there is something problematic at first blush – from the Jewish perspective at least – about Philo's teaching here and it even seems to contradict his earlier one. Is it possible that God opposes the ultimately good ontological state of spiritual, androgynous unity for humankind? We might have thought that the bad things that happen to humankind are the result of sin and that God only wants the best for them. Abrabanel seems to be combining a pagan notion of competition between man and God with the more typically biblical one of God wanting only the good for humankind.[580] Indeed, Sophia (as the cautious

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[580] As regards pagan sexual myths involving man vs. the gods, Ovid's treatment of Hermaphroditus and Salmacis comes to mind. While the concept of a hermaphrodite is somewhat distinct from that of an androgynous being, as we have been discussing it, they are related. Ovid, a late classical writer, tells the tale of Hermaphrodite, the young son of Hermes and Aphrodite. As beautiful as a god, a nymph named Salmacis falls in love with him but he resists her advances. She embraces him and prays to the gods to incorporate him into herself. When he realizes what has happened, he prays to the gods to make him at least half man and half woman and his wish is granted. We know this myth was well known in Italy in Judah Abrabanel's time because even the Dutch painter Gossaert depicted it in 1520 in a painting that is now in the permanent collection of Rotterdam's Museum Boymans-van Bueningen and was part of the Bossaert show at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 2010. What is interesting about it is that there are also two unions involved. The original one, which was prompted by female heterosexual desire, incorporated the male into the female and was bad. The subsequent union was a compromise that rendered the unified creature half male. See Ovid's poem, translated by Joseph Addison, in *Poetica Erotica*, edited by T.R. Smith.

Both bodies in a single body mix
A single body with a double sex.

voice of reason) responds to his earlier account by saying that she might accept his interpretation if not for the fact that it degrades procreation by making sin "the cause of generation" and Philo responds: "the true end of man is not generation" (p.354). Now the tables seem to be turned because Philo is almost always the one who claims knowledge of Judaism (and Kabbalah) while Sophia is his eager student. Here Philo is openly repudiating what might admittedly be a philosophically naïve interpretation of Jewish and kabbalistic tradition but without attempting to defend that tradition in any deeper way and it is Sophia who defends the traditionally Jewish emphasis on procreation.[581] Indeed Philo's later attempt to justify the division of the androgyne gets him deeper and deeper into pagan/Gnostic views that imply fallibility or even malevolent intent onto the creator/creators of humankind. Whether he was

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The boy, thus lost in woman, now surveyed
The river's guilty stream, and thus he prayed.
(He prayed, but wondered at his softer tone,
Surprised to hear a voice but half his own.)
You parent gods, whose heavenly names I bear,
Hear your Hermaphrodite, and grant my prayer;
Oh, grant that – whom so'er these streams contain,
If man he entered, he may rise again
Supple, unsinewed, and but half a man!

The heavenly parents answered, from on high
Their two-shaped son, the double votary;
Then gave a secret virtue to the flood,
And tinged its sources to make his wishes good.

[581] As we will see, Sophia at the end of the book (pp.467-468) proclaims that: "corporeal love seems rather to contain naught but evil and ugliness, and its effects for the most part to be pernicious and hurtful." I do not know how we can easily reconcile that statement with her earlier defense of procreation except that technically the term "for the most part" allows such an exception. At any rate, there is no real question regarding the traditional Jewish emphasis on procreation as a major value and this opinion of Sophia seems quite un-Jewish.

consciously guided by kabbalistic thought or unconsciously so by purely Gnostic teachings is impossible to determine. Admittedly, his entire argument is quite confusing. Perhaps the simplest explanation, however, is his continuous attempt to reconcile Plato and Moses. Still, he need not have attributed this androgynous myth to Moses or even to Plato! For that reason I suspect that he was indeed guided by some other teaching (or teachings) that he considered either authoritative or at least convincing. What is interesting, however, is that he fails to clearly and specifically place a kabbalistic stamp on his arguments. He never, for example, mentions the unification of some of the *Sefirot* as a result of human sexual relations. And he fails to fully and unequivocally endorse procreation. In no sense does he echo the sentiments of the *Zohar*: "A person flawed by not leaving a son in this world does not cleave to the holy name when he departs, nor is he admitted within the curtain because he is defective, incomplete."[582] As is so often the case his emphasis is on the interpersonal, intrapersonal and subjective rather than on objective cosmic or divine entities. He also fails to mention the Jewish people as it pertains to procreation and/or those cosmic entities.

Sexuality

The relationship between love and sexuality must constitute an important aspect of the entire teaching of the *Dialoghi*. As Seymour Feldman observes, "Most significant is the sexual aspect. Sophia is clearly a woman; moreover, she is the object of Philo's love, which is overtly erotic."[583] But this theme of sexual love is not among the least ambiguous ones in

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[582] See the *Zohar*, Volume One, Matt translation, p.262.

[583] See Seymour Feldman, *Philosophy in a Time of Crisis: Don Isaac Abravanel: Defender of the Faith*, p.169.

the book. This can be partially explained by the various intellectual forces at work upon Judah Abrabanel. Opposition to purely spiritual love (which might preclude sexuality) is not confined to the kabbalists. It is a general Jewish prejudice.[584] It may even be a general human prejudice! It can be found even in societies that are commonly thought of as anti-sexual, such as the Christian Middle Ages or Hindu dominated India.[585] One could confidently assume (from an evolutionary perspective) that those humans who were indifferent or averse to sexuality generally did not pass on those genetic predispositions to

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[584] Actually, Jewish tradition is somewhat ambivalent about sexuality. On the one hand we have legends regarding Moses and some great rabbis refraining from sexual intercourse for years on end. We also have evidence that even the *non-celibate* Essenes had a relative abhorrence for sexuality. On the other hand, procreation has been one of the most highly valued virtues in Judaism and some Talmudic passages suggest that not all scholars can successfully refrain from sexual acts. Some kabbalistic and other writings, on the other hand, often assume that Jewish scholars would not really be very interested in sexuality and ought to engage in it only once a week (Friday night) as an obligation to their wives and God. This raises the intriguing possibility that Jewish tradition might have induced those who otherwise would have chosen not to reproduce to do so as an obligation to God.

[585] It is of course true that Hinduism and Christianity can be somewhat more anti-sexual than Judaism, at least in theory. But we should not be fooled by extreme phenomena, most of which have been eliminated by Judaism, in contrast to some other religions that seem to have a greater tolerance and even predilection for them. For example, Christian spokesmen have often extolled celibacy as the superior condition. But absent the Jewish commandment to be fruitful and multiply, similar conclusions might be reached from some Jewish writings, as mentioned in the previous note. At times Jewish commentators have made an effort to assert that sexual intercourse existed in the Garden of Eden prior to the first sin, something that many Christian commentaries denied. Even stranger allusions to prelapsarian sexuality exist in Jewish literature. See Eric Lawee, "The Reception of Rashi's *Commentary on the Torah* in Spain: The Case of Adam's Mating with the Animals." Nevertheless, despite those views of the various religions, sexuality was never in any danger of dying out except perhaps in the most extreme sects.

subsequent generations to the extent that more sexually "normal" individuals did.[586] Nevertheless, despite that apparently normal human prejudice in favor of sexuality, ambivalence towards it (often viewing it as only instrumentally good) is somewhat characteristic of much of medieval and Renaissance thought.[587]

Yet, unlike much of medieval philosophy, Abrabanel does not dismiss sexuality quite so lightly, as a merely inferior, physical process. Nevertheless I cannot completely agree with Miranda who asserts: "we can confidently say that one of the most unavoidable lessons included in the *Dialoghi d'Amore*

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[586] Good cases in point would be the Shakers and the Essenes, both of which died out. While some Essenes were celibate, like the Shakers, we now know that many (and perhaps most) were not. Nevertheless, they seem to have been somewhat averse to sexuality as the following translation of the *Testament of Issachar*, 2:1-3 by Gabriele Boccaccini attests: "They despised [sexual] intercourse, yet they married and mated for the sake of children and not for fondness for pleasure." See Boccaccini, editor, *Enoch and Qumron Origins*, p.414. Of course this example of the Essenes is not a clear case of asexuality affecting survival since many other Second Temple Jewish groups did not survive for purely cultural and historical reasons. It is interesting, however, as related to the previous notes and the origins of certain ascetic Christian attitudes towards sexuality.

[587] As an example of such an attitude in the Renaissance we might cite the cult of St Anne, which began around the 1490's. This was associated with the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception, which, while much older, was quite controversial and received impetus from the cult of St. Anne. The Immaculate Conception of Mary by Saint Anne finally became a dogma of the Church in 1854. Many people are acquainted with the paintings of St. Anne by Leonardo and other Renaissance artists. But few recognize the ideal of feminine attractiveness divorced from sexuality that is behind those paintings. For a very enlightening discussion see Meyer Schapiro, "Leonardo and Freud: An Art-Historical Study." While these doctrinal discussions within the Church may not have affected Judah Abrabanel, the cultural significance of beautiful women may well have exercised an influence upon him somewhat independently of the more universal sexual attractiveness of women. This might also partially explain the rather strange dialogue regarding spirituality and sexuality that goes on between Philo and Sophia.

pertains to the author's intention of showing how *human sexuality* constitutes one of the foremost dimensions of *being*." It is true that Abrabanel uses the term "*copulazione*" to refer to the highest experience of the human soul with God. But, on the other hand, he also has some rather uncomplimentary things to say about sexuality. This is arguably one of the most difficult to understand concepts in the *Dialoghi* but not because it is intrinsically mysterious. Abrabanel is clearly working in the context of religious and philosophical prejudices that downgrade sexuality and he himself believed that there are processes in the universe that are far more profound and more desirable. Yet there is a connection in his thinking between the lower and the higher that he continually attempts to uncover, not entirely successfully however. The connection between those higher and lower processes has to do with the creation of new life.[588] In the first dialogue (p.55) he attempts to distinguish between sexuality as the *end* of love and as its *fulfillment* and *perfection*, given the fact that we live in a physical universe.

> Sophia: So you admit that the end of your desire resides in the most material of the senses,

[588] We should not lose sight of the fact that paganism tended to glorify sexuality as a creative force associated with fertility. We now know from a biological and evolutionary perspective that the reproductive power of sexuality is less significant than its power to create *novelty*. But the pagan glorification of sexuality does not seem to have been based upon that aspect nor is it likely that Abrabanel was aware of the connection between novelty and sexuality. Ancient paganism associated sexuality with rain, fertility, prosperity, etc. Its intensely pleasurable aspects must also have figured into its glorification. Another interesting pagan motif is the possibility of sexual relations between heavenly beings and human beings. In the Bible the only clear mention of this (*Genesis* VI: 1-7) presages one of the strongest divine condemnations of human beings and leads to God's decision to destroy them. Hence, what might have been viewed as a propitious cosmic sexual act in paganism became an utter disaster in the biblical myth.

namely: touch. And I am amazed that you should place the end of love in so low a thing, if love is as spiritual as you say.

Philo: I do not admit that this is the end of perfect love; but I have been telling you that this act, far from dissolving perfect love, rather confirms and integrates it through the bodily activities of love, which are desired insofar as they give indication of such reciprocal love in both lovers. Furthermore, when two spirits are united in spiritual love, their bodies desire to enjoy such union as is possible, so that no distinction may persist, but the union be in all ways perfect; the more so as a corresponding physical union increases and perfects the spiritual love, even as prudence[589] is perfected by the correspondence of prudent actions. Finally I would tell you that, whereas we before defined love in general, the proper definition of the perfect love of a man for a woman is: the conversion of the lover into the beloved together with a desire for the conversion of the beloved into the lover. And when such love is equal on both sides, it is defined as the conversion of each lover into the other.

Therefore, I find it somewhat puzzling that Miranda should use this very exchange as a justification for the view that sexual intercourse is "intended as a definite means toward the

[589] See Italian text (p.50): "*il conoscimento de la prudenzia*" and the new English translation (p.64): "prudent consciousness." This is an attempt to differentiate the virtue from the actions that result from it.

achievement of *spiritual union* between opposites."[590] I do not know if Abrabanel actually believed it but I fail to see how it follows from this particular exchange.[591] It is true that Abrabanel places great stress on the love of man for woman (in contrast to some pagan views that exalted homosexuality) but it is not clear to me that he ever argues that sexuality is a means to the end of spiritual love or union. This may be an area where our modern thinking deviates quite essentially from medieval/Renaissance thinking. As an illustration (a variant of which Abrabanel himself employs) we moderns might argue that the desire or need for prudent actions is a means for the attainment of prudence as a quality of the soul. But Abrabanel seems to be arguing the very opposite here: that prudent actions are a *perfection* of prudence just as physical sexual union is a *perfection* of the spiritual love for the opposite gender, which is already present in the human soul. But can a fulfillment or perfection also be a means? Aristotle might have denied that and common sense may also have difficulty with it. If something like prudence or love is already present in the soul as a quality, how can prudent physical action (or sexuality) be a means of producing it?

We should remember that the minstrels of the Middle Ages promoted a cult of the female that was almost devotional, turning them into objects of veneration, in contrast to the more "normal" tendency of men to use women as objects of

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[590] See Miranda dissertation, pp. 907-908.

[591] It is understandable how such a misinterpretation could arise. We tend to view love (like intellect) from a more developmental perspective than did the medieval and ancient worlds. It makes perfect sense to us that sexuality can act as a catalyst in the production of love and that once the sexuality has run its course (in old age for example) the love still remains. It is remarkable to us therefore that Abrabanel does not avail himself of such an argument and we tend to read it in to his discussion.

enjoyment. It is at least likely that Abrabanel was influenced by it. Now it could be argued that all human beings require some form of enjoyment in order to go on with their lives. The spiritually inclined obtain that by intellectual and spiritual activities, the ultimate of such felicity being mystical union with God. For them it need not necessarily lead to either worldly enjoyment or good deeds, but if it does so much the better. Others, however, view spiritual or intellectual activities as a means to more earthly or physical outcomes. But even if those physical outcomes are perfections or fulfillments, that does not mean they are proper ends in terms of intentions. It is possible that those who view physical sexuality as a means to spiritual perfection seek to avoid admitting it as an end for the latter. I would argue, however, that for Philo (Judah Abrabanel) sexual desire or activity is neither a means nor an end as regards spiritual perfection, but a byproduct or an overflow into the physical world.

But perhaps Abrabanel had a slightly different idea and his circular concept of love may allow us to see that the physical and the spiritual are constantly reinforcing one another just as the lover and beloved (assuming both are lovers and beloved) are constantly reinforcing one another. This may also be a very Jewish way of viewing life or at least a justification of Jewish tradition, which places a great premium on the expression of virtue by actions (which also make one more virtuous in the Jewish view). But as emotionally satisfying as this equivocation between character virtue and virtuous actions may be, ultimately ordinary logic must come down on either the quality of the soul or the performed action as the essential virtue, with the other consigned as either a means or an expression. Perhaps, however, this is an area where logic conflicts with other profound human concerns. Perhaps its

resolution requires a kind of circular rationale such as Abrabanel has been said to propose, albeit not entirely successfully.[592]

One might also ask whether Abrabanel's view of sexuality is a specifically kabbalistic motif. I would argue that it is not. The theurgic kabbalists viewed sexuality as a means of producing more spiritual unions in the higher realms — in the *Sefirot*. Nowhere does Abrabanel argue or even allude to that. At most, as Miranda claims, Abrabanel concedes sexuality a role in the spiritual perfection of the human individual. But, as I have argued, even that is doubtful and Abrabanel seems most comfortable discussing it as being the expressive perfection of a spiritual virtue already present in the human soul. And in fact he might seem to contradict himself at the end of the third dialogue (p. 429).

> Sophia: Love is therefore a species of desire.
>
> Philo: Even so.
>
> Sophia: And what will you call that other species which is not-love?
>
> Philo: I would call it appetite or carnal desire.
>
> Sophia: What difference do you make between love and appetite? Is not the end of both the

[592] Seymour Feldman devotes an entire chapter to the "circle of love" in *Philosophy in a Time of Crisis: Don Isaac Abravanel: Defender of the Faith* (pp.171-175), despite the fact that the book is primarily about Isaac Abrabanel. Obviously he considers this to be one of the important aspects of Judah Abrabanel's thinking. As Feldman states on p.175, "The circle has been completed. The source and the goal of love is one and the same: God." When the source and the goal are the same, it is impossible to view causes and effects in terms of a means-end analysis. This is one of the prices of certain types of mysticism and produced conflicts with some ordinary types of rationality.

> same, to wit, pleasure? How, therefore, can you make such distinction between them?
>
> Philo: It is true that the end of each of them is pleasure, but beautiful pleasure is the end of love and unbeautiful pleasure the end of appetite.

It seems that Abrabanel may not be opposed to pleasure per se and that may be the cause of some misunderstandings since later on we will see him refer to the purely pleasurable as "vicious." He may, however, not be opposed to physical pleasure if combined with the spiritual, even though he calls the former "unbeautiful." The ensuing argument is quite frankly hard to follow. But it seems that sexuality is only a true good when combined with the higher form of love or (like other physical pleasures) when enlisted in the service of some other virtue. He, therefore, does concede some value to procreation and sexuality as a means to that end on p.436-437 but it seems to be a different one than Miranda proposed. That value lies precisely in maintaining or creating the physical life that serves as the substrate for spiritual virtue.

> Sophia: Why, therefore does Aristotle call only one kind of love pleasurable and the others by a different name?
>
> Philo: Because carnal delights are commonly called and held to be true pleasure — not that they are so in reality, for by reason of their base and material nature they represent the lowest form of pleasure, and are for the most part devoid of beauty...And the materially pleasurable, as I have told you, although it holds the foremost place in the estimation of the majority of mankind, and is of supreme

> importance to animals, has in truth little or no true goodness or beauty.
>
> Sophia: How can this be? Do you not see that there are many pleasures of the body which are essential to the life of the individual and to the preservation of the species? Therefore in the course of nature, and by the mind of the supreme creator with wondrous art and most subtle wisdom each was allotted its proper organ and destined to bring sweet recreation to the body. How, then, can those pleasures, though carnal, not be good in reality but only in appearance, as you say? For this does not tally with our experience...
>
> Philo: They are certainly carnal, but are not purely of the species of the pleasurable; nay, they are even virtuous when, as I told you, they are indulged in with such moderation as is meet to procure the nourishment of the body and the preservation of the species. When abused, they become wanton and vicious and belong purely to the pleasurable, devoid of all virtue, and their goodness and beauty is only apparent and not real.

Is there some way of resolving this apparent conflict between the views of Philo and Sophia? Obviously, we would prefer not to leave a glaring inconsistency but on the other hand we are not willing to pay the price of harmonizing of elements that may in fact not be truly reconcilable. Let us recall what Philo said: "physical union increases and perfects the spiritual love, even as prudence is perfected by the correspondence of

prudent actions." Since he uses the relationship between prudence and prudent actions as an explanation we might assume that prudence may be an easier way to understand this relationship between spiritual (Platonic) love and sexuality. But the analogy seems to fail. Philo needs to explain how and why something that is base like sexuality can fulfill or perfect something that is spiritual like love and prudential actions are not base in quite the same way, even if they are not as spiritual as virtuous character traits. Even those with utter contempt for the physical world would not call prudent actions "base." It is difficult to put Abrabanel in that extreme camp, however, and therefore he most surely did not consider prudential actions base. Another possibility is that what is base and disgraceful is the physical desire or the physical pleasure but the physical union itself is not base, especially since it is (ideally) an expression of a spiritual union and since it leads to new life.[593] All in all, however, Abrabanel's analogy seems not to be a good one. So let us go back to the original proposition that a spiritual union between two individuals is completed or perfected by physical union. What if the two individuals are men? There seem to be a lot of unspoken assumptions here. There is the

[593] Bernard McGinn and Seymour Feldman are of the opinion that Abrabanel's positive stance towards physical love reflects a Jewish tradition that is less ascetic in these matters than some strands of the Christian tradition. Although Jewish tradition is generally more concerned with procreation and perhaps more open to sexual pleasure than some other religious traditions, I tend to think the matter is a good deal more complex. Firstly, Sophia especially but Philo also say some rather negative things regarding sexuality. Secondly, despite its existence in the Bible, romantic love seems not especially prized by Jewish tradition, which often endorsed arranged marriages. It is undoubtedly true, however, that the *Dialoghi* does not have the feel of an anti-sexual book, despite those utterances of the protagonists. Perhaps this more positive view reflects Renaissance culture. See Feldman, "Platonic Cosmologies,"p.576 and McGinn, "Cosmic and Sexual Love in Renaissance Thought."

medieval contempt for physical pleasure and imagination, the Renaissance zest for life including sexuality and the Judaic (and Christian) repugnance regarding homosexuality. Though we would like to harmonize them all, I am not convinced it is possible to do so with the tools provided by Abrabanel. Furthermore, it must perhaps be admitted that Abrabanel's view is not the traditional Jewish one, which exalts procreation and good deeds over almost everything else, with the possible exception of study of the *Torah*.

Regarding Kabbalah, there seems to be another contradiction between Abrabanel's view and that of the kabbalists, at least as Elliot Wolfson reads them. Wolfson's insight is that the male desire for heterosexual intercourse is rooted in the desire to reclaim "the component of himself severed in the construction of his feminine partner," that the original human was really male and therefore heterosexuality is "covertly homoerotic."[594] We have already seen, however, that according to Philo (Abrabanel?) the male lover's purpose is primarily to become the beloved and secondarily to have the beloved become him: in other words complete union and identity between the male and the female. We have also seen that Ficino held a view that has an affinity to this: one loses oneself in ones beloved and then finds oneself again in the beloved who is also ones lover. Yet it is difficult to understand how one can either lose or find oneself in an inferior. Admittedly, Philo (presumably speaking for Abrabanel) believed that the male was superior and he stated it on more than one occasion. On the other hand, Philo (Abrabanel?) also believed that the recipient of love (the beloved) is in a sense superior to the giver of love (the lover). Elliot Wolfson also

[594] See *Language, Eros, Being*, p. 148.

quotes Chaim Vital and others to the effect that the female when she is integrated into the male becomes superior to him. It is possible therefore that Wolfson's position regarding the views of the kabbalists could be projected onto Abrabanel with the help of a certain hermeneutic method.[595] But let us now look at another (perhaps more literal) interpretation that involves a kind of (relatively) unselfish love.

The Love of the Superior for the Inferior

This brings us to another possibly profound observation of Judah Abrabanel, which is a sort of gloss on both biblical and philosophical thought and a bridge between them. I believe that it is intimately connected to his view of the superiority of the beloved and his exaltation of love beyond how it was often understood as a kind of needy desire. We have already seen in our synopses of the second and third dialogues that Sophia, speaking from a philosophical perspective originally denied that such a non-needy love is possible. It is only in the third dialogue after reiterating her skepticism that she is finally convinced. There seems little doubt that Philo is the voice of Judah Abrabanel on this issue since Sophia comes to accept his views. But in this case he sides with Moses or at least with a somewhat literal reading of the Bible. And as soon as he does that he must revise its literal meaning as it proves too much. But there is a questionable doctrine that some have found in this love. The doctrine in question deals with the role of the inferior in the perfection of the superior, of which the value of sexuality as a means may be a sub-set. Perhaps if we can understand this more general concept, the previous problem regarding sexuality (which we

[595] Ibid, p.185

left in a state of uncertainty if not confusion) could be resolved. I quote Miranda:

> At the core of Filone's argument is, thus, the idea that the imperfection in the effect implies imperfection in the cause and that in loving its lower effect, therefore, the higher cause desires the perfection of the lower being, desiring to unite with it precisely in order to save it from its defect. Indeed, it is by freeing the latter that the higher being saves itself from any defect and imperfection. Hence Leone Ebreo's extraordinary claim that, as the ancients (most likely meaning the *Kabbalists*) used to say, the sinner stains and offends the divinity, whereas the just man exalts it. Of course, this notion that God Himself is affected by human imperfection is an extraordinary one. Later on, in the third dialogue, Filone himself will attempt to make it clear that such a notion applies to God's activity, but not to His essence:"[596]

So Miranda seems to understand (correctly I believe) that only on the divine level can love be completely unselfish and even there the "activity" is positively affected. That, however, does not prove that on the human level there are not gradations of unselfish love. It is also not at all self-evident that "the ancients" he refers to are the kabbalists, especially since Abrabanel knows of even more ancient writers than the one claimed by the kabbalists to have written the *Zohar*. We will have more to say about this shortly. On the other hand,

[596] Miranda dissertation, p.720

Miranda might be using the word "kabbalist" in a broader sense. Be that as it may, here Miranda alludes to two major philosophical problems. We would like to think of the love of the higher for the lower as completely unselfish or disinterested in nature (especially when pertaining to God) but the very nature of love resists any such simplistic formulation since it is what binds everything together. Therefore, we tend to view it as having an effect on both the beloved and the lover. This fits in with a male phallocentric view of sexuality. We have already seen Elliot Wolfson's view that male sexuality is rooted in the desire to reclaim an originally male element from the female and which also allows the female to (in a sense) become male. Hence the reclaiming of the lost male element is somewhat dependent upon not only the positive transformation of the female but also her reunion with the male.[597]

The notion of God being adversely affected by the foibles of His creation and positively affected by their

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[597] What is interesting here is that both the male and the female receive but it is only the male who gives. The female receives much more since she is more in need. Abrabanel also views the woman as receiving and the man as giving. But as has been mentioned on countless occasions, for Abrabanel the recipient of love is in a sense superior to the giver of love (with some obvious exceptions such as man and God). This view of the beloved as superior is counterintuitive and even invites an interpretation that is reductive but perhaps it is to be accepted as a possibly profound insight that we still have not really come to grips with. The kabbalistic explanation as I understand it (from Elliot Wolfson) has to do with the union between man and woman. That is not how Abrabanel explicitly states it. He describes both women and children as inferior beings who become superior through the love of the father. This does not appear to me to be a union but a family constellation, very similar to what goes on here on earth where God is the father and we humans are the children. We seem to be the superior centers of attention in the drama unfolding but in reality it is only because of God's love for us that we are. Abrabanel's notion of divine love and human love for God seems to fall short of union and he even warns against excessive love that causes one to lose oneself in the beloved.

remediation is also problematic, especially in the context of medieval Jewish philosophy.[598] In fact we have already seen in our brief synopsis of the second dialogue that Philo might have used the example of God to convince Sophia that an unselfish love is indeed possible. A literal reading of the Bible, on the other hand, supports a notion of divine defect and need; but this proves little, as it also supports the corporeality of God and it, like the latter, also is inconsistent with the teachings of Maimonides. I will give one very poignant example of this biblical teaching. In *Genesis*, prior to the flood, we read of God repenting that he had created man on the earth "and it grieved Him at His heart."[599] The Hebrew word for "grieved" (*vayita'zeb*) is an intensified causal form of the verb to hurt and the word "heart" in Hebrew really means mind or soul (the inner person), when employed metaphorically. This is especially problematic for it indicates not only damage to God but also in His essence and not merely in His actions. That is why Abrabanel must go out of his way (as a good disciple of Maimonides) to say that it refers to God's actions only. Happily, we need not always read the Bible literally or in this case we may not even need to read "his heart" in its normal metaphoric sense but surely one cannot interpret it literally either. Therefore, the only option left is to invent a new metaphorical interpretation. But if, like Abrabanel, we choose to interpret that biblical passage in a Maimonidean way it

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[598] Daniel Lasker saw the attributing to God of a defect as one of the criteria of beliefs that were unacceptable to medieval Jewish rationalists such as Kaspi and Bibago. See "Averroistic Trends in Jewish-Christian Polemics in the Late Middle Ages," pp. 299-300. Lasker rightly points out that the concept of "defect" is not a matter of logical impossibility or of natural impossibility but an axiological concept. For Christianity it was a good thing that God made Himself imperfect and therefore increased His greatness.

[599] *Genesis*, 5: 6

certainly takes a lot of the poignancy out of it. It also may take something away from Abrabanel's own philosophical insight, at least as ordinarily interpreted. If God is really not damaged by human actions then his love for humanity has nothing whatsoever to do with perfecting himself but only his actions. I personally do not find a problem with that but perhaps others do. Can there be a love that is impassionate and essentially disinterested? We only know of love that inevitably feels negative emotions when the beloved is in pain or in trouble. We can of course attempt to envision a purely passionless love (especially in a perfect being) but many quite rightly sense it as cold and distant and therefore not really love at all. The only love they know is a mixture of the selfish and the unselfish. Perhaps this opens the door to kabbalistic speculation. Could it be that the ultimate God (*Eyn Sof*) is not damaged by human evil but the *Sefirot* are? That would be a nice way of reconciling the inconsistencies but I don't think it works. In kabbalistic systems the *Sefirot* are not just actions of God but really comprise the reality of God from within, even if ultimately they all dissolve into the oneness of God. And as I stated previously, it is not at all clear that "the ancients" should be interpreted as the kabbalists, especially since Philo has already cautioned us regarding the latter's claims regarding ancient provenance ("the evidence of their texts is not clear") and since other ancient writings (such as *Genesis*) tell us essentially the same thing. In addition, the claim regarding the connection between human actions and the perfection of the heavenly realms that is most characteristic of Kabbalah has less to do with the "just man" than it has to do with the knowledgeable man who performs the correct rituals.

This question of the love for the inferior is one area, and an extremely important one, where Abrabanel definitely comes

down firmly on the side of Moses. According to Plato, and Aristotle as well, the supreme God should not really care about man or the world. I know that this is somewhat obscured in some of Plato's myths and perhaps I should not be so quick to opine on the "real" Platonic doctrine but nowhere in the *Timaeus* does it say that the demiurge loves its creation. It is probably correct to conclude that the notion of a God who cares or at least acts in a caring manner has come down to us from the Bible and not from Greek philosophy even though later pagan philosophers such as Proclus may have accepted it. It is a fundamental axiom of biblical thinking if ever there was one. Judah Abrabanel puts it in philosophical language on pages 180-181 as follows.

> Sophia: Which do you yourself believe the truer and more unalloyed love: that of superior for inferior or that of inferior for superior?
>
> Philo: That of superior for inferior and of spirit for matter.
>
> Sophia: Tell me why.
>
> Philo: Because the one is of receiving, the other of giving. The superior spirit loves the inferior as a father loves his child, and the inferior loves the superior as a child its father: and you know how much more perfect is parental love than filial. Again, the spiritual loves the corporeal world as a man loves a woman, and the corporeal loves the spiritual world as woman loves man, as I explained before. Suffer me to say, O Sophia, that the love of man, who gives, is more perfect

than that of woman, who receives.[600] And among men the love of a benefactor for a beneficiary is greater than that of beneficiaries

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[600] This is not the only comment of Abrabanel that could possibly be interpreted as anti-feminine. It seems obvious that he associated femininity with weakness and inferiority. See pp.95-96 where Philo compares heaven to man and earth to woman and proclaims: "And philosophers declare that heaven is only an animal of the higher kind." But, unlike kabbalistic thought, we do not find here the feminine being associated with wrath or harsh judgment. The depiction of women as inferior seems to be quite universal until modern times. Despite the slight bias against the feminine, however, the tone of the entire book seems somewhat geared to the feminine perspective since the passive role of being loved is quite often endorsed as something quite good. And there is little trace of what is surely common in some medieval authors: the complete dismissal of the feminine perspective as something uninteresting. For the most up to date discussion of the role of women in Jewish tradition, see Isaac Sassoon's dissertation (University of Lisbon, 2007), recently published by Cambridge University Press, which only deals intensively with the nuanced biblical and Talmudic attitudes but also alludes to the hardening of those attitudes in the Middle Ages. Despite socially enforced disabilities, Jewish women have traditionally been treated quite well in comparison to other groups. The first overtly anti-feminine Jewish work may not have been composed until the 13th century by Judah ben Sabbatai of Barcelona. Soon afterwards, however the *genre* gathered steam. Even before that (in 1200) Zabara in his *Book of Delight* told tall tales of feminine weakness. See Israel Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*, pp. 180-181 for additional information. In ancient times women were severely disadvantaged in terms of absolute longevity by two principal factors: childbirth and iron deficiency. In terms of *relative* longevity, the death rate of men in warfare was a major historical factor. There is a great deal of evidence that by the 13th century changes in diet had already allowed women to outlive men, despite a reduction of deaths in warfare. See Vern Bullough and Cameron Campbell, "Female Longevity and Diet in the Middle Ages" in *Speculum*, Vol. 55, No. 2. This may have affected attitudes towards women. On the one hand, increased longevity of women made their perception as inherently weak somewhat problematic and might have contributed to and increased their reputation as malevolent. On the other hand, increased longevity rendered women less valuable (because less scarce) as a purely economic commodity. Hence, counter-intuitively, perceptions of their weakness (based on their being short-lived) might have actually contributed to the respect for women as economically valuable, *ceteris paribus*.

> for their benefactors: for the former love their gain, the latter their virtue: utility enters into the one love, the other is wholly good.[601] And you know by how much goodness is more excellent than gain. So that not without reason did I tell you that the love of spirits for the material is far more excellent and perfect than that of the material for the spiritual.

Unlike the question regarding the interior affections of God, which can perhaps be finessed away philosophically, the question of whether God acts in accordance with mercy, justice and love cannot be avoided. Abrabanel, with his doctrine of God's love permeating the universe, answers affirmatively and comes down strongly on the side of Moses. And perhaps this philosophical justification of one of the most distinctive biblical teachings is also the most essential part of his teaching as well. Whether he is successful in reconciling his more intuitive philosophical view with the Jewish medieval philosophical tradition and Maimonides in particular is an open question.

Conclusion

I entitled this chapter "Moses or Plato?" in order to show what I consider the real significance of these two individuals. They are not simply the authors of books that can be understood literally.

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[601] The discussion of benefactors and beneficiaries and why the love of the former for the latter is greater than that of the latter for the former is suggestive of Aristotle's discussion in the *Nichomachean Ethics*, Books VIII and IX (pp.1071-1088) except that Aristotle entertains more explanations for the phenomenon, best exemplified by the love of parents for their children. He comes to more or less the same conclusion, however. But Aristotle's notion of virtue and love seems to me to apply only to imperfect beings, which crave nobility and perfection. It would not apply to spiritual beings/persons (and especially to God), who are in no need of such things.

Both are iconic figures, symbolizing access to esoteric knowledge in the thinking of Judah Abrabanel. The former functions through authoritative religious tradition but should perhaps not be construed as completely identical with the traditions of rabbinic Judaism. The latter functions through discursive reason but that should not be confined to value-free logical demonstrations. Both preserve an element of mysticism and esotericism that are congenial to one another, at least for the author of the *Dialoghi d'Amore*. In addition, both Jewish philosophy and Kabbalah retain elements from both Moses and Plato, as do Christianity and Islam. One (and perhaps the most important) of the differences between the two streams of thought relates to the love of the superior for the inferior and the love of the inferior for the superior. In previous times the male-female polarity was often viewed through those lenses, as was the God-man relationship. Both kabbalistic writings and the *Dialoghi D'Amore* attempt to reconcile the two streams of thought. In my view they do so differently but this depends upon ones interpretation.

Chapter IX: Mysticism and Union with the Divine

I will not attempt to be encyclopedic regarding mysticism and its relationship to monotheism, monism, Neoplatonism, Kabbalah etc. Obviously, however, some grounding in these matters would be very useful. For a rather comprehensive but succinct treatment of the subject see Parvis Morewedge, "Neoplatonism and Contemporary Theories of Mysticism." I will however note that Judah Abrabanel seems to combine monotheistic and monistic elements with the former prevailing due to his strong emphasis on the love which descends from God and also on the effect of that love in strengthening rather than weakening the human individual.

It has become customary in academic writing to attempt (and sometimes even demand) definitions of such terms as "mysticism" and "religion." Unfortunately most such attempts at definition fail as they either exclude significant phenomena that many users of the language would want included or include too much. While I will not attempt to define "mysticism," some discussion of definitional issues may be warranted. Many people restrict the term "mystical" to experiences of unity with God. Some distinguish between "theophanic" divine interventions, (often embodied in revelations and traditions) and the human "apotheotic" ascent to or search for the divine. Others would include any experience of God or a divine realm. Some, moreover, would also want to include any aspects of the inner life that have any reference at all to a divine/supernatural realm or being/beings. For example, in a recent article Kevin Hart criticizes Anthony Steinbock's *The Verticality of Religious Experience* as follows.

> Steinbock thinks it is "misleading" (206) to call mystics contemplatives. Not all mystics have been contemplatives — St. Paul and Jakob Bohme come to mind — but many have been....
>
> Many mystics in the Christian tradition have been contemplatives... For contemplative religious, there is no strict division between thinking on the one hand and living on the other, and one can be misled to draw such a firm line by talking of "the mystics" as though they are all cut from the one cloth of "mystical experience." In doing so, one might miss many contemplatives from whom we should not withhold the title "mystic" who practice what Gerson in his *De Mystica Theologia* (1408) calls "repentant affectivity." These devout souls seek wisdom through penitence, prayer, and the practice of love, but who may never have mystical experiences of the sort that Theresa of Avila records in her *Autobiography* and that Steinbock cites. They may be aware of the presence of God, may lead lives in which there is a gradual deepening of repentant affectivity, but never have "epiphanies" or experiences of God in the sense of "something tak[ing] place" (146).[602]

Hart raises some important issues, many of which we cannot adequately deal with here. Admittedly, we are in a somewhat fluid and gray area of discourse. But I would want to know what is meant by "repentant affectivity" and "aware of

[602] Kevin Hart, "Of Love and How" pp.725-726

the presence of God." If the affectivity were simply an awareness of one's own feelings and a firm *belief* in the presence of God, I would not call it mysticism. If, however, the individual not only experiences his or her own inner life but also experiences something that he or she believes is a divine presence (no matter how diffuse and constant) I would indeed allow the title of "mystic." We will come to see that my own view is somewhat dependant upon a distinction between *experience* and *interpretation* that many might not accept.[603] Nevertheless, I think it is useful enough in terms of saving the traditional meaning of "mysticism" to risk offending some and/or the possibility of using words without a precise empirical means of determining their proper applicability. Hence, while there will inevitably be an overlap, I intend to restrict the term "mysticism" to experience and, on the other hand, belief systems would more appropriately dealt with in the discussions of pantheism and other topics. Union with the divine, in this context, would be considered a sub-set of mystical experience rather than a belief in either the ultimate unity of the human and divine or the possibility of conjunction between the two.

We cannot simply assume that Judah Abrabanel was a mystic. Nevertheless, the *Dialoghi* evinces a great interest in the subject and even provides descriptions of altered states of consciousness. Admittedly, however, the author never actually states that he has had such experiences. But as we have also

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[603] I am not at all convinced by the arguments that experience is always metaphorical or interpreted. While from an empirical point of view it is indeed the case that every report or memory of an experience is theory laden and interpreted, to erase completely the distinction between experience and interpretation leads to even greater perplexities and even absurdities. I think it is analogous to erasing the distinction between external reality and perception. Nevertheless, I cannot hope to persuade those who firmly think otherwise.

seen, there is an unresolved conflict between traditional religious views and philosophical doctrines, which perhaps could be mediated by personal experience.[604] This tendency to link (and even identify) conscious cognitive states and metaphysical realities is characteristic of the Neoplatonic School.[605] Previously, I proposed that he seemed to include such experiences under the broad heading of reason, as opposed to faith. This would be a sort of reconciliation of philosophy with mysticism. I will be devoting an entire chapter to Judah Abrabanel's quite interesting conception of what he considered the ultimate felicity of humankind, which consists in a type of experienced mystical union with God or perhaps two types. I will also include background information regarding mystical union in Jewish philosophy, Christian philosophy, Islamic

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[604] Erwin Goodenough made what I consider a very important point regarding this in his conclusion to *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman World*, Volume 12, p. 184. He stressed the wide gap between the Greek *Theos*, which by the time of the *Septuagint* had become an abstract term, and the quite concrete and individual Hebrew names for God. Regarding the biblical encounters of men (or women) with God, we don't normally consider them to be mystical experiences despite their obviously experiential nature. It is only later after *theoretical* examination of religious belief and experience that the term "mystical" usually is applied. This view raises questions regarding what we often call early Jewish mysticism as well as very early Christian religious experiences. While we cannot investigate this fully, it is a fact that there is a huge phenomenological gap between all subsequent religious thought and the biblical literature that documents the original experiential source of some of that thought. We can only think in abstract terms; yet our experience is always individual and unique. Mysticism involves a bridging of that gap.

[605] See R.T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, pp.4-7 and p.41 for a good discussion, particularly regarding Plotinus. We know that Judah Abrabanel was familiar with Plotinus since he mentions him in the *Dialoghi*. To what extent he actually relies upon him is not entirely clear. It is possible and perhaps likely that Abrabanel would be more reticent to describe his own mystical visions (if he really had them) due to rabbinic prejudice against such experiences.

philosophy and Kabbalah. By Abrabanel's "ultimate felicity," I am referring, of course, to his metaphor of copulation to describe the union between man and God. After I do that, I would also like to put it into some sort of historical perspective. I say "some sort of perspective" because I may well have missed something important and there is certainly much more to be said about it but this book does not purport to be a comprehensive study of mysticism or religious philosophy. Nevertheless, it may well be helpful to attempt to place Abrabanel's thought in an intellectual historical perspective. Of course we have been attempting to do that all along and this subject of mystical union is intimately related to Abrabanel's metaphysics and the subject of pantheism. It is also related to a subject that I dealt with in the introduction: the love of man for God and its possible tendency to promote obliteration of the separate human personality.

The question of self-immolation in the face of the divine may at times be less of a metaphysical question and more of a psychological one. It is often argued (and sometimes anecdotally observed) that mystical or intensely religious experiences may have a deleterious effect on both the human personality and its physico-social functioning. A possible empirical corroboration of that is the general statistical correlation between poverty and religiosity.[606] But while that

[606] There are many exceptions but in general the wealthier nations are not as religious as the poorer ones and this could be conceptualized as a *general* causal effect of religiosity or at least religiosity could be viewed as oftentimes justifying and facilitating human degradation. There are also those who believe the converse and consider poverty to be a root cause of religiosity. The matter is far too complex to discuss adequately here but if one explains religious phenomena in a naturalistic manner it seems to entail belief in some evolutionary advantage to such belief. That coupled with the more current statistical correlations might lead one to conjecture that whatever advantage conferred by religion in the past is no longer the case

may be an interesting fact, many doubt that such statistical or even phenomenological data prove anything from a causal standpoint. We would have to show that religiosity actually *causes* poverty and rule out an alternative hypotheses that poverty causes religiosity or both are caused by some other variable (such as powerlessness) in order for this correlation to truly corroborate the belief that religious yearnings or experience truly injure the individual human personality. When I speak of injury to the personality I am quite frankly speaking normatively and not from an evolutionary adaptation perspective.[607] And of course it is not exactly valid to lump all types of religion together because disaggregating them could reveal much more subtle causal patterns. Indeed, there are

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but that it may still have a poorly understood reproductive advantage. A very significant exception to the former statistical correlation seems to be the United States. But even there religious people seem to have a reproductive advantage, which often leads to greater poverty. On the other hand, using more ideographic methodologies, there are many examples of religion being used to uplift individuals and communities. Undoubtedly, the kind of religiosity is significant in determining its causal effect upon individual human functioning. For example, while the United States has been quite religious at least since the time of DeTouqueville its religiosity has always been characterized by the plentiful existence of splinter groups pursuing biblical ideals rather than being dominated by large social class based official churches. Perhaps this much can be said, however. There is some meaningful connection between religiosity and the willingness to accept self-degradation/self-destruction, which is evident in extreme cases such as suicide bombers. The relationship between that meaningful connection and adequate causal explanation is quite complex and at any rate cannot be pursued here.

[607] From the evolutionary perspective fitness or adaptivity simply means the ability to survive and reproduce. It is quite possible that what look to us like damaged human beings are reproducing at a faster rate than the ones that we like and admire. Sometimes we can understand this with a bit of common sense. For example, fundamentalist type religiosity is obviously easier to transmit that philosophically sophisticated religiosity. At other times, however, the high survival rates of the unintelligent raises interesting questions regarding both fitness and the social environment to which human evolutionary fitness must always partially refer.

surely cases where religion enormously strengthens both human functioning and inner feelings of self-worth. An argument could be made that the types of mystical or "religious" experiences that tend to weaken the personality are really not monotheistic or Abrahamic but tend more towards the monistic, Neoplatonic or Hindu/Buddhist types. I will not take a position on that because it would involve a kind of essentialistic analysis of concrete religious phenomena, which I am not entirely comfortable with. Nevertheless, we are probably on safe ground asserting that at least *some* types of religiosity are *associated* with a reduction in concern for one's own well being. And the types of religiosity that are most likely to qualify might perhaps be the more mystical ones. This involves a general tradeoff between the valuing of experiences and valuing of objective outcomes, such as wealth, power, etc. It can be seen regarding other (non-religious) experiences, whether they are aesthetic, intellectual, athletic, etc. But this conclusion seems to conflict somewhat with the view of some social scientists, influenced by anthropological investigations, that mysticism is really a quasi-rational strategy to obtain power.

Firstly, I would be extremely cautious regarding extrapolating from anthropological observations of indigenous peoples to activities of people in more complex social and cultural settings where many other avenues of achieving power exist. Secondly, it is quite possible that an expansion of the concept of power eradicates the conflict since even those who care relatively little about their own self-aggrandizement or well-being may still have some power needs, at least in the

sense that David McClelland posited.[608] Thirdly, I am less concerned with social strategies and more concerned with phenomenology on the one hand and actual outcomes on the other. The latter two are observable in a relatively non-controversial way, even though the phenomenology is not measurable or observable in a manner that social scientists usually favor.

This book is not a work of social science even though concepts from the social sciences are obviously of great interest to me and my broader philosophical methodology reflects that. But the social scientific bias against the private or ineffable and in favor of thought and consciousness as social phenomena is not bad nor is it completely foreign to our method. Even in literature and philosophy we need to acknowledge motives, even if they are not our primary focus. In the context of the *Dialoghi*, for example, it would not be an extremely radical conclusion that Philo uses his "mysticism" as a means of wooing Sophia and therefore influencing her, which is an expression of power (in the broad sense). This might offer an explanation for some of his utterances and might impact upon our interpretation of them. In terms of the social and intellectual milieu in which Judah Abrabanel himself lived, it also seems plausible that mysticism would confer some power (in the broad sense in which McClelland used it) especially since it is a kind of crowning adornment on top of religious, philosophical, scientific (medical) and literary achievements, all of which surely impress and are noted by others and therefore fit into a

[608] See David McClelland, *Power: The Inner Experience*. His view of power is a broad one that is more or less coextensive with recognition from others. He posits it as one of the three psychological needs, the others being achievement (real accomplishments that may be unknown to others) and affiliation (social bonding).

typology of power motivation vs. accomplishment or affiliation motivation. I don't know what more we can say about this in the absence of additional biographical data but it does *not* seem to be the case that Abrabanel would have had a great need or incentive to hide an intense religiosity and there might even have been social motives for exaggerating it. From our perspective we are more interested in his experiences and beliefs than his motivations. Therefore, while I may be in agreement with the tendency of social scientists to see power motivations in some mystical experiences, I find it mostly irrelevant to my purpose of explicating the underlying meaning of the *Dialoghi*. And within that book lies the very interesting assertion that those who devote themselves to the love of God may end up caring less (and even too little) of themselves. That assertion, it seems to me was likely to be correct in Judah Abrabanel's times, no matter what his personal motives might have been. We are, at any rate, more concerned with the coherence and truth of his statements than we are with his social-psychological motivations.

Most students of mysticism have attempted to distinguish, at least conceptually, the experience itself from the subsequent interpretation of that psychic event. Recently some have despaired of such an attempt, arguing that all experiences are theory-laden and partly interpretive. This has come to be known in philosophy of mind as the "Fodor-Churchland debate." While we cannot give it all of the attention that it deserves, my own view is somewhat weighted towards Fodor's insistence on encapsulation of perceptual experience. Nevertheless, the influence of theory on perception is immense. Interestingly, very few seem to deny that there is such a thing as pure interpretation even though we could also say that every interpretation has hidden within it some basic intuition or other

experience. Yet some who view all experience as perceptual (coming from the senses) might indeed deny that while others would indeed look for some early perceptual experiences as causal factors in producing a person's theoretical stance. But one of the problems here is that my notion of experience (and most mystics would probably agree) goes far beyond perception. So mysticism seems to demand an expanded notion of experience beyond what many empiricists would consider legitimate. It would be hard to imagine a mystic who also believed that his or her mystical experiences were completely produced by a theoretical stance. But we might find a mystic who recognizes the influence of his or her religious beliefs on those mystical experiences. We can of course quite correctly insist (on the basis of experience) that the same objective event (such as a crime) will be interpreted in different ways by different people. Therefore, even if we assume that mystical experiences have some objective basis (not necessarily but possibly involving a human encounter with God) I have no objection to speaking about interpretations as a part of those *reported* experiences. It seems to me, however, that those who oppose the concept of pure conscious events that are unconditioned by culture, beliefs, interpretation, etc. may be defeating their own cause. It is part and parcel of the modern scientific bias against subjective experience. Even if we can never actually describe such pure states of consciousness we may need to assume their existence in order to make sense of the powerful things that modify them. And further proofs of their existence are the numerously recorded cases of people who have had completely novel experiences, even though their world-view did not change prior to them. Admittedly, changes in beliefs could often brew under the surface of consciousness but those dramatic and explosive experiences that change

peoples' lives seem to suggest that something is happening on a purely experiential level that later on gets interpreted. Nevertheless, it is very difficult to discern where raw experience ends and where interpretation begins.

This raises another interesting question, which has not been discussed nearly enough and that unfortunately we cannot provide a truly adequate discussion of here. When one speaks of mystical union, does this imply in the mind of the experiencer a belief in prior metaphysical separateness or could it be the mere psychological recognition of an already existing metaphysical unity?[609] Certainly on a phenomenological level, the latter is at times the case but that does not necessarily warrant drawing metaphysical conclusions. In many other cases the feeling of oneness with God may not even approach a pantheistic phenomenological experience. We have already attacked that problem somewhat in the section on pantheism. A mystically inclined person might initially have the experience of union and then he or she needs to explain it in terms of a formal theory. But even before one has a well-developed theory, every person's experiences are always filtered through some unconscious or intuitive "theoretical" perspective. Cognitive

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[609] The latter seems to be the case with many formulaic aesthetic approaches as well as some meditative techniques. They are virtually predictable in their effects if persisted in and assuming the individual has the requisite capacity. For example, witness the following excerpt from a letter by Carl Carus that can be found in Elizabeth Gilmore Holt, *A Documentary History of Art*, Volume III, pp. 89-90.

> Go up to the top of the mountains, look over the long range of hills, observe the flow of the rivers and all the splendour that opens before your eyes, and what feeling touches you? It is one of quiet devotion within you; you lose yourself in boundless space; your ego vanishes; you are nothing; God is all.

psychologists such as Jerome Brunerer[610] have become much more aware of this in relatively recent times and the classical psychological search for the original sensation prior to any kind of post-theoretical perception may turn out to be in vain, although it should not yet be abandoned entirely, at least conceptually. In fact, we can already draw some conclusions regarding the way people are hard-wired to perceive the world but it does not yield nearly enough information regarding actual subjective, phenomenological, experience (both perceptual and conceptual) which always seems to be filtered through a culturally determined lens. Thus most researchers have come to see all mystical experiences as somehow reflecting cultural and religious biases.

One of the things that some researchers have claimed to learn is encapsulated in the following statement: "At their core, all folk psychologies contain a surprisingly complex notion of an agentive Self."[611] Thus the view of the free individual that we see emerging in the Renaissance and that is often associated peculiarly with Western culture may in reality be a kind of default epistemological perspective for all of humanity, despite the fact that it is suppressed by certain cultures. We cannot necessarily draw metaphysical conclusions from that but we may be able to use it to enrich our phenomenology of both ordinary and mystical experience. We would expect, therefore, that true unitive experiences should be rare, as they contradict our normal, default way of viewing things.[612] When such experiences are reported, unless the experiencer is one who

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[610] See Jerome Bruner, *Beyond the Information Given: Studies in the Psychology of Knowing.*

[611] See Jerome Bruner, *Acts of Meaning*, p. 41.

[612] Admittedly, in some "primitive" cultures they are less rare. It is also less likely that such cultures require a more or less logical harmonization of being moved by the spirit world and being one's own agent.

believed before her experience that everything except God is an illusion, they may require some additional explanation beyond the normal one that focuses on interpretive issues. For example, it is possible that certain drugs or other traumas could deprive a person of the more or less normal ability that we call self-consciousness.[613]

Yet there are surely many examples of mystical experiences of unity with the divine that do seem to contradict the person's pre-mystical experience theoretical standpoint but cannot be readily explained in terms of trauma. Some would interpret those mystical experiences as reflecting some very basic metaphysical reality, albeit somewhat flavored by the person's pre-existing cultural framework. I think we need to proceed with extreme caution here. Where Judah Abrabanel fits in is arguable but it seems to me that he did not have a simplistic view. And he (under the guise of Philo) never actually states that he has had these mystical experiences. Perhaps those reports of mystical experiences are simply a confirming capstone upon what we have seen as strong pantheistic tendencies of belief. But something about those descriptions gives us pause. The metaphor of copulation certainly connotes a real bridging of the gap between separate entities rather than a pre-existing unity and so does the concept of love, which affirms (and even enhances) the individuality of the other and is so prominent in the *Dialoghi*. Nevertheless, we cannot always be sure whether the author is speaking on a metaphorical, psychological or metaphysical level or even

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[613] This possible explanation for certain psychedelic type experiences could perhaps be empirically verified through brain scans or other devices. It is interesting that this is quite different from the Neoplatonic view of mystical experience as emerging from an intensified knowledge of the inner self. See R.T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, p.56, n.1.

whether he was fully aware of this problem in the same manner as we are.

In some religious systems the human soul is viewed as actively seeking the Divinity. In others, it is God who pursues humankind. Yoga might be a good example of the former and the Bible of the latter. Interestingly, Judah Abrabanel seems to be a blend of the two. While he seems to allow for some human initiative, the overall environment in which it takes place is love, which descends from God.

Another related and common (but by no means universal) feature of mystical experiences relates it to hypnosis and female sexuality. These types of mystics feel overwhelmed, overpowered and ultimately filled and permeated by the divine spirit or substance. One might also point out the word "rapture" and its derivation from the Latin "*raptus*" as well as its relationship to "rape." Such etymological exercises prove little and we are much more interested in the reported experiences of at least some mystics. As an after effect of the experience, they may feel somewhat outside themselves and the world.[614] Of course feminists might view such experiences as not confirming the validity of feminine consciousness as much as they are an outgrowth of patriarchal power and dominance. But considering the fact that humankind evolved physically and psychologically under conditions of extreme male dominance, it might not be surprising if feminine consciousness preserves such elements. This could also be viewed as of great spiritual value and signaling the value of human submission to God.

If the previous discussion was not sufficiently cautious, I would also like to preface this discussion of mysticism with

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[614] For an interesting discussion of the connection between love, hypnosis and mysticism, see Jose Ortega y Gasset, *On Love*, pp. 57-75.

another strong warning. The very terms "mysticism" and "mystical union" are fraught with controversy. Perhaps we should really speak of altered or unusual states of religious consciousness and nothing more. At any rate, there are a number of such states that people often call "mystical." Among them are states where both cognition and awareness of self no longer exist but a powerful degree of affect remains. There are also much more normal states of consciousness where the individual still feels the presence of God.[615] And there are states in which that which is experienced is impersonal and not at all what we usually mean by "God" in Judaeo-Christian parlance. Annemarie Schimmel calls some of those impersonal experiences "Mysticism of Infinity."[616] We can probably rule out the latter for Abrabanel, especially since he stresses so heavily God's love for the human individual and that may also rule out the first type of experience mentioned: where the self completely disappears. Regarding more "normal mysticism," it may have simply been taken for granted in his time and place but a close reading of the *Dialoghi* reveals that the author surely did not consider it optimal but only preliminary. Therefore, we will be focusing on what appears to be a fairly extreme mystical state. Nevertheless, it should be read in the context of a much broader range of mystical phenomena. We do not, however, intend to provide a full-blown discussion in this preliminary

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[615] For an excellent discussion of these more "normal" or "garden variety" mysticisms and what he sees as the baneful legacy of Willian James' interest in the more extreme cases, see Jerome Geller, *Mystical Experience of God*, 88-94. I am in complete agreement with him regarding that but I do not think it is particularly relevant to the *Dialoghi*, since the mystical experiences described therein are fairly extreme.

[616] See *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p.5.

introduction to mystical experience but merely an advisory warning.[617]

Judah Abrabanel says two very interesting things about the psychological problem of mysticism. Firstly, the mystical experience is not expected to last and while he speaks of a continued longing for it he never advises practical means for replicating it. Secondly, the mystical experiences described in the book and compatible with his philosophy would also presumably include the experience of God's love, which is incompatible with the extreme neglect of the body or the desire for the complete obliteration of the separate human personality. And in fact he warns against such extreme states. The fact that he does not advise such extreme measures or outcomes indicates to me that from a metaphysical standpoint he does not

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[617] It might be noted there are common out-of-body experiences that do not include experience of the divine, .in contrast to commonly reported near-death experiences that usually involve some experience of the Divine. Whether or not the former should be called mystical is an interesting question. Certainly, such experiences, by alleviating the default identification of body and soul, either reflect or induce a belief in some divine origin of the soul but such an interaction between religious belief and actual experience might not be sufficient to justify the use of the term "mystical." For example, Oliver Sacks seems to exclude them from the category of mystical experience on the basis of his reading of William James. See *Musichophilia: Tales of Music and the Brain*, pp.13-14. I quote from Sacks.

> Many supernatural or mystical explanations have arisen to explain out-of-body experiences, but they have also been a topic of neurological investigation for a century or more. Such experiences seem to be relatively stereotyped in format: one seems to be no longer in one's own body but outside it, and most commonly, looking down on oneself from eight or nine feet above (neurologists refer to this as "autoscopy"). One seems to see clearly the room or space around one and other people and objects nearby, but with an aerial perspective. (p.13)

really believe wholeheartedly in monism, which is not to say that he lacked such leanings. In the introduction we dealt with this issue and the question of whether his pluralism is really justified by his fundamental principles. We even expressed doubts about that. No firm conclusions can be reached, however, and at any rate the ultimate consistency of his thought is a separate matter from an accurate description of it. It does seem obvious, though, that the metaphors of copulation and tasting (both of which he used) for the ultimate relationship to God seem to preserve the integrity of the separate human personality, at least to a degree, and help to distinguish between the human and the divine. When we taste or copulate, the union involved is a kind of unification rather than a pre-existing essential union. No matter to what extent we recognize a kinship with that to which we relate, our individuality does not cease to exist. This refusal to go headlong into monism may be a part of a more general Renaissance theme. The following quotation from Ernst Cassirer may be helpful. Part of it has already been used in our discussion of Ficino.

> Here a thought emerges that will only find its complete systematic development and articulation in Leibniz. The sensible and corporeal is not a merely indifferent, undifferentiated *sub-stratum* for the pure act of thought. Neither is it a mere *organ* that simply exists like a dead tool outside the pure act of thought. Rather, the power and the achievement of this act consists in its ability to grasp as such the differences that lie in the sensible world and to completely represent them within itself. Thus the *principium individuationis* cannot be sought in the mere 'matter' of thought but must be

based in its pure *form*. As the active power of thought, the soul is not just enclosed in the body, as in some external lodging place; rather it expresses with more or less clarity all the differences that are in the body, and all the changes that are taking place within it. Thus, between the soul and the body there exists not only a relationship of connection but also of complete 'concinnity', of continuous proportion, as Cusanus calls it. A completely opposite conception is offered in the doctrines of Averroes and of certain Neo-Platonists. But the *Renaissance* Neo-Platonism of the Florentine Academy quite characteristically sides completely with Cusanus in this decisive problem. In the *Theologica Platonica* as well as in his letters Ficino constantly combats the doctrine of the unicity of the 'active intellect'. In this battle he, too, also bases himself on immediate experience which always shows our Ego and our thought in individual form. No essential difference can exist, however, between the *nature* of the self and that which it is *given* to us in our immediate consciousness, *quid enim menti naturalius, quam sui ipsius cognitio.*

This process seeks to work out the *theoretical* foundations and conditions of 'subjectivity'. But beside it, there is another process, one that makes clear to us for the first time the actual forces that, in the final analysis, determine and dominate this whole intellectual movement. Ficino builds his doctrine of the soul and his doctrine of individual

> immortality nor so much upon his view of human knowledge as upon his view of human *will*. The actual pivot of Ficino's psychology is the doctrine of *Eros*. It becomes the central point of all the philosophical efforts of the Florentine Academy.[618]

This general condition of Renaissance Neoplatonism should be kept in mind when we discuss the subjects of mysticism and pantheism. While Judah Abrabanel may not always be as clear as Ficino in stating his philosophical presuppositions, they may exist for him just as strongly nonetheless. There is no sure way of knowing what was going on in a person's mind if he or she does not express it but surely we have the right to speculate somewhat when it is of explanatory value and/or helps us to understand what is otherwise incomprehensible. This should be done cautiously without doing violence to the text and always keeping in mind alternative explanations. It seems to me that Abrabanel is walking a tightrope between mysticism and individualism and that if he sees no inherent contradiction between the two, it might well be explainable by means of the kind of Renaissance notions that Cassirer stressed. They allow him to skirt those mystical experiences that might alternatively be interpreted in a monistic fashion and incorporate them into an individualistic experience of human consciousness.

Copulation as a Metaphor for Mystical Union with God

This is a topic that lends itself to misinterpretation, especially since both copulation and procreation are used by other religious thinkers in ways that are quite different and it is a

[618] See *The Individual and the Cosmos in Renaissance Philosophy*, 130-131.

commonplace error to place what we don't understand in the category of what we already understand (or at least are acquainted with). Perhaps there has not been sufficient attention given to the context of copulation in civilized human life, which generally includes the psychological bridging of the gap between male and female as well as the resulting physical act and the possibly resulting procreation. But this is surely not the place for such an ambitious project. Nonetheless, this broader context may distinguish the concept we are dealing with from earlier pagan ones for the following reasons. Copulation as a religious metaphor is fairly common in paganism but the Bible seems to reject the value of copulation between heavenly beings and humans even as it alludes to it as an accepted mythological reality (assuming that one interprets those passages literally).[619] Given its association with pagan fertility cults, it does seem a little strange that such a concept should reappear at all in Judaism. If it does appear there, it may be in the context of either procreation, which is surely a great Jewish value or in the bridging of that aforementioned psychological gap between man and woman. It has of course often been noted that copulation also plays a prominent part in some Neoplatonic and kabbalistic systems.[620] While it might be the case that Abrabanel was a closet kabbalist and was surreptitiously

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[619] See *Genesis*, VI: 1-5.

[620] Regarding the use of this metaphor by Plotinus there are some ambiguities. We can say with assurance that deliberate procreation does not play a part in his system, in contrast with some kabbalistic and theurgic notions of unifying the spiritual realms, which are foreign to Neoplatonism. In addition, Plotinus did not have a concept of the love of the One for the lower levels of being. Nevertheless, metaphors of touch and physical union appear in Plotinus and may symbolize the intimate union achievable between the human soul and the One, even more intimate than an ordinary contemplative relationship. See R.T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, pp.85-89 for a good discussion.

pursuing a kabbalist agenda, his use of the metaphor seems to apply to the individual and God rather than to actual sexual intercourse and its effect on the *Sefirot*. It is my tentative view that its significance in the *Zoharic* Kabbalah is quite different than in Judah Abrabanel but that regarding Abraham Abulafia's thought there is perhaps a much greater similarity.[621] Therefore, I must disagree with Rossella Pescatori, who thinks that the doctrine of the "sages" mentioned who believed that the "ultimate perfection and beatude...is called the happy copulation of the potential intellect with the active intellect" might be "linked to the *Zohar*."[622] This has already been

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[621] Nevertheless, there is a particularistic element in Abulafia, which implicates copulation in the original defiling of humankind by the serpent and the subsequent freeing of Israel from this filth by means of the *Torah*. See Brian Ogren, *Renaissance and Rebirth*, pp.82-83 for an interesting discussion of the views of both Abulafia and Michael Balbo. While Judah Abrabanel does not have a completely pure view of coitis and Sophia seems to have a particularly jaundiced one in the dialogues, he never uses it as a means of separating the Jewish people from others.

[622] See the new English translation, p. 54 and note 85 on p.389. I agree with her regarding Abraham Abulafia and possible debates within kabbalistic circles. The "sages" referred to seem to me to refer to all those in the tradition that we normally associate with Averroes and Maimonides, which would include Abulafia and exclude the *Zohar*. The term "copulation" could be an innovation of Judah Abrabanel but was more likely culled from some other source, one of which might possibly be the *Zohar*. Interestingly, Agostino Nifo, a somewhat later figure (1473-1545?) used almost identical language to describe Averroes' notion of human felicity being the "copulation of the agent intellect with the possible...the possible intellect stands for the soul, while the agent intellect stands for God..." See Eugenio Garin, volume 1, pp. 358-359. Nifo was a student of Niccoletto Vernia, a very well-known Paduan Aristotelian, and his aim might have been to Platonize or render more mystical the teachings of Averroes and Aristotle. While Nifo's writings certainly pre-date the publication of the *Dialoghi*, it is possible that he knew of Abrabanel's views or both might be rooted in earlier Renaissance thought. Abrabanel, of course, does not attribute this view to Averroes or the *Zohar* but expresses it as his own view. That Nifo would have consciously attributed a concept from the *Zohar* to Averroes seems unlikely to say the least, especially since the *Zohar* was not widely

discussed somewhat but I would now like to mention the fact that Moshe Idel finds the "image of intercourse" to be more rare than that of the kiss in Jewish mysticism. He uses the former as a means of connecting ecstasy with prophecy.[623] He also specifically alludes to Italian Renaissance figures who, under the influence of Plotinus, "thought of pleasure as a value superior to apprehension" and Idel even suggested a possible Abulafian influence.[624] This phenomenon that Idel describes certainly does remind us very much of Judah Abrabanel's position and what we previously described as his spiritualized Epicureanism, especially as it relates to mystical union and the ultimate end of human life. I would also like to mention that the image of intercourse in a spiritual context is not at all uncommon in non-Jewish systems. I would like to provide the following quote from Erwin Goodenough, especially since it describes an ancient Egyptian belief system and Judah Abrabanel seemed to have a peculiar interest in Egypt, most likely due to Hermetic influence.

> In ancient Egypt the vine and wine have no demonstrable importance as symbols or, apparently, as ritualistic media....Fluid in other forms, however, clearly meant much in Egyptian religion....It can flow as light from the sun, as semen from the phallus of a god or of the king, as milk from the breasts of the goddesses...as divine spittle, as water of the Nile for the fluids. The various fluids are a single fluid in various forms. Its source was represented as a male or

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known in Italy at that time. Regarding unconscious cross-fertilization, almost anything is possible.

[623] See *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, p.184.

[624] Ibid., p.189

> female interchangeably, apparently to show that the supreme reality is hermaphroditic, which would mean that in having both sexes united in itself the ultimate is above sex, is the creator and source of life in monistic sufficiency. With this go what are to us almost inconceivable contradictions. The king, identified with the god, fertilizes the goddess with the seed within *her* — in the process becoming the "bull of his own mother," hence begetting himself, as a new birth.[625]

I would now like to take a somewhat more in-depth view of Abrabanel's thinking on this matter. Since this subject is so strange and so important, I will quote a large portion of the relevant section in English and smaller parts in Italian. This section begins in the first dialogue on page 45.

> Sophia: What intellect then is this, the apprehension of which makes men happy?
>
> Philo: Some hold it is the Active Intellect, whose copulation with our potential intellect effects a joint vision of all reality (*di tutte le cose in atto*) in a single act of most lucid spiritual apprehension; and that herein happiness consists. But others maintain that we are happy when our intellect, wholly enlightened by its copulation with the Active Intellect, becomes wholly actualized without residue of potency, and beholds itself according to its inmost intellective essence: herein are contained, and wherein it

[625] Erwin Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*, Volume 12, pp. 110-111

beholds, all things made spirit (*spiritualmente*), and the object and act of intellection [comprised] in one and the same intellect, as indistinguishable and inseparable components of knowledge. The holders of this opinion add that, when our intellect is thus actualized, it becomes and remains essentially one with the Active Intellect, no trace persisting of division or duality. In these terms do the most illustrious philosophers discourse on happiness; but it would take a long time, and out of all proportion to our discussion, to quote the arguments they adduce for and against. I will only say that those who meditate most on God, affirm—and I agree—that the Active intellect, which gives light to our power of understanding, is God Most high; and hence they are convinced that happiness lies in cognition of the Divine Intellect, which contains in Itself all things before, and more perfectly than, any created intellect; seeing they inhere in Him effectively—not mere rationally but causally—as in the first and absolute Cause of all existent things. Thus He is alike the cause that produces them, the mind that comprehends them, the form which informs them, the end which directs them and for which they were made: from Him they proceed, and to Him they ultimately return as to their last and true end and common happiness. He is the First Being; and all that exists, exists through participation in him. He is pure activity; He is the Supreme Intellect, from which all intellect,

> activity, form and perfection derive. To Him all things tend, as to their most perfect end; in him they subsist without multiplication or division, in utter simplicity and unity. He is true happiness. He is necessary to all, but none is necessary to Him. In contemplating Himself, He knows all things; He contemplates, and is contemplated by, Himself. Whoever could see with His sight, would see all in perfect unity...It is enough you should understand that our happiness consists in the knowledge and vision of God, in Whom we behold all things most perfectly.
>
> Sophia: On this I will question you no farther, for it suffices, if it does not even exceed, my powers of comprehension. But a doubt suggests itself to me. I have at some time heard it propounded, that happiness consists, not exactly in knowledge of God, but in love and blissful enjoyment of Him.
>
> Philo: God is the true and only object of our happiness, and we adore Him (*amiamo*) through knowledge and through love. About these two activities wise men have differed: namely, as to whether happiness really lies in knowing God, or in loving Him. But you must be content to know that both activities are necessary to happiness.

Without drawing too many conclusions, we can assert that Abrabanel describes two distinct "mystical" states here. It is also significant that the emphasis seems to be on the experiences themselves and not on which one is more correct in terms of knowledge of entities outside of humankind. The first

one described is a copulative union with the Active Intellect that seems somewhat Neoplatonic and gives the experiencer a "joint vision of all reality in a single act." It might be significant that he describes the Active Intellect as copulating with "our potential intellect." The wording suggests not only that all humans have the same potential intellect but certainly indicates that it is the passive partner. I interpret this as seeing things through the eyes of the Active Intellect (my metaphor). This is described as a "most lucid spiritual apprehension." This seems to be in consonance with Neoplatonic and mystical ways of thinking. The second state appears to me to be more Aristotelian, though this could me disputed. It also involves copulative union with the Active Intellect in which "our intellect wholly enlightened by its copulation with the Active Intellect" is "actualized" and effects a type of cognition in which everything is viewed "spiritually" (*spiritualmente*) yet still perhaps remains a distinctly human perspective, though no trace of division between the human intellect and the Active Intellect remains. Here it seems that the emphasis is on enlightenment and actualization rather than on complete union. The human material intellect is not completely passive but is actualized by its "copulation" with the Active Intellect. He never explicitly adjudicates in favor of either one of those views as the best but does insist that the Active Intellect is God and that the recognition of that fact allows for "cognition of the Divine Intellect" and the viewing of all things in "perfect unity" in Him. That leads me to suspect that the first state described is for him the superior one, since it seems to leave less room for distinct human and divine vantage points.

But does that first cognitive state and experience of union obliterate the human personality? That kind of self-annihilation is something Judah Abrabanel seemed to view

unfavorably, based upon other statements he had made. It seems however that from a subjective standpoint the personality does get eclipsed, even if distinct human personalities might still be discernible in that "joint vision of all reality," which seems to mean (judging from the Italian text) a vision of all things in actuality, without potentiality or matter. That would seem to me to (arguably) preclude a unique, individual, human perspective.[626] We might recall that Thomas Aquinas had similar concerns and that for him the survival of the individual person required the survival of the human body. Yet he also found a way to believe in individual angels despite the fact that they are incorporeal. Now that belief in the non-corporeal individuality of angels may be viewed as purely speculative or theoretical in contrast to Abrabanel's discussion, which appears to be experiential. Nevertheless, it is at least possible that Abrabanel benefited (or suffered) from the Enochic tradition, which included the view that humans can indeed become angels (if they are not already such in some essential sense).

The question we now ask is whether these aforementioned states of consciousness are really two distinct experiences or one experience with two distinct interpretations. The first experience subsumes everything (including the experiencer) in the Active Intellect (God) in a "joint vision." In other words, God is the perceiver as well as the reality perceived. In the second experience our own intellect becomes "actualized without residue of potency" and there is "no trace persisting of division or duality" but despite the fact that things are viewed "spiritually," the perceiver is still the human mind,

[626] Unfortunately, Judah Abrabanel does not provide us with the kind of discussion of human identity, memory and continuity of consciousness as later thinkers, like Locke, Leibniz and Kant, do. We therefore cannot draw definite conclusions regarding his views on this matter.

albeit purified and perfected. These seem to me to not be the same raw experiences at all, even though both are explained *theoretically* as union with the Active Intellect. In the first, the self only exists as an objective datum within the Active Intellect but there is no experience of the self as experiencer. In the second the experiencing self remains intact, yet united to the Active Intellect, without any duality or division. The first seems to be an actual apprehension of God and of everything else through the consciousness of God. And the second is merely consciousness of union with the Active Intellect and a perfected apprehension of the universe. No "division or duality" remains but the human soul remains as subject. Yet both are the result of copulative union with the Active Intellect! Abrabanel now makes an issue here of whether one believes that the Active Intellect is God. Apparently whether or not one believes that, one has a rather different experience and therefore there is perhaps an interpretive element or aspect to the experience. But I will argue that there is also an element of difference that we should not call interpretive.

Let us think about this even if we cannot give it all the attention it deserves. If you perceive something, it is surely a matter of interpretation regarding what it is that you have perceived. In both aforementioned experiences the same reality is perceived although it is arguably a matter of interpretation whether that reality is viewed as within God or whether it is simply viewed spiritually, without matter and potentiality. So there does seem to be a difference of interpretation in the two experiences. If you believe that your mind has copulated with God, perhaps everything is viewed as within God. If you think that your mind has only copulated with the Active Intellect then perhaps everything is viewed spiritually but God still remains outside of your experience. But there is something else here that

may *not* be merely an interpretive difference. When everything is viewed as within God, the perceiver turns out to be not man but God. It is an experience of *God* perceiving everything including us humans within Him. In the other experience *we humans* view everything spiritually but without "division or duality" yet God remains outside of the picture. I admit that whether one thinks that he/she has experienced God could indeed be a matter of interpretation. But could it possibly be a matter of my own interpretation regarding whether *I* am the experiencer? I would argue that this stretches the notion of interpretation beyond its normal or even plausible limits. Those limits define the difference between normal differences of opinion or interpretation and radical differences of basic intuition. In fact it is even more radical than differences of world-views between very different cultures. It is as if an insane person were to insist that she is not herself and yet she perceives her real self as within her externally perceived reality. This was indeed the case in the famous movie *The Three Faces of Eve*. I am not sure whether it is really typical of the multiple personality disorder. It is difficult for us to imagine what kind of veridical experience could lend itself to that sort of interpretation and it is more plausible to attribute it to a faulty raw experience such as a deficit (or split) in self-consciousness or memory. It is perhaps analogous to the dog that sees itself in the mirror but seems to perceive its image as that of another dog. We don't think that the dog has misinterpreted things but that it lacks self-consciousness, as almost all animals do. The same is true of very young children, who perhaps are not yet capable of either self-consciousness or interpretation. But in the case of mystical experience that deficit seems to be a good thing, according to Abrabanel. It is not that one's own self has been completely obliterated but that it now exists as a datum

within God's own consciousness. Admittedly, this may well be a much more common experience in certain types of Eastern mysticism. We must recall again the then current conflict between Ficino and a certain interpretation of Averroes that denied the ultimate survival of the human soul. Does such an experienced situation as Abrabanel described spell the death of the human self? That is a difficult question and depends upon what one means by "self." If the ultimately important thing is God's love of the individual human being and not the continuity of consciousness of that specific person, then perhaps all individual identity is not lost and the best part is preserved. But from another perspective, the precious subjectivity of the individual has indeed been lost. Whether we view such a state of consciousness as a plus or a minus is of course a clear matter of interpretation and/or evaluation. It may also be similar to certain states of consciousness achieved through ingestion of psychedelic drugs or meditation. Admittedly, interpretation plays a role there but we also assume that the drug itself has a more or less typical or default objective affect on the organs of consciousness and memory that result in certain characteristic experiences. Although there is such a thing as denial in normal human conscious memory, in more extreme states such as amnesia we don't refer to the resulting lack of self-awareness as an interpretation but as a clear loss of objective memory.

After expostulating upon what seems to be Arabic-Jewish theories of the Active Intellect and human soul and upon the other view that the Active Intellect is really God (also the view of Alexander of Aphrodisias and Augustine), Abrabanel (Philo) then tackles the problem of intellect vs. will, one which was more a feature of Christian philosophy and theology than of medieval Jewish or Arabic philosophy. Since he states that God is the Active Intellect, the two views now boil down to whether

ultimate felicity lies in knowing God or loving Him. Sophia then asks for the "premises" of those two views. Philo explains that some say love is more ultimate than knowledge even though knowledge is a necessary condition of love. Therefore happiness ultimately consists of love of God. They also say that pleasure resides in the will (love) and not in the intellect. But their opponents think that happiness must consist in the "most essential (*principale*)" and the "most spiritual" faculty, which is intellect and which is also "most abstracted" from matter. They argue that love and pleasure are not our "essential end" but "follow on knowledge as adjuncts." Sophia then says (p.47) that both arguments seem equally valid. Philo admits it is a hard task to resolve a problem "long debated, alike by ancient philosophers and modern theologians" but since she has diverted him from telling her how his soul "is afflicted" on her account he will tell her something about it. She encourages him to do so and promises that when they tire of "matters divine" they will "discuss more candidly our own human friendship." The following can be found on pages 48-50.

> Philo: it is a true and necessary proposition, that happiness consists in the ultimate activity of the soul...and in an activity of the most noble and spiritual faculty of the soul, — and that is the intellect. Again it is undeniable that love presupposes knowledge; yet it does not follow from this, that love is the ultimate activity of the soul. For you must know that, of God, as of all other objects of love and desire, there are two forms of knowledge. One precedes and causes love; but such knowledge is not perfectly unific. The other follows on, and is caused by, love; such knowledge is unific, the enjoyment of

perfect union...for true knowledge of bread lies in tasting it...So it is, too, in regard to whatever else we love and desire; for, in regard to all, love and desire are means of raising us from imperfect knowledge to the perfect union, which is the true end of love and desire; and these are effects of the will, which translate dual cognition (*la divisa cognizione*) into perfect cognitive union (*cognizione perfetta e unita*). When you understand this essential nature of theirs, you will recognize that it does not differ greatly from that of mental desire and mental love, although our former explanation, when we were discussing the subject in a general way, was rather different. So that we could really define love as 'desire to enjoy in union an object recognized as good'; though I told you before that desire presupposes the absence of its object. But now I add that even when the good exists and is ours, we may yet desire it, not possession thereof, (for that is achieved already), but enjoyment of cognitive union with it; and such future enjoyment we may desire, because it is not yet actual. Such desire we call love: a desire to possess things we lack, or desire to enjoy in union those we have obtained; both of these may properly be called 'desire', but the second more accurately—'love'. So that we define love as a desire to enjoy in union—or, let us say, a desire to become one (*convertirse con unione*) with the object of love. Now to return to the matter of our enquiry: I say that we must first have that

knowledge of God, which it is possible to attain in respect of so sublime and infinite a subject. And, as we know, His perfection, though incapable of apprehending it completely, so we love and desire to enjoy Him in the most perfect union of knowledge possible to us. This great love and desire of ours ravishes us into such contemplation, as exalts our intellect, till, illuminated by special favour of God, it transcends the limits of human capacity and speculation, and attains to such union and copulation with God Most High, as proves our intellect to be, rather a part of the essence (*ragione e parte*) of God, than understanding of merely human form. Then is our desire slaked and our love, with far greater satisfaction than our first knowledge and our former love afforded. Yet may love and desire well persist—not indeed for union in knowledge, which has been achieved already—but for continuance of the enjoyment of such union with God; and this is truest love. Nor can I affirm that we experience pleasure in such blessed activity, save in the moment of attainment, when pleasure springs from the obtention of what we desired and lacked...Yet, in conclusion, I would have you know that happiness consists, not in the first act of knowing God, which gives rise to love, nor in the love which follows on that first knowledge; but it consists solely in the conjunctive act of intimate cognitive union with God, wherein lies the supreme perfection of

> created minds. Yea, that is the ultimate activity and blessed end, in which they are made rather divine than human...And the soul which has achieved such excellence, thus loosed from its fleshly bonds, enjoys without impediment forever its happy union with the Light, even as do the blessed angels and disembodied (*separate*) intelligences, the heavenly bodies and the spirits that move them, each according to the degree of its dignity and perfection forever...[627]

I will now presume to summarize this theory and put it into somewhat more understandable language. The relationship between man and God is a relationship of the human mind to God. It first requires some imperfect knowledge, followed by love and desire but culminates in copulative union, which does not last forever, at least in this lifetime. This is followed by a yet more perfect knowledge and love of God. But that "blessed activity" may lack pleasure and desire for union remains until copulative "cognitive union" with God is achieved again. This is an interesting admission that intellectual efforts without mystical union may not be altogether pleasurable. Yet most intellectuals would probably say that there is a great deal of

[627] Although he never explicitly connects the dots, we can now see that the preliminary discussions of human felicity and the various views regarding the Active Intellect are crucial introductions to what for Judah Abrabanel is the ultimate question of human experience as an ultimate fulfillment of human life, surpassing both physical and mental activity. Thus, the disputes between the Arabic philosophers regarding mental reality as it relates to objective reality and those in Christendom regarding love vs. intellect all boil down (for Abrabanel) to the same thing in the end: human felicity. This seems to me to remove him from the metaphysical, terminological and methodological discussions so characteristic of medieval thought and perhaps his being called the greatest example of Jewish Renaissance philosophers is well deserved.

pleasure afforded by intellectual activity even without some kind of mystical breakthrough. Abrabanel, however does not categorically deny that; he only says: "Nor can I affirm that we experience pleasure in such blessed activity, save in the moment of attainment, when pleasure springs from the obtention of what we desired and lacked". I conclude that the author may well be speaking from personal experience of mystical pleasure, which makes mere *intellectual* pleasure (not to mention physical pleasure) pale in comparison. Hence, while clinging to the notion of the substantive human intellect as the substrate of mystical union with God, the ultimate mystical activity or state transcends mere intellectual activity. In fact, Abrabanel in the final section of the book (p.446) argues that intellectual activity "would not suffice" as "the ultimate end and perfection of the universe." What are needed, not only for human perfection but also for the perfection of the entire cosmos, are intellectual activity, love and "enjoyment in union." The question now arises as to whether we can find similar accounts of mystical experience elsewhere. Before we do that, however, I would like to refer the reader again to the long passage in the section on Ficino regarding love of God vs. cognition of God. While we cannot analyze every nuance of the two views, it is fair to say that they are extremely similar.

Union with the Divine in Kabbalah

It is well known that Gershom Scholem denied the existence of true unitive experiences in Jewish mysticism generally and in Kabbalah particularly.[628] That conclusion of Scholem has been

[628] See Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, p. 123. "Nothing seems to me to express better this sense of the distance between God and man, than the Hebrew term which in our literature is generally used for what is otherwise called *unio mystica*. I mean the word *devekuth*... Yet

rebutted by Moshe Idel. There may however be some truth to Scholem's exaggerated claim in that much and perhaps most kabbalistic writings seem weighted towards the descriptive rather than the experiential. Now how one can assert descriptive statements about God and the spiritual realms without having experienced them is a question that we will not pursue in great depth. It might suffice to note that the very word "Kabbalah" originally referred to a received tradition, which might obviate the need for individual experience of the spiritual realms. I am not siding with Scholem against Idel on this issue but simply suggesting that even if Scholem was technically incorrect there may have been some truth to what he said. And even Idel's very interesting discoveries do not seem to have found or asserted anything quite like what we find in the *Dialoghi*. The closest that I have found in the writings of Idel and others is the concept of the Active Intellect (as male) copulating with the human soul (as female) in the thought of Abraham Abulafia. This is quite interesting and we should keep in mind that Abrabanel specifically mentioned such a view and also specifically considered God to be the Active Intellect. The following are two descriptions of mystical experience by Abulafia that have been translated by Moshe Idel.

> [They] will be united with it after many hard, strong and mighty exercises, until the particular and personal prophetic [faculty] will become universal, permanent and everlasting similar to

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even the rapturous descriptions of this state of mind which abound in later Hasidic literature retain a proper sense of distance, or if you like, of incommensurateness."

> the essence of its cause, and he and He become one entity.[629]

Abulafia states that the ultimate goal of man is:

> To reach to the degree of the angels named *Ishim* and to cleave to them for the everlasting life, until the men will become the angels which are also separate [from matter] after they were man *in potentia* and angels *in actu*, but on a lower degree.[630]

I selected those two passages because they seem to bear a rather strong resemblance to what Abrabanel says in the *Dialoghi*. There is the phenomenon of remaining somewhat separate from the Active Intellect, despite what Idel calls "universalization."[631] Abrabanel also describes a state of separateness from God punctuated by copulative union. The first quotation from Abulafia describes an active struggle, despite the fact that the human soul is considered to play the female role when uniting with the Active Intellect. One wonders whether this is an internal inconsistency that is demanded by the general Jewish preoccupation with actions, or at least physical activity. Or perhaps it is recognition of the very active role of the female in *preparing* for copulative union. One certainly does not get that same feeling of struggle in the *Dialoghi*, perhaps because there is no prescribed program of meditation that would lead to union. Even the dialogues themselves seem like rather easy-going and pleasurable learning

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[629] See Abraham Abulafia, *Sefer Sitrei Torah* (Paris BN MS.774. fol.155a, translated into English by Moshe Idel in *Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam*, p. 30.

[630] See Abraham Abulafia, *Ozar Eden Ganuz*, Oxford MS. 1950, fol. 27a, translated into English by Moshe Idel. See Ibid. 31.

[631] Ibid, 30-31

sessions rather than strenuous exercises, despite the sometimes difficult to follow arguments. However, there may be much more going on here than meets the eye. For example, Philo is actively wooing Sophia as one would expect from the male of the species. God is also in active search for man, according to biblical motifs.[632] But we also know that for millennia man has also been actively seeking God and while this may be considered by some to be a pagan motif, thinkers such as Judah Abrabanel may have also been sympathetic to it. I do not know whether the relationship between Philo and Sophia mirrors the relationship between humankind and God but it is a possibility that there is some kind of parallelism going on here. Perhaps Sophia is actually laying a trap for Philo, which will lead not only to union but also to a longer lasting one than Philo's efforts alone would assure.

We must also keep in mind, however, that the notion of the human soul as passive and feminine is generally more in keeping with Christian mysticism than with Kabbalah. That having been said, this may indeed be a case of more or less direct kabbalistic influence upon Judah Abrabanel. It also seems to be a case where Abulafia is closer to Maimonides than is Abrabanel. According to Idel's interpretation, Abulafia achieves universalization without "*devekut*" (cleaving to God) but there is a cleaving to the active intellect or separate intellects (*Ishim*). Most interpreters of Maimonides' mature philosophy would go no further than that in describing what Maimonides believed could be achieved in this lifetime but Abrabanel seems to assert the possibility of union with God in

[632] See A. J. Heschel, *God in Search for Man.*

this world. Here is Idel's analysis of what Abulafia thought could be achieved.

> Although it refers to an individual entity (the Active Intellect), it is also a plural form, its literary meaning being "men." This Maimonidean quandary enables Abulafia to present a complex theory of cleaving to the Active Intellect, becoming universal and at the same time, remaining an individual. All this is the result of the double nature of *Ishim*. In an unnamed treatise, Abulafia describes the separate entities denominated in the medieval terminology as separated intellects... [633]

It should be noted that despite the similarities and the fact that Abrabanel may well have been familiar with Abulafia's work, there are some fairly major differences. In Abrabanel the human soul really unites with God and then returns to herself, but with permanent spiritual changes. She then *becomes like* the separate intellects. This may be impossibile for Abulafia. He has the soul cleaving to the separate intellects, which are in one sense separate from God but perhaps in another sense are not. This kind of ambiguity is common among medieval Jewish philosophers. When we read them we often have difficulty knowing to what extent they conceived of God permeating all of reality or not. As we saw in the chapter on pantheism, for Abrabanel there may be no such ambiguity (or much less) even if he at times attempted to cover his tracks with difficult arguments and language.

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[633] *Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, p. 31

Idel gives a number of other examples of mystical union in kabbalistic thinkers but many seem to be from the later Lurianic Kabbalah or still later Hasidic rabbis. The purpose of this investigation is to identify possible influences on Abrabanel so I will ignore those. Idel does, however, mention a few earlier thinkers and I will briefly describe them. There were two Catalan kabbalists, Ezra and Azriel, both of Gerona, who believed that the human soul could ascend to the *Sefirah* of *Binah*, which is the root of souls. But there is no clear description of an ecstatic experience.[634] Idel also describes an early kabbalistic text that describes immersion "in the divine light" but admits there is no experience of "*unio mystica*" or "transcendence of plurality."[635] He describes another early text, which describes the mystical experience as encountering one's own human form as it exists in the Shekhinah.[636] None of these appear to me to resemble to any remarkable extent what we found in the *Dialoghi*.

Union with the Divine in Medieval Christian Thought

It might come as a bit of surprise to some to know that prior to the 12th century divine union (in a strict sense) was not a very common motif in Christian thought and Augustine does not speak of it, nor does Gregory the Great.[637] Early Christian

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[634] Ibid. 35

[635] Vatican MS. 1954, fol. 68a. See ibid., p. 36

[636] Oxford MS. 1954, fol. 68a. See ibid., pp. 36-37.

[637] That is not to say that early Christianity did not acknowledge the experience of the presence of God. Notable among early mystics are Pseudo-Dionysius and Eriugena. And as should be obvious, notions and definitions of mysticism differ. See Bernard McGinn, *Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, p. 61for additional information and a balanced discussion. Also see Paul MacDonald, *History of the Concept of Mind*, volume 2, pp. 207-298 for a more extensive discussion.

religious experience such as is described in the *New Testament* might be better described as an experience of spirit possession, the spirit of Jesus coming to dwell within the soul of the believer, rather than mystical union.[638] Bernard McGinn attributes the arousal of an interest in mystical union to two factors: the reception of old texts such as *De Mystica Theologia* by Pseudo-Dionysius and the establishment of new monastic orders.[639] Without attempting to become encyclopedic, I would like to concentrate on a particular theme in Christian mystical theology: love vs. knowledge and use two thinkers to illustrate it: Bernard of Clairvaux and Meister Eckhart.

We have already seen how the theme of love vs. knowledge is a major area of discussion in the *Dialoghi* but not particularly prominent in Kabbalah or for that matter in Jewish philosophy either. Solomon ibn Gabirol, for example, considered love practically a disease of the mind and comparable to lust. He admits, of course, that love is good when it is either the love of God or stems from that love. Unfortunately, he says nothing more about it, which leaves us perplexed and suspecting that what he means by love as a disease (probably romantic love) is very different from what he means by love of God.[640] Moses Maimonides incorporates love completely into the *intellectual* love of God in such a way that there could not possibly be a conflict or competition between love and intellect. He seems not to even recognize the possibility of such a conflict in a truly religious person. A

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[638] It has always seemed obvious to me that Paul was a mystic of sorts and that his ideological differences with rabbinic (or Pharisaic) Judaism stemmed to a degree from his mystical experiences. It was especially gratifying to me to see that E.P. Sanders seems to agree with that assessment. See his "Comparing Judaism and Christianity," p.22.

[639] Ibid ,p.62

[640] See Solomon ibn Gabirol, *Improvement of the Moral Qualities*, pp. 68-70.

relatively late but great Jewish philosopher, Hasdai Crescas, did endorse love over knowledge as a means of relating to God. This can be viewed as both a repudiation of earlier Jewish philosophers and as a concession to certain trends in Christian thought, with which he was otherwise in polemical dispute. Judah Abrabanel, however, does not take such an easy path of choosing one over the other. He makes a point of portraying Philo as a learned mystical philosopher and also one smitten by human love for a woman. Hence Philo (Abrabanel?) is really torn between the love of knowledge, the love of God and the love for a female human personality. Like the Christian thinkers, he must take both love and knowledge seriously and deal with the question: Which is superior in relation to God? As we already saw, he attempts a compromise, which strikes many as dissatisfying and perhaps disingenuous. Let us now see what these two Christian mystical philosophers have to say and whether it can shed light on Abrabanel.

Bernard of Clairvaux lived in the 11th and 12th centuries. He is known as a monastic figure but at the same time lived an active and sometimes contentious life. For example he is known for a dispute with Abelard and the labeling of the latter as a heretic. He is also known as a protector of the Jews of the Rhineland during the Crusades. It is even possible that the popularity of Bernard as a German Jewish name was one result of that. We do not know if Judah Abrabanel knew of him but if so he might possibly have reminded him of his own father—a man equally at home in the practical, theoretical and devotional realms.

In his *De Diligendo Deo*, Bernard describes four levels of the ascent, called charity (*caritas*) and culminating in union with God. Despite the fact that he uses the term "one spirit" to

describe that union, he also maintains that the human person remains, albeit in another form. He also wrote a book on the *Song of Songs*, an ostensibly secular love poem from the Bible that both Jews and Christians have been at pains to interpret as a strictly religious text describing love between man and God. Bernard insists that it is love that is crucial in that human/divine relationship. Most interesting is the fact that he calls love "a form of knowing."[641] This is a rather similar maneuver to the one that Judah Abrabanel makes when he insists that it is the intellectual faculty (the highest) in man that loves God. Bernard's insistence that the human nature remains intact is also reminiscent of Abrabanel.

Meister Eckhart is another well-known Christian mystic and one generally considered even more radical than Bernard. That is because Eckhart seemed to believe there is an aspect of the human soul that is really somehow identical to God. He lived in the 13th and 14th centuries and therefore was able to survey the development of scholasticism and the Moslem and Jewish philosophical sources that made that development possible. This is significant because, like Abrabanel, and unlike Bernard of Clairvaux, he had that higher vantage point. Indeed, Abrabanel and Eckhart were quite likely influenced by the same or similar sources: Jewish, Moslem and Christian. Like Abrabanel, Eckhart is also often considered a pantheist and he made little effort to conceal those tendencies. Hence the relevant doctrines of Eckhart seem to go far beyond mystical union with God and verge on a kind of pantheism that is fairly extreme, bordering perhaps on monism. Nevertheless, those more extreme statements of Eckhart need to be balanced by

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[641] See Bernard McGinn, *Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, pp. 62-63.

others and it is perhaps not necessary to read him in quite so extreme a manner, especially since mystics and other intensely religious people often make extreme hyperbolic statements. For example, Eckhart stated that: "God's ground and the soul's ground are one ground." And, perhaps from a Christian perspective, he made an even more daring statement: "He gives me birth, me, his Son and the same Son."[642] Eckhart also claimed that the union between man and God is beyond love and knowledge yet also maintained that intellect is the highest faculty — higher than love. But love (*caritas*) is still given a unique role in his mystical philosophy.[643] The similarities to Judah Abrabanel are uncanny. The main difference seems to be that Eckhart made very bold statements while Abrabanel was a bit more cryptic and perhaps hedged somewhat on his true beliefs.

Union with the Divine in Islamic Thought

I do not consider myself entirely capable of discussing this subject in any great depth and I have relied upon those who know much more than I. But not to mention it would be wrong and misleading. The influence, direct and indirect, of Islamic thought on Judah Abrabanel was considerable and may be far more so than we can imagine.

When we discuss unitive mysticism in Islam we are immediately struck by what appears to be a conundrum. On the one hand, Islam appears to endorse the most transcendent view of the divine imaginable but on the other hand there is a substantial branch of Islam (Sufism) that just as emphatically endorses union with the divine. This raises a very interesting

[642] Ibid. pp. 75-76
[643] Ibid. pp. 77-78

question regarding whether there really is a contradiction or conflict between transcendence and mysticism. Unfortunately we cannot really pursue that question here as intensively as we might like but there is something to be said of a preliminary nature.

In the Hebrew Bible there are quite a few encounters between man and God but nothing that would be considered truly unitive. There are, however, many descriptions of angels that could easily be interpreted as being united ontologically with God. One of the philosophical problems regarding a direct human relationship to God (even short of union) is that of physicality. We have come to insist that God is not physical but this was not always the case and even in medieval times there were many intelligent people who would have rejected that insistence on God's incorporeality, not to mention later thinkers such as Spinoza. Given our now normative belief in divine incorporeality, however, if there is to be union between man and God it seems to me that either God must descend to a human level in some fashion or the human personality and its intimate association with a particular physical body must be at least partially obliterated. The latter possibility seems consistent with extreme transcendence if one takes the view of objective reality being constituted at least partially by subjectivity. In other words, if what we normally call the physical world is constituted (at least partially) by our human subjectivity and if the latter is obliterated to the extent that there is no longer a subjective basis for that objective "world," union with the divine might be consistent with divine transcendence and incorporeality. Of course this only makes sense if one does not view the soul and God as completely objective or material entities.

These concepts that I have just discussed are only a guide for a modern understanding of mystical phenomena and may have little or nothing to do with how medieval Muslim culture understood them. Therefore I will have nothing more to say about this preliminary matter here. I would, however like to quote Annemarie Schimmel regarding Islamic thought in general but specifically the thought of ibn Arabi.

> Ibn Arabī's entire system is generally designated by the term *wahdat al-wujūd*, "unity of being." The correct translation of this expression provides the key to most of his other theories. His concepts have evoked numerous discussions about the "pantheistic" or "monist" trend in later Islam. Marijan Molé has put his finger on the difficulty of translating *wujūd* correctly (MM 59-62): Arabic, like other Semitic languages, has no verb to express "to be." The term *wujūd*, which is usually translated as "being," "existence," means, basically, "finding," "to be found," and is, thus, more dynamic than mere "existence." "At the end of the Path only God is present, is 'found.'" Thus, *wahdat al-wujūd* is not simply "unity of being," but also the unity of existentialization and the perception of this act; it sometimes becomes quasi-synonymous with *shuhūd*, "contemplation," "witnessing," so that the terms *wahdat al-wujūd* and *wahdat ash-shuhūd*, which were so intensely discussed by later mystics, especially in India, are sometimes even interchangeable (MM 61...).[644]

[644] *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, p.267

Additional difficulties in our understanding these phenomena have been pointed out by Michael Sells, and I would like to quote him here.

> In Islamic literature there is no adjective such as "mystical" to distinguish the Arabic terms from their use in other contexts. The topic of mystical union confronts us immediately with a central aspect of classical Islamic culture: the interpermeability and interfusion of discursive and cultural worlds such that each is reflected within the other. The challenge in an essay of this kind is to allow not only the central terms of Sufism but the language contexts in which they are embedded and without which they are stripped of meaning to show through and, in showing through, to contribute their own distinctive perspective to comparative mysticism.[645]

Why is there a special problem understanding these "language contexts" and the "distinctive perspective" of Islam? The study of Islam from an intellectual historical point of view may well obscure this problem. Since Islam developed out of pagan, Jewish and Christian roots an outside observer may well believe that he or she understands more than we really do. Why exactly this is (or whether it really is) I cannot really say. There is always a problem looking within a system from the outside. But sometimes when the language of discourse is quite similar to ones own, important errors are made *because* of the apparent

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[645] See Michael Sells, "Bewildered Tongue: The Semantics of Mystical Union in Islam" *Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity and* Islam, p. 88.

familiarity and the resulting overconfidence. Visitors or students of Moslem societies often remark on their uncanny religiosity. This is something we must keep in mind even though we may not be able to understand it fully.

Obviously, Sufism stresses the immediacy of the contact with God and even union with Him and also the resemblance of that erotic relationship with profane eroticism.[646] Perhaps the paradigmatic expression of this motif is the saying usually attributed to Hallaj: "I am whom I love, whom I love is I."[647] We could spend a great deal of time on Sufism but since this is so well-known and one can learn about it from the aforementioned excellent chapter by Michael Sells and elsewhere, I would prefer to very briefly explore some other areas of Islam in order to flesh out yet other mystical elements. Besides, Judah Abrabanel never mentions the Sufis but only the Islamic philosophers. We will, however, discuss a thinker influenced by both Sufism and philosophy: Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Tufayl.

I will begin with the thinker who many would consider quite anti-mystical: Averroes.[648] We know that his career at the court of the sultan was initiated by none other than ibn Tufayl, who was known as a mystic. Much more will be said about him shortly. This association with a known mystic proves nothing

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[646] Ibid. pp. 87-124

[647] For a good discussion, see ibid, p.226.

[648] See Majid Fakhry, *Averroes: His Life, Works and Influence*, p.1: "He was, in addition, a close friend of Ibn Tufayl... Ibn Tufayl's 'illuminationist' (*Ishraqi*) or mystical sympathies cannot have appealed much to Avveroes, who was highly critical of the *Ishraqi* tendencies of Avicenna and the Sufi tendencies of al-Ghazali, whose thought was at the heart of Ibn Tufayl's philosophical outlook." While Fakhry is undoubtedly correct in everything that he wrote there, I am attempting to elucidate a somewhat broader concept of mysticism that might even include Averroes and most definitely would include Judah Abrabanel.

about Averroes himself; but perhaps we should not assume that mystically inclined religion was quite so antithetical to philosophically inclined religion as we are now accustomed to think.[649] We also know that ibn Arabi, a very important philosophically inclined mystic, reported of a conversation with Averroes in which the latter confessed a belief in mysticism. Most likely this was a fanciful dialogic tale and it would not have been the first in that cultural context; but again it gives one reason to ponder and investigate a little further. According to Shlomo Pines, Averroes, like his associate ibn Tufayl, believed that "the solitary...recognizes at least one social duty: he must not disturb the religious way of life of ordinary people."[650] Towards the end of his *Definitive Statement Determining the Relationship between Divine Law and Human Wisdom*, Averroes while discussing piety or spiritual health quotes the *Koran* as follows: "their flesh or blood will not touch God, it is

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[649] In general, philosophers do not dwell upon their own experiences as mystics sometimes do. This may be a result of the fundamental distrust that philosophers have of discrete experiences and their tendency to trust thought. This is a theme that will come to dominate this study because Judah Abrabanel seems at times to rely upon certain experiences as means of resolving philosophical perplexities. Regarding Averroes, we could say that he exhibits few psychological mystical traits but that is not to say that his philosophy cannot be reconciled with mysticism in a broader but less bold experiential sense. There is a possibility that certain philosophical systems, such as Plato's, reflect an intellectualization of pre-existing mythical traditions and/or the philosopher's own mystical experiences. At times a person might be reluctant to describe his or her own experiences. To what extent this might be the case in medieval Islamic philosophy I do not know. At any rate, if the intellectual models only reflect a belief in the validity of certain traditions I would consider them not essentially mystical from an individual perspective. But it is easy to see the cultural connection between belief in the possibility of certain spiritual experiences, belief in certain spiritual entities and the actual experiences of them by certain individuals.

[650] Shlomo Pines, *Studies in the History of Arabic Philosophy*, p.817

your piety that will touch Him."[651] As we will see in our discussion of mysticism in Maimonides, it is possible that Averroes did really believe in the validity of a kind of mystical union but was disturbed by some contemporary mystical phenomena and wanted to postpone such union till after death.[652] I am certainly not attempting to view him as a practicing mystic but simply pointing out that his thinking may not be as diametrically opposed to mysticism as commonly supposed. In fact, nowadays his views of the unity of all intellects might actually be considered mystical. Looked at from a metaphysical perspective, his famous doctrine of the unity of the active and potential (whether rightly understood or not) might actually be interpreted in an ultimately monistic

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[651] The quotation is originally from the *Koran*, XXII, 37. See *Two Andalusian Philosophers*, translated by Jim Colville, p. 96. This saying seems to fit in his belief in the inherent powers of the human soul, even if they are only potential and require actualization. Such a belief could be consistent with certain types of active meditative techniques that might be called "mystical." It seems less consistent with more fundamentalist types of belief in revelation, in which all power and truth resides in God and human beings are merely passive recipients.

[652] There is of course a rather major dispute regarding whether Averroes believed in any kind of personal immortality. Perhaps the problem lies in his view of the material intellect. In his *Middle Commentary* on Aristotle's *De Anima* he treats the material intellect as a constituent part of the individual human psyche but in his *Long Commentary* he seems to deny that and posits only one material intellect. The medieval Jewish tradition knew of the former and the medieval Christian tradition knew of the latter. We do not know to what extent Judah Abrabanel knew of these two possible views of Averroes and distinguished them one from the other. However, my reading of Abrabanel leads me to think that he relied upon the *Long Commentary* since he contrasts Averroes' view with his own. And in his view human perfection actually involves union with God whereas he views Averroes as teaching that human perfection resides in its own distinct nature (perhaps the material intellect). For more information regarding these commentaries, see Alfred Ivry, *Averroes Middle Commentary on Aristotle's De Anima*, pp. xiii-xxviii; also see Averroes of Cordoba, *Long commentary on the De Anima of Aristotle*, edited by Richard Taylor.

sense of all intellects (including the Active Intellect) being one with God. Such a view would certainly provide a psychological and metaphysical underpinning for mystical experiences. Or, alternatively, as we saw with Nifo, it could be viewed as a kind of copulation between God and the individual soul. The following opinion of Charles Trinkaus regarding how Pico della Mirandola (and possibly some Renaissance Jews) viewed Averroes is instructive.

> There was one tradition to which Ficino was able to give lip service but could not make his own – the Hebraic. As we know, and as we shall discuss in some detail in the next part of the book, Giannozzo Manetti was the first significant Hebraist among western thinkers of the Renaissance...Pico della Mirandola was far superior to Manetti as a Hebraist, and certainly a far more imaginative and gifted thinker. As a philosopher, which Manetti was not, Pico sought like Ficino to produce a grand synthesis. Whether he was originally dependent upon Ficino for this ambitious purpose, which I doubt, there can be no doubt that he took all that Ficino could give him, first from his writings and then from him personally, and then added to and broadened the scope of the Ficinian synthesis in at least two significant respects. One was his recognition of the underlying Neoplatonic and mystical nature of the so-called Averroist doctrine of the possible intellect as universal rather than individual. This doctrine he apparently learned from one of his teachers of Hebrew lore, Elia del Medigo, while he, Pico,

> was a student at Padua. The other was the mystical and esoteric medieval Jewish tradition of the Cabala.[653]

Of course we are accustomed to believe that Averroes was widely misinterpreted and this may well be another case of that phenomenon. Perhaps, however, it is futile for our purposes to speculate regarding such things here and more relevant to see what Judah Abrabanel himself thought about it and I think the following excerpt will show that it is not far from what has been stated regarding the mystical aspect of Averroes' teachings. I am certainly not claiming, however, that Abrabanel understood Averroes (or Aristotle, for that matter) rightly. That is not the essential point right now even though eventually we would like to know whether such influence is real or only apparent. This is what Abrabanel says on pp. 184-187.

> Philo: These Arab Philosophers hold that the First Mover is not God Most high. For [then] God would be a soul assigned to a sphere, just like the other motor intelligences; and such allocation and similarity would be in no wise seemly to God. So they say that the Most High God is the end, for whose sake the Prime Mover moves.
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> Sophia: Is this opinion accepted by all other philosophers?
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> Philo: Certainly not. Averroes and other later commentators of Aristotle hold that the intelligences are as many as the spheres and no

[653] Charles Trinkaus, *In Our Image and Likeness*, Volume 2, pp. 505-506.

more, and that God Most High is the Prime Mover…

Sophia: This doctrine seems to me more discreet[654] than the former; but how does Averroes answer the assertion of Aristotle (and of reason): that the end of the mover of the sphere is of greater worth than the mover himself?

Philo: Averroes says Aristotle means that the intelligence which moves is itself the end of its own continual motion, in that it rolls the sphere solely to achieve its own perfection.

Sophia: To my mind it is strange that Aristotle should by such considerations declare one and the same intelligence more perfect than itself.

Philo: I too feel it unreasonable… But if I allow that Aristotle meant to identify the Prime Mover with God, I would have you understand that he believes God to be the end of all the motors…but not that he holds Him more excellent than Himself…

Sophia: So you deny that the other motors roll their heaven to achieve their own perfection which they desire to enjoy, (as Averroes says)?

Philo: I do not deny it. On the contrary, I tell you that they desire union with God, so as to consummate their perfection…And therefore it is

[654] The Italian text (p.160) reads: "*Più limitata oppinione mi pare questa che quella de' primi*" and the new English translation (p.158): "It seems to me that this theory is more limited than the former one."

> that Aristotle says, that this God-head is their supreme end, and not, as Averroes holds, their own perfection immanent in them.
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> Sophia: And is it for a like reason that the felicity and ultimate end of our human intelligence lies in union with God?
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> Philo: Assuredly: because their ultimate perfection, end and true felicity, rests not in these spirits themselves, but in their elevation and union with the Godhead...for while actually blessed the intelligent spirit is no longer in itself, but in God, who renders it happy in union with Himself...

It seems that Abrabanel agrees with the imputed view of Averroes as believing that God is the efficient cause of motion as well as the ultimate final cause; and he then goes on to disagree regarding the details. That disagreement involves the "immanent perfection" that would seem to be the Active Intellect for Averroes and which Abrabanel denies, stating that union with God is the ultimate perfection of all things. Ironically, Abrabanel also imputes to Averroes the view that "God Most High is the Prime Mover." The latter also appears to be the Active Intellect in the opinion of Abrabanel. The crux of the disagreement seems to be that for Averroes (in the opinion of Abrabanel) the human soul is not a completely passive recipient of an influx from without but has its own potential that is actualized by external spiritual forces. Likewise, the Active Intellect has its own potential that is actualized by God. For Abrabanel, on the other hand, God has much greater metaphysical prominence even if from a strictly causal perspective (formal and teleological) God is supreme in

both systems. So he finds himself both agreeing and disagreeing with Averroes and perhaps even accusing the latter of inconsistency and lack of insight. He explains how the love of the superior and desire for union with Him (rather than love of their own immanent perfection) inspires souls to love the inferior as well. In other words, for souls the final cause of their actions lies not within themselves but in their desire for union with God. It seems to me that this disagreement could be viewed as more of a psychological one than a metaphysical one. The reason I say that is that the very notion of ultimately separate intellects may be incoherent for Averroes. Perhaps that is why for him the passive intellects and the Active Intellect become one. But perhaps the unity of those two intellects lies in the fact that the former is not really intellect but merely matter, which cannot exist without its form (the Active Intellect). Be that as it may, the very same relationship might also hold between the Active Intellect and God, and Abrabanel certainly attributed that belief to Averroes. If that is in fact the case, the ultimate separation between the Active Intellect and God in the thought of Averroes is called into question. We might remind ourselves here that in Abrabanel's own time Averroes had been strongly attacked by Ficino for denying the ultimate eternal nature of the human soul. This was perhaps the strongest indictment of Averroes since Thomas Aquinas. Where Abrabanel stands in this controversy is not readily apparent, however.

To the best of my knowledge, the scholar who has most strongly emphasized the connection between Judah Abrabanel and Averroes is Alfred Ivry. It might be useful to absorb what he has to say, especially since he has also helped us greatly to break down some of the rigid categories that we have inherited form previous generations of scholars: most notably the

distinction between Neoplatonism and Aristotelianism in the thought of Maimonides. Here is an excerpt of what Ivry wrote.

> For Ebreo, therefore, the dynamics of God's relation to the world is not essentially different in a Platonic or Aristotelian worldview, though the structures might vary. There is even a certain structural parallelism within Aristotelianism to the Platonic view of the deity as a force extrinsic to the world and relating to it through intermediaries. In this regard, Ebreo points to the view advanced by Al-Ghazzāli [!], Avicenna and Maimonides. The alternative model to this view is that which Ebreo has previously and rightly associated with Averroes, *viz.*, a view in which God is the first mover of the world and in it, an intelligent being directly related to all other intelligent being and responsible for all form. Though Ebreo explicitly subscribes to the "Platonic" view, and is thus more sympathetic towards the Avicennian-Maimonidean approach of Aristotelianism, it might well be argued that it was the Averroian model which effectively influences his thought. For Averroes ultimately posited a single principle of form which pervades the universe directly, though in an infinite number of guises and degrees of perfection. It is this direct pervasiveness of the divine Intelligence to which Ebreo is attracted, even as he fears its diffusion and naturalization. He thus indulges in one place in a critique of Averroes' view of the Prime Mover, seeing it a "strange" interpretation of Aristotle that the same

presumably unified being should be both a final and efficient cause, though his own view of God is equally that of a composite unity.

While Ebreo goes finally to the extreme of delegating God's presence in the world to intermediaries in order to preserve His unique character, he yet permits these intermediaries — the divine wisdom and Beauty — to pervade and produce not only the formal component of our world, but also its material aspect. Ebreo's immanentism receives its boldest expression, perhaps, in the view of God as creating the world by an act of self-love; a notion which aptly describes Ebreo's belief in love as a purposive, constructive act directed always to a noble and ennobling end, which for God can only be Himself. Similarly, the love of any superior being for an inferior one can well be described as an instance of self-love. The perfection of the inferior being which occurs in the relation of two beings is real, but incidental, as it were, to the perfection of the superior being itself.

The double perfection thus described calls to mind Averroes' view of the relation of disparately comprehensive intelligences, as described in his *Treatise on the Possibility of Conjunction*. There, the lower form is said to perfect the higher, even as the higher obviously perfects the lower. The perfecting of the higher form can be understood as the result of its relation with the lower, that form presenting an

> opportunity for the higher form to express its own perfection, and in that sense perfecting it. "Higher" and "lower" forms are of course all related; in Averroes' thought, they are parts of a whole. It is this organic unity and inter-relation of specific forms, so characteristic of Averroes' thought, which also inspires Ebreo.[655]

Let me say where I agree and where I disagree with Ivry. I certainly agree with what might seem to be a peculiar affinity between Judah Abrabanel and Averroes in terms of their "immanentism." Ivry has also asserted, and I agree, that: "Ebreo goes further towards uniting man directly with God than do most medievals."[656] This "immanentism" would explain how the divine Wisdom and Beauty can be intermediaries but also, in a sense, be immanent aspects of God. But I would disagree somewhat regarding the nature of the love of the superior for the inferior. Ivry seems to assert (by analogy to Averroes' theory of forms) that for Abrabanel the superior (God) perfects Himself by "its relation with the lower" as "an opportunity for the higher form to express its own perfection." This seems to possibly conflict with two things that Abrabanel says. Firstly, he argues (parenthetically) that a father is not perfect as long as his son has problems. That could indeed be interpreted as Ivry does but the human analogy seems to suggest something less self-centered and more altruistic. Secondly, Abrabanel argues that it is ultimately superior to be loved than to love; and Ivry's analogy seems to put the priority on the lover (God) rather than on the beloved. Yet human love (as we know it) is not

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[655] Alfred Ivry, "Remnants of Jewish Averroism in the Renaissance," *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, edited by Bernard Dov Cooperman, pp. 248-249

[656] Ibid. p.247

primarily love of self but love of the other. Is God's love more selfish that human love?[657] I agree with Ivry, however, that the love of God for the creation is "an instance of self-love" but that is a result of looking at it from an original causal perspective (before there was a creation) because God's love for Himself is the ultimate efficient cause of creation and everything else. Nevertheless, once the creation is posited as a given, God's love for the inferior looks very different and perhaps approaches (while never really attaining) Abrabanel's novel view that the inferior becomes superior through being loved by the superior. Hence the perfection of the inferior (humankind) might be the teleological end of God's love. This might even explain the phenomenon of God allowing human freedom and its resulting defiance of God, something that hopefully gets resolved in some ultimate messianic or other kind of redemption but regarding which Abrabanel is noticeably silent. In other words, he seems somewhat more concerned with the perfection of man in mystical union with God than with the perfection of God through the perfection of His children, whatever that might mean.

Although Averroes was extremely influential in the late medieval period and Renaissance, the tendency to misinterpret his views or at least the perception that this took place raises questions that we cannot answer here. As another and much better example of the confluence of mysticism and philosophy in Muslim thought I would like to quote from ibn Tufayl's only extant complete work: *Hayy ibn Yaqzan*. It has been asserted that Isaac Abrabanel was well-acquainted with it, which makes

[657] I refer the reader to my synopsis of the third dialogue in the introduction where I showed how Philo finally convinces Sophia of the unselfish nature of God's love.

our discussion all the more relevant.[658] This is the delightful story of a boy abandoned on an uninhabited island and raised by a gazelle. He slowly comes to understand the truth about his own human condition, other scientific information and even metaphysical truths. His ultimate discovery, however, was his ability to become one with God, at least for short periods of time. It then happens that another spiritually inclined individual from a neighboring island arrives. But this latter seeker was part of a society that had a true and conventional religion (presumably Islam).

> Hayy asked what scripture said about religious duties and the practices of worship...Absal told him about prayer, taxation, the pilgrimage, fasting and other similar, external aspects of the faith. Hayy accepted and undertook to perform these, in line with his belief in the prophet's authenticity. There were, however, two points which surprised him and the wisdom of which eluded him.
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> First of all, why did this apostle use allegory in most of his descriptions of the divine world and avoid direct disclosure? In consequence, people attribute a great deal of corporeity to the divine world and believe things about the divine Essence of which it is completely devoid. He had similar misgivings about punishment and reward in the hereafter.[659]

So it happens that Hayy and Absal find a way to return to the latter's society and Hayy attempts to teach the very best

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[658] See Eric Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance toward Tradition*, p.30.
[659] See *Two Andalusian Philosophers*, p.61.

members of that society about the truths of the spiritual world and his own mystical experiences. But they only resent him for this and in the end Hayy comes to the following astounding conclusion.

> Now aware of the people's condition and how the majority are just like dumb animals, he understood that it is impossible for all the wisdom, guidance and success of which the prophets spoke and which is contained in scripture, to be more than it is...
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> So Hayy went to Salaman and his colleagues, apologized for what he had spoken of and retracted it. He told them that he now took their view and would, henceforth, be guided by their example. He advised then to remain within the guidelines of scripture and ritual and not become involved with what does not concern them.[660]

Perhaps this story explains why ibn Tufayl, the mystic, could ally himself with Averroes the rationalist and Aristotelian. Of course it tells us nothing about the psychology or motivations of the latter. It tells us even less about Judah Abrabanel, especially since he never hid either his mystical or philosophical inclinations and even attempted to unite them both with revealed religion. This simply points out how someone like Judah Abrabanel might have reconciled them and living in a different time and one in which many things that were formerly concealed were being revealed, he may have abandoned the discretion of his Arabo-Jewish ancestors. It might however be

[660] Ibid. p. 64

interesting to see why ibn Tufayl himself revealed this somewhat scandalous doctrine. This is what he said.

> I have diverged from the traditional line by not withholding this knowledge. In fact, I have been prompted to draw aside the veil from this secret by the appearance in our times of insidious ideas dredged up and spread about by would-be philosophers. These ideas have pervaded the country and caused wide-spread mischief. People imagine them to be esoteric ideas withheld from all but the elect and this has increased their interest and appetite for them. I fear for weak-minded folk who, in trying to imitate these ignorant clowns, have discarded the traditional faith of the prophets. It is my belief that, by showing folk a glimpse of the secret of secrets, they can be diverted from that trail and led towards critical examination. However, I have not left the secrets set down in these few pages without the covering of a thin veil – a veil that will be drawn aside with ease by the deserving but remain impenetrably dense to the unworthy. [661]

To whom should we suppose ibn Tufayl was referring when he describes them as "would-be philosophers" and "ignorant clowns"? Most probably he was not referring to competent non-mystical philosophers like Averroes, especially since he highly recommended the later to the sultan. Ibn Tufayl was not only a philosopher and mystic but also a doctor and

[661] Ibid. p. 65

scientist.[662] It is also interesting that he counsels "critical examination." Regarding whether Judah Abrabanel might have been acquainted with ibn Tufayl, we cannot know but his contemporary Giovanni Pico della Mirandola certainly was. The story of ibn Yaqzan was translated into Hebrew by Moses Narboni in 1349 and into Latin by Pico della Mirandola in the late 15th century. Nevertheless, Shlomo Pines does not seem to list ibn Tufayl as a possible source of Judah Abrabanel's doctrines.[663]

I would now like to turn to Alfarabi, who was among the earliest and greatest of the Muslim philosophers. This is from his treatise on the philosophy of Plato.

> Then he closely investigated how the man who is resolved to become a philosopher or a statesman and achieve something good ought to be, and how he ought to be possessed by what he seeks, not think of anything else, and revel in it. Since reveling in this thing and seduction by it are subsumed under the genus of rapture, he therefore investigated what rapture is and its genus. Since some reveling and seduction are blamable and some praiseworthy, and since some praiseworthy things are believed by the multitude to be praiseworthy although they may

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[662] For references to his more scientific work see Julio Samsó, *Los Ciencias de los Antiguos en Al-Andalus*, pp. 308, 330-331, 337-338, 342, 344, 355.

[663] See "ibn Tufayl" by Lenn Goodman in *The Literature of Al-Andalus*, edited by Maria Rosa Menocal, Raymond P. Scheindlin and Michael Sells, pp 318-330. I am not suggesting that Abrabanel knew of ibn Tufayl, though it is a distinct possibility. See Shlomo Pines, "Medieval Doctrines Renaissance Garb: Some Jewish and Arabic Sources of Leone Ebreo's Doctrines," *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, edited by Bernard Dov Cooperman.

not be truly praiseworthy, while others are truly praiseworthy, he investigated both of them. And since the excess of seduction and reveling is attributed to enchantment and madness, and upon the first view these are believed to be blamable, he investigated also the enchantment and madness that are said to be blamable. He mentioned that those who bestow blame on these two do praise them sometimes. For they believe that, frequently, men become enchanted and mad from divine causes, so much so that some of them foretell future events, and others are possessed by the love of goodness and the quest of the virtues practiced in mosques and temples. Others associate the poets who are skilful in making poems with spirits as the cause of their enchantment and madness. These and similar things belong to praiseworthy enchantment and madness. He investigated the praiseworthy seduction, reveling, rapture, enchantment, and madness, when it is divine, in what manner it occurs, and in what man it occurs...And he explained that philosophy, statesmanship, and perfection cannot be achieved unless the soul of the man who seek them revels in them and in the end that he seeks; neither the philosopher nor the statesman can perform his activity with which he seeks the virtuous end unless that very reveling continues to be in him.[664]

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[664] See Alfarabi, *Philosophy of Plato and Aristotle*, translated by Muhsin Mahdi, pp. 61-62.

This discussion of the blameworthy vs. the praiseworthy brings me to an Islamic phenomenon described very well by Aaron Hughes and which he applied to a degree to Yehudah Halevi. I am referring to the Ismaili distinction between the esoteric (*batin*) and the exoteric (*zahir*).[665] This distinction is one that we have already been made painfully aware of in Maimonidean studies. Quite often it is assumed that the esoteric doctrine is something akin to materialism or secularism: some doctrine that might even militate against religion in general. But perhaps the esoteric doctrine might also be of a mystical nature, militating not so much against religion per se (and certainly not against God) but only against religious authority.

Union with the Divine in Jewish Thought

The manner in which ancient Judaism has come down to us seems not to allow for mystical union, even though many encounters with and experiences of the Divinity are surely enshrined in the Bible. The following passage from Mircea Eliade summarizes well what was at one time the scholarly consensus.

> "Slave" or "servant" of Yahweh, man must live in the fear of his God. Obedience is the perfect religious act. On the contrary, sin is disobedience, breaking the Commandments. However, consciousness of precariousness does not exclude confidence in Yahweh or the joy engendered by the divine blessing. But the

[665] See Aaron W. Hughs, *The Art of Dialogue in Jewish Philosophy*, pp. 30-32.

> relations between God and man do not go beyond this stage; the *unio mystica* of the soul with its creator is unthinkable for the theology of the Old Testament.[666]

Whether this characterization is completely accurate is a question that I am not prepared to answer but it does seem to be a prevalent view.[667] If you were to ask the average moderately knowledgeable person concerning Judaism regarding where mystical union could be found in that religion they would probably answer that it must be sought in Kabbalah. That, however, might not be the only correct answer. There are strands in Jewish philosophy that can arguably be called mystical just as there are correlative ones in Moslem and Christian philosophy. What the relationship is between medieval Jewish philosophy and earlier forms of Jewish thought or non-Jewish philosophy and/or mystical schools is a complex question that we will not delve into in depth. Early post-biblical Jewish religious experience often manifested itself in

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[666] *A History of Religious Ideas*, Volume 1 p. 338

[667] The Hebrew verb *yira* usually means "fear" in the Bible but in a number of instances could also mean "revere." The relationship between fear of God and confidence or trust is an interesting one. In *Exodus* XIV: 31 the Israelites upon seeing the power of God feared (revered) Him and trusted Him and Moses. But see 2 Samuel VI: 6-11 where after the death of Uzzah, David feared God but apparently did *not* trust Him and refused to take the Ark of the Covenant with him, hiding it instead. There is, nevertheless, an ancient tradition in Judaism of advocating the condition of friend of God rather than fearful slave of God as the more perfect state. This is found most emphatically in Philo of Alexandria. The prevalent view of the relationship between man and God in the Bible may to an extent disregard some Hellenistic traditions, which might include parts of the *New Testament* as well as some other early mystical traditions. Regarding the extent to which Philo might have interpreted the Bible in a mystical fashion there is still considerable debate. See *The Cambridge Companion to Philo*, edited by Adam Kamesar, particularly the discussion by Folker Siegert on pp. 206-207 and David Winston on p.253.

journeys of ascent in which knowledge of heavenly realities was revealed or with knowledge and instruction conveyed by heavenly voices and visions. We will not attempt to interpret or understand those early types of mystical experience for two reasons. Firstly, they are clouded in mystery and secondly, they do not appear to be examples of strong mystical union with the divine. Those early forms of Jewish mysticism may, however, be more significant in the later history of Jewish thought than we can currently determine. But we are dealing here specifically with medieval Jewish philosophy.

We might have begun our search with Judah Halevi, especially since Aaron Hughes associates him with the aforementioned Ismaili influence. I have chosen, however, to disregard him altogether for the following reason. He turned out to be an enemy of philosophy despite the fact that he was of course influenced by it. He was perhaps even more anti-philosophical than was Isaac Abrabanel, who cannot be excluded from our study due to the immediate family relationship. It also seems to me that Judah Abrabanel was not very much influenced by Judah Halevi and the *Dialoghi* betrays no mention of his name or traces of his thinking whatsoever, at least as far as I can see.

The individual who most normally and naturally comes to mind as a possibly mystical Jewish philosopher is Bahya ibn Pakudah, since he is often associated with Sufism as well as philosophy. Undoubtedly he believed that the human soul was ultimately destined to return to God in some rather robust sense. But, unfortunately, we do not find any very explicit mentions of mystical experience in his work though his emphasis on asceticism and the inner religious life certainly conveys a mystical flavor. Certainly his philosophy regarding the

religious obligations of the inner soul are quite relevant to the *Dialoghi*; but in the context of mystical union we need not dwell on him any further.

Perhaps mystical experiences are more palpably described in Salomon ibn Gabirol's poetry. This has often been pointed out. Unfortunately, interpreting poetry (especially in biblical type Hebrew) is not at all an easy matter. We do, however, have a section from his metaphysical work, the *Fons Vitae* that does, at least in my estimation, seem to qualify as mystical. The English translation is from Isaac Husik's classic: *A History of Medieval Jewish Philosophy*. The *Fons Vitae* (like the *Dialoghi*) is in dialogue form between a master and a student.

> If you wish to form a picture of these substances you must raise your intellect to the last intelligible, you must purify it from all sordid sensibility, free it form the captivity of nature and approach with the force of your intelligence to the last limit of intelligible substance that it is possible for you to comprehend, until you are entirely divorced from sensible substance and lose all knowledge thereof. Then you will embrace, so to speak, the whole corporeal world in your being, and will place it in one corner of your soul. When you have done this you will understand the insignificance of the sensible in comparison with the greatness of the intelligible. Then the spiritual substances will be before your eyes, comprehending you and superior to you, and you will see your own being as though you were those substances. Sometimes it will seem

> to you that you are a part of them by reason of your connection with corporeal substance; and sometimes you will think you are all of them, and that there is no difference between you and them, on account of the union of your being with their being, and the attachment of your form to their forms.

The student then assures the master that he has gotten to the point where he saw the corporeal world floating in intelligible substances like a boat on the sea or a bird in the air. The master then responds.

> When you have raised yourself to the first universal matter and illumined its shadow, you will see there the wonder of wonders. Pursue this therefore diligently and with love, because this is the purpose of the existence of the human soul, and in this is great delight and extreme happiness.[668]

In ibn Gabirol's metaphysics, Universal Matter is the most direct emanation from the Divine Substance. In his greatest poem the *Keter Malkhut* (*Kingly Crown*) he describes Universal Matter as "Thy dwelling place," "the abode of mystery and foundation" and "the secret and the foundation."[669] Therefore, I am not at all convinced that Husik was correct when he stated that this does not constitute "knowledge of the Most High."[670]

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[668] See Isaac Husik, *A History of Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, p.70. The original source is *Fons Vitae*, III, 204.
[669] See Solomon ibn Gabirol, *The Kingly Crown*, translated by Bernard Lewis, p.82.
[670] Ibid, p. 70

The next figure that I would like to discuss is Maimonides, someone who is usually assumed to be even further from mysticism in general and the *unio mystica* in particular than the first two Jewish philosophical thinkers that I discussed. Most people who have studied Maimonides intensively and critically do not consider him a mystic. Perhaps the best and most up to date summation of that view can be found in a recent book by Menachem Kellner that specifically view him as an opponent of mysticism and proto-kabbalistic thought.[671] Yet some troubling (to that view at least) facts emerge and cannot be denied. Firstly there are some early statements by Maimonides that point to at least some kind of union with the divine in the world to come. This was pointed out by Moshe Idel at a conference attended by, among others, Menachem Kellner, Aviezer Ravitzky and myself. I remember Ravitzky joking that perhaps Maimonides had done *teshuvah* (repented) but that perhaps Idel would have wished that he had not. This was the same conference in which Idel opined that the distinction between Jewish philosophy and Kabbalah was a product of modern scholarship. Another disturbing fact (for some) is that Maimonides' son became a bit of a Sufi, while remaining both Jewish and a firm supporter of his father's philosophy. Daniel Merkur seems to stress this side of Maimonides somewhat.[672] Moshe Idel has also written extensively on the subject of the affinity of mystics to Maimonides.[673] But the scholar who is best known for

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[671] See Menachem Kellner, *Maimonides' Confrontation with Mysticism*.

[672] "The Jewish version tended to blend Sufi ethics with Muslim Neoaristotelian mysticism. We find the blend in Moses Maimonides, his grandson Obadia Maimonides, and an anonymous tract that stemmed from medieval Egyptian pietism." See Daniel Merkur's comments in *Mystical Union in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, p.178.

[673] See Moshe Idel, "Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* and the Kabbalah."

associating Maimonides with mysticism is David Blumenthal.[674] Personally, I tend to side with most Maimonidean scholars, who view Maimonides (at least in his mature work) as disassociating himself from most types of mysticism. He is somewhat emphatic, for example, regarding his assertion that such entities as the Active Intellect, *Shekhinah*, etc. (which are indeed susceptible to human contact) are not really God. Not only that, he is rather condemnatory regarding those who misinterpret their experiences of those lower entities as encounters with God. This is quite significant and points out the supremacy of knowledge over experience in the thought of Maimonides and when it comes to knowledge of God that turns out to be mostly negative knowledge. Yet there surely are what I would call "mystical elements" in the thinking of Maimonides. I would include among them the conjunction of the human soul with the Active Intellect and the general association of the intellect with the religious life as well as the intellectual love of God and allusions to even higher states of contact as regards the death of the "perfect" in "the pleasure of this apprehension due to the intensity of passionate love."[675] As I have stated on a number of occasions, and specifically in the previous section, there may be (and probably are) large elements of a mystical Islamic and Arabic world-view that we cannot really understand now but that Maimonides (and most medieval Jewish philosophers) would have understood fairly well since they lived in its midst. Quite likely he also found some of them somewhat threatening but that surely does not prove that he was not influenced by them. In fact he seems to

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[674] See David Blumenthal, "Maimonides' Intellectualist Mysticism," *History of Judaism: The Nest Ten Years*, edited by B. Bokser, pp. 27-52.

[675] Moses Maimonides, *The Guide*, III, 51, p. 628. See the previous discussion of Maimonides and the kiss of death in Chapter I.

have been very much under their influence. Arthur Hyman, for example, has sometimes alluded to the possible influence of al Ghazali on Maimonides.[676] I have touched upon the relationship between ibn Tufayl and Averroes in the section on mystical union in Moslem thought. I also suspect that future research will bring much more of these relationships to light and we may have to revise our current normative views regarding rationalism and mysticism.

A tentative approach to understanding the position of Maimonides in relationship to mysticism would focus on his concept of belief. The crucial nature of "true belief" (rather than knowledge) has been discussed by Charles Manekin, who also warns that: "To argue this position one would have to show, among other things, that knowledge (or rational belief) is distinguished form traditional belief not so much in the question of justification, but rather in the content — and the character — of the belief itself. (See Maimonides' explanation of Job's shift from knowledge of God based on traditional authority to certain knowledge in *Guide* 3.23: 492-493.)"[677] It might therefore be useful to look at Maimonides' discussion of Job in the *Guide*. After what is described as follows: "Then the Lord answered Job out of the whirlwind"[678] and a fairly lengthy divine exhortation, Job said "I had heard of Thee by the hearing of the ear; but now mine eye seeth Thee".[679] What is this experience of the divine that Job metaphorically describes as sight? Maimonides is somewhat equivocal about the nature of Job's

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[676] See Arthur Hyman, "Maimonides on Creation and Emanation" in *Studies in Medieval Philosophy*, edited by J.F. Wippel, p.57.
[677] See Charles Manekin, "Belief, Certainty and Divine Attributes in the Guide" *Maimonidean Studies*, volume 1, p.119.
[678] *Job*, 40: 6
[679] *Job*, 42:5-6

new belief or knowledge of God. First, in the section referred to by Manekin, he describes this new belief as "by way of speculation" on p.493. This certainly fits in with a philosophical and non-mystical interpretation. But he then describes Job's very same experience as a "prophetic revelation" (p. 496). Now surely Maimonides recognized that revelation and speculation are not the same things although there are modern commentators who would seize upon this as proof that Maimonides really subsumed the former in the latter. I, however, interpret this Maimonidean discussion of Job as alluding to a new way of thinking about God *based upon a new experience*. Thus, speculation is necessary but not sufficient and there must be an experiential basis for true belief in God. This explains why Maimonides requires that prophets be philosophers; prophetic experience without valid speculation is quite dangerous as it leads to improper and false beliefs. But that is not to say that such experience does not or should not occur.

I would now direct the reader's attention back to the earlier discussion of the story of the elders (or nobles) in *Exodus* XXIV: 10-11, when they beheld God and after doing so ate and drank.[680] Isaac Abrabanel rebuked much of the Jewish exegetical tradition (including Maimonides) for accusing the elders of doing (or at least believing) something akin to idolatry. This, as I have alluded to, may have been the great fear of Maimonides: that mysticism leads to a kind of idolatry unless it is hedged in by proper rational speculation. But Isaac Abrabanel never gives this episode a clear mystical interpretation and perhaps skirted around the issue. We may

[680] Once again I would like to acknowledge and thank Eric Lawee for his excellent analysis of this early writing of Isaac Abrabanel.

never know for sure what he thought but perhaps he reasoned as follows. It is possible for people to wrongly believe that they have experienced God. We might (contra Maimonides) place a positive interpretation on that experience even while believing that those people were deluded. A practical leader must also know how to exploit the prejudices and/or delusions of his followers. Isaac Abrabanel might have viewed Maimonides' strict position as religiously counterproductive. But granted that we may not fully understand Isaac Abrabanel's position on this matter, perhaps it was a sort of initiation into mystical theology for his son, who is much more explicit about his mystical proclivities. For him tasting and intimate connecting of various sorts (eating, drinking, copulation) are (metaphorically) of crucial importance as regards the ultimate human relationship with God. For Maimonides, on the other hand, such close intimacy is perhaps only possible with the Active Intellect. Judah Abrabanel's insistence that the latter intellect is indeed God (which Maimonides explicitly denied) may be Judah Abrabanel's way of subtly co-opting Maimonides into the Jewish mystical tradition. It also seems obvious to me that Judah Abrabanel is indeed part of that mystical tradition. But I must remind readers that the Jewish mystical tradition should not necessarily be confused with Kabbalah, which it includes but is not exhausted by. This is significant because very often a tradition is defined by outsiders; from within the various parties that comprise that "tradition" may not view themselves as having a great deal of affinity, even if they at times agree (or are coerced) to tolerate one another.

Conclusion

I have provided this brief description of mystical union in various traditions in order to help readers form their own

opinions regarding the sources of Judah Abrabanel's views. I will offer my own opinion here even though it lacks strong substantiation, is tentative and subject to criticism. Although Abrabanel mentions many thinkers in his book, the one whose views seem most similar to his in this area is Marcilio Ficino.[681] Ordinarily such similarities would not be the basis for constructing causal or even meaningful connections. In the case of Ficino, however, his immense influence in the Renaissance must militate in favor of considering his views and those of his school the primary suspect.

[681] It could be objected that Abrabanel dwells more on the union with God subsequent to love and Ficino more on the actual love of beauty and God. I think a close reading of Ficino's letter to Lorenzo de Medici, much of which was quoted in the previous section on Ficino shows that he is at pains to justify the superiority of the will and love insofar as it moves the soul to actual union with the object of its love. On the other hand, Abrabanel seems more reticent to repudiate the long-standing assumption of the superiority of the intellect in Jewish Medieval philosophy. Such differences to my mind are more stylistic than they are substantial.

Chapter X: The Origin of Love

I will devote an entire chapter to this discussion for two reasons. Firstly, it is a very important part of the *Dialoghi* and even constitutes a kind of metaphysical culmination of the book, at least as we currently have it.[682] Secondly, Moshe Idel connects this theme with certain kabbalistic thinkers such as Rabad, ibn Malka and Abraham ben Eliezer ha-Levi, though he admits that (in contrast to many kabbalistic writings) what Abrabanel is discussing is "an extradivine process, and it does not deal with the sefirot."[683] Thirdly, it seems to be an example of cosmic eroticism, which is a very interesting notion and has features in common with some kabbalistic thought but also with other *genres*. Finally, the discussion of the origin of love elicits an interpretation (by Judah Abrabanel) of the *Song of Songs* that perhaps is not the standard rabbinic version. So this subject serves both as a metaphysical conclusion of Judah Abrabanel's philosophy as well as a possible connection with Kabbalah. Since no one to my knowledge denies that Abrabanel was acquainted with Kabbalah, the question at hand is the *extent* of kabbalistic influence in contrast to other roots. As usual, we will look first at Abrabanel's Jewish intellectual heritage before inspecting other likely or possible influences.[684] We will look

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[682] It has been claimed that a planned additional chapter either was never written or was lost. See Harari, David, "The Traces of the Missing Fourth Dialogue on Love by Judah Abravanel Known as Leone Ebreo."

[683] See Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, p.189.

[684] It is easy to imagine medieval Jewish life being excessively intellectual and religious and lacking in affective elements if one only reads the rabbinic and/or philosophical literature. We have dwelt upon those purely intellectual data in this study quite a bit. We do not want to give the false impression that affective elements were ever expunged from Jewish life in the medieval period. Such an impression would be quickly dispelled, moreover, upon

at the *Song of Songs*, that most peculiar biblical book and one of the earliest Jewish writings on love. Before we do that, however, let us inspect a part of the first dialogue, which already alludes to this subject (pp.31-32).

> Sophia. In few words you have told me much of human friendship. Now I would fain hear of the love of God, as being the greatest of all.
>
> Philo. Love of God not only partakes of good, but comprises the goodness of all things and all loves; for the Godhead is at once origin, means and end, of all good deeds.
>
> Sophia. If He be their origin how can He be their end and even their means?
>
> Philo. The Godhead is their origin, inasmuch as on Him depends the intellect, through which all human good is achieved. For the intellect is nothing but a tiny beam of the infinite splendour of God, assigned to man to make him rational, deathless and happy; although before it can achieve good deeds, it must again communicate with the divine light; for though, as a ray of God's glory, it is

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inspection of the secular poetry and folk literature. The fact is that love and other human emotions are a constant part of all human life, even in those periods when they are under the strict rule of religious or other legal-rational precepts. For a good discussion see Israel Abrahams, *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*, pp. 179-228.

naturally bright,[685] yet by the manner of its connection with the body and dimmed as it is by the opaqueness of matter, it cannot attain to the noble disposition of virtue or the clear concepts of wisdom, unless rekindled in the Divine light for the achievement of such ends. For even as our eye, though unclouded, can see neither colours, figures nor other visible things unless illumined by the light of the sun, which distributed between our eye, the object seen and the intermediate space, is the actual cause of the sight in the eye; so our intellect, though in itself clear, is yet hindered in wise and virtuous activities and so darkened by the course body which harbours it, that it needs fresh enlightenment from the Divine Splendour. Which actualizes its potencies and — illuming the ideas and forms of things issuing from the activity of understanding, which is intermediate between intellect and imagination —

[685] The English translation fails to make clear the created (produced) nature of the human soul. While one could argue regarding whether that concept (in contrast to emanation) fits in with the overall thesis of the book, this passage certainly seems to endorse it. See the new English translation (p.49): "produced brilliant as a ray of the divine light" and the Italian text (p.30): "prodotta chiara come razo de la luce divina." On the other hand, in the third dialogue on p.227, Philo describes the soul's relationship to the "divine intellect" as "a splendour emanating from it." The new English translation (p.191) reads: "a splendour deriving from it." The Italian text (p.195) is equally ambiguous: "un splendore procedente da quello" but seems to lean in favor of emanation.

makes it truly intellectual, prudent and wise...[686]

The *Song of Songs*

As we speak of love in a religious vein, this book of the Bible naturally comes to mind, as presumably it did for Judah Abrabanel as well. Ostensibly it is a secular love poem but it has been interpreted at least from Talmudic times as a testimony

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[686] Much of this discourse of Philo is a rehashing of typical medieval concepts but some details deserve special notice. Firstly, he seems to skirt around the dispute between partisans of original sin and the need for divine grace and those who stress the innate human ability to perceive and do what is good in a rather clever way. The human soul is a fragment of the divinity but is so clouded by its association with the body that it needs additional contact with God in order to be virtuous. Secondly, he seems to weigh in on a dispute regarding the nature of human sight, arguing that the light of the sun is its actual cause, rather than some potency inherent in the eye itself. Yet later on (pp.214-215) he seems to contradict himself when he states that for vision to occur it requires two causes: the "light rays which proceed from the eye to this object" and the "universal illumination of the diaphanous." Sophia, noting that he believes that "the eye sees by transmitting rays from itself to the object" accuses him of not being a follower of Aristotle and being a Platonist. Philo, in his typical syncretistic manner, attempts to smooth over the difference between Plato and Aristotle. He describes three different mechanisms and insists that neither the "transmission of rays from the eye" or the "representation of the form of the object in the pupil" are sufficient for vision nor are the two conjoined sufficient. What is sufficient is the two of them plus an additional phenomenon: "the eye directs its rays for a second time on to the object" and that is "the true essence of vision." While we can no longer accept the outmoded science of his time, researchers into consciousness have documented the phenomenon of blind sight in which a person can react quite well to visual stimuli but cannot really see them in a conscious manner. Even in normal subjects it frequently happens that we passively avoid bumping into objects that we don't really see in a conscious fashion. There does seem to be three separate aspects to vision: the passive, unconscious illumination of objects in our field of vision, the active focusing of the eye on an object and the extension of that focus for a longer period of time that we call conscious vision. Finally, it is interesting that Philo considered understanding to be "intermediate between intellect and imagination."

to the love of God for the people of Israel. It has been opined by a learned scholar of medieval Jewry that: "it was perhaps the most popular of all the Books of the Old Testament. It was read in synagogue, and its imagery has left its mark on many pages of the Jewish liturgy."[687] Maimonides further revised its meaning by associating it with the kiss of death by which God summons the perfect individual to die "in the pleasure of this apprehension due to the intensity of passionate love."[688] Although Maimonides only specifically mentions Moses, Aaron and Miriam as recipients of such a kiss, he also states: "The result is that when a perfect man is stricken with years and approaches death, this apprehension increases very powerfully, joy over this apprehension and a great love for the object of apprehension become stronger, until the soul is separated from the body at that moment in this state of pleasure."[689] There is an old tradition that the *Song of Songs* was written by King Solomon in his youth, which was supposed to explain its erotic elements. And there is some evidence that even in the Talmudic period some still interpreted it literally as a secular love poem, which would cohere with its youthful Solomonic authorship. The Church interpreted it in an analogous fashion to the rabbis: regarding the love of God (Christ) for His Church. There may be reason to believe that there were yet other mystical or metaphysical interpretations either in medieval or ancient times — and Judah Abrabanel may have known of one. Judging from what he says, there may well be a connection with another controversial statement in the book of *Proverbs*, a controversial saying of Rabbi Akiba and also certain kabbalistic doctrines.

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[687] Ibid. p. 179
[688] Moses Maimonides, *The Guide*, III, 51, p. 628
[689] Ibid., p.628

The love celebrated in the *Song of Songs* appears at first blush to be the love of a woman for a man as its very beginning attests:

Oh, give me of the kisses of your mouth,

For your love is more delightful than wine.

Your ointments yield a sweet fragrance,

Your name is like finest oil—

Therefore do maidens love you.

Draw me after you, let us run!

The king has brought me to his chambers.

Let us delight and rejoice in your love,

Savoring it more than wine—

Like new wine they love you!

But the poem also reveals that the male beloved (the king) loves the maidens as well and is also beloved by many of them. Judah Abrabanel explicitly states that this love is that of both the human intellect and created universe for God (pp.46—461). This seems to be a philosophical and allegorical interpretation even more radical that that of Maimonides because it does not refer to the Jewish people at all. Abrabanel goes on to connect this love with the more physically erotic love of man and woman (pp. 461-462).

What then is the connection with Akiba, who according to legends lived without his wife for many, many years and was certainly no eroticist? We know that Rabbi Akiba was one of the early proponents of interpreting the *Song of Songs* allegorically and we also know that he had mystical proclivities. We have already seen that he considered the Jews to be

especially privileged as having been given "the instrument by which the world was created." Perhaps there is reason to believe that the love of Israel for God (and the love of God for Israel) is intimately and essentially related to the mutual love between God and the *Torah*. In a very general sense this model points to the idea that a universal caring or affection is based upon a very individual and intimate one and not the converse.[690] In order to substantiate that conjecture, I would like to look at another book of the Bible, also traditionally reputed to have been written by King Solomon, but in his middle age: the book of *Proverbs*.

Proverbs, VIII: 22-36

> The Lord created me at the beginning of His course
>
> As the first of His works of old.
>
> In the distant past I was fashioned,
>
> At the beginning, at the origin of earth.
>
> There was still no deep when I was brought forth,
>
> No springs rich in water;
>
> Before the hills I was born.

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[690] This is a perennial debate in ethical philosophical literature. Some idealists have seen intimate, exclusive love as an impediment to universal caring and compassion. Others, however, have pointed out that human beings deprived of intimacy in early life rarely grow up to be great lovers of humankind. Even if we concede the truth of that latter assertion, it is still not self-evident that God would require such an intimate, exclusive love. On the other hand, it might be necessary as a means for human beings to understand divine love.

He had not yet made earth and fields,
Or the world's first clump of clay.
I was there when He set the heavens into place;
When He fixed the horizon upon the deep;
When He made the heavens above firm,
And the fountains of the deep gushed forth;
When He assigned the sea its limits,
So that its waters never transgress His command;
When He fixed the foundations of the earth,
I was with Him as a confidant,
A source of delight every day,
Rejoicing before Him at all times,
Rejoicing in His inhabited world,
Finding delight with mankind.
Now, sons, listen to me;
Happy are they who keep my ways.
Heed discipline and become wise;
Do not spurn it.
Happy is the man who listens to me,
Coming early to my gates each day,
Waiting outside my doors.
For he who finds me finds life
And obtains favor from the Lord.

But he who misses me destroys himself;

All who hate me love death.[691]

This is Wisdom speaking, personified as a personal being that existed prior to the creation of the world. At some point in Jewish history (perhaps for the first time in *Ben Sirach*) that Wisdom was interpreted as being the *Torah*, even though the book of *Proverbs* never explicitly speaks of Moses, the *Pentateuch*, revelation, etc.[692] I would like to focus on one word in the 17th stanza: "confidant" in the new JPS translation. The Hebrew word (*amon*) is obscure but related to a number of others. It has also been translated as nursling, architect, artisan, builder, etc. Some view Wisdom (or the *Torah*) as a being that is peculiarly intimate with God and others as His instrument of creation. But perhaps it is both! It would also seem that Salomon ibn Gabirol interpreted it as the Divine Wisdom itself (God).[693] As we will come to see, the relationship between God and this primeval Wisdom explains the origin of love,

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[691] The New JPS translation of *The Writings*, pp. 213-214

[692] See *Ecclesiasticus* (*ben Sirach*) in *The New English Bible* (p. 136 in *Apocrypha*): "Happy the man who fixes his thoughts in wisdom and uses his brains to think...The man who fears the Lord will do all this, and if he masters the law, wisdom will be his." Wisdom (*Hochma, Sophia*) personified as a woman is characteristic of the Jewish wisdom literature as is another metaphor: fountain of life or some other form of water, as in *Proverbs*, XVI, 22, *Jeremiah*, II, 13 and XVII, 13, *ben Sirach*, XV, 3 and XXIV, 30; it is also found in the *New Testament* in *John*, IV, 10 and VII, 38 and in Philo. Of course, ibn Gabirol's metaphysical work is also called *Fountain o f Life*. What is more evident from the metaphor of water and less so regarding the personification is the characteristic of flowing from God. Therefore, the watery metaphor may be more strictly monotheistic and the personification metaphor more of a concession to polytheistic tendencies. Ancient thought may have viewed God as essentially a powerful force and the notion of Wisdom as a divine force was therefore reduced to a hypostasis. Interestingly, in ibn Gabirol, this tendency is reversed; divine wisdom is the divine essence and the divine will becomes the hypostasis.

[693] See Solomon ibn Gabirol, *The Kingly Crown*, p.53.

something that the Renaissance was somewhat obsessed by. But first we should look at Aristotle, as mediated by Thomas Aquinas.

Aquinas on Aristotle

Obviously, Aristotle and Aquinas form a backdrop of all subsequent Western thought and it will be interesting to contrast them with Judah Abrabanel.

> In *Metaphysics* xi Aristotle proves that in the heaven's movement two factors are to be considered; something that moves and is wholly unmoved, and something that moves and is also moved. Now, that which moves without being moved moves as an object of desire; nor is there any doubt that it moves as a thing desirable b that which is moved. And he shows that it moves not as an object of concupiscent desire, which is a sense desire, but of intellectual desire; and he therefore says that the first unmoved mover is an *object of desire and understanding.* Accordingly, that which is moved by this mover, namely the heaven, is composed of an intellectual soul and a body. He indicates this when he says in *De anima* II that "in certain things there is intellect and the power of understanding, for example, in men, and in other things like man or superior to him," namely the heaven.[694]

[694] *Summa Contra Gentiles*, Book Two, Chapter 70, pp. 210-211

As is evident, the stress in Aristotle, or at least in Aquinas' interpretation of him, is on the intellectual love of the universe (especially the heaven) for God and not on God's love for the universe or man. We are not saying that Aquinas had no concept of the latter but simply that in terms of the way the universe works it is the former that is paramount. We will now look at a Renaissance treatment of this subject.

Ficino's Treatment of the Origin of Love

The other most important Renaissance treatment of the origin of love may be that of Marsilio Ficino. There is some dispute, however, regarding what he actually said. We can begin with the very influential book by Anders Nygren entitled *Agape and Eros*, which devotes an entire chapter to Ficino. Nygren attributed to Ficino the belief that all love is ultimately self-love, including the love of God for his creatures (particularly humankind). Nygren's thesis has been subjected to a great deal of criticism[695] but it may still be quite relevant regarding Judah Abrabanel's thesis. In his commentary on *The Symposium*, entitled *De Amore*, Ficino speaks of the first creation (celestial intelligence) reaching out to God; even before that there was an increase of appetite in Mind. The first turning of Mind to God he calls the impetus of Love. But the subsequent formation of the Ideas by God is called the perfecting of Love.[696] Hence,

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[695] See James Devereux, S.J., "The Object of Love in Ficino's Philosophy" *Journal of the History of Ideas*, Volume 30, No.2 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1969) 161-170.

[696] See Ficino's *Commentary of Plato's Symposium on Love (D'Amore)* Speech I, chapter 3, p.39 translated by Sears Jayne, a part of which is reproduced here.

> But before that perfect conceiving of the ideas by the forming God came the reaching out of the Mind to God. Before this reaching out came the increasing of the

while we cannot fully discuss this controversy here, Ficino's opinion regarding the birth of love depends upon an important question regarding when love really is born: Is it with the increase in appetite in Mind, the turning of Mind to God or the perfection by God of love via the formation of the Ideas?

With this very brief summary of Ficino's teaching we can perhaps make some sense out of the seemingly interminable discussions in the *Dialoghi* regarding desire and love and regarding the lover and the beloved as well as the origin of love. Those discussions seem somewhat disproportionate to the book as a whole unless one assumes some unstated agenda. It is my conjecture that Judah Abrabanel was in a sense writing a gloss on Ficino, but that in order to do that he needed to delve into a multitude of other thinkers and *genres*. This should become apparent shortly once we look at Abrabanel's view and Ficino's definition of love as well as other possible influences.

The Teaching of the *Dialoghi*

We have already discussed the *Song of Songs* and *Proverbs* and I alluded to the likelihood that Judah Abrabanel possessed a mystical interpretation of them that we may not know of. I also alluded to his treatment of the *Song of Songs* at the very end of the *Dialoghi*. I will now quote in full the earlier relevant

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appetite... Further that still unformed essence we call chaos. Its first turning towards God we call the birth of love...The combination of all the Forms and ideas we call in Latin a mundis, in Greek a cosmos, that is an ornament. The grace of this world or ornament is Beauty, to which that Love, as soon as it was born, attracted the Mind; and led the Mind, formerly ugly, to the same Mind made beautiful. Therefore the condition of Love is that it carries things off to beauty and joins the ugly to the beautiful.

passages of the *Dialoghi* in order to tease out what might be viewed as one of the most fascinating conclusions of the book. It is on pages 424-425.

> Philo: You must know that Solomon and the followers of Moses hold that the world was begotten of the supremely beautiful, as a son of his father, and of the supreme wisdom or true beauty as its mother. And they say that the highest wisdom, being enamoured of the supremely beautiful as a woman of her more perfect half, the man[697], and the supremely

[697] This association of love with beauty, which we find in both Ficino and Judah Abrabanel, seems to come from Diotima's discourse on love with Socrates in the *Symposium*. It is also found in the *Phaedrus*, 250d-e, where the beautiful is described as both shining forth and beloved. Whether Abrabanel borrowed it directly from Ficino, some other contemporary or directly from Plato is impossible to know but it does bear a strong resemblance to Ficino's world-view. Ficino goes so far as to say: "For love is the desire of enjoying beauty." (Ibid. Speech II, chapter 2, p.46). Nevertheless, John Charles Nelson (*Renaissance Theory of Love*, p.85) claims that "Leone Ebreo defines love not in terms of beauty, as Ficino did, but in terms of the good." He provides proof texts for this. While I do not claim to know Ficino as well as Nelson did, it certainly seems that beauty had an extremely key role in Judah Abrabanel's philosophy of love as well. Surely he knew of Plato's rhetorical question in the *Symposium*, agreed to by both Socrates and Agathon that: "Then in wanting the beautiful, love wants also the good?" (*The Symposium*, p.345). It could very well be that even if he tended to define love in terms of the desire for goodness as he did in the early part of Dialogue 1, beauty might still constitute an essential ingredient. For example on p. 32 Philo discusses the origin of love in God and alludes to "God's glory" and the "Divine Splendour." On p. 57 when asked to explain his love for Sophia, he alludes to her "beauty, no less admirable than wondrously attractive" as well as her virtue and intelligence. Hence if Abrabanel agreed with Plato (and presumably with Ficino) that goodness and beauty are ultimately one, the issue becomes a psychological one. It is possible that the perception of goodness alone without an accompanying perception of beauty generally fails to elicit love. It is quite likely that both Ficino and Abrabanel were under the influence of Plotinian thought and its

beautiful returning this love, she conceives and bears him a son, the beautiful universe with all its parts. And this is the meaning of the love which Solomon in his Song of Songs places between his love[698] and the most beautiful beloved. And because the latter has more reason to be beloved by her than she by him, in that he is the author and creator of her being and she is the created and inferior to him, she always calls him 'my beloved', as the inferior the superior. And he never calls her 'beloved', but 'my consort' 'my dove', 'my undefiled one', 'my sister', as the superior the inferior. And she becomes perfect in her love for him, and she is no longer barren, but conceives and brings forth the perfection of the universe; whereas his love for her is not that he may acquire perfection, since none can be added to him, but that he may impart it to the universe, the child which beauty bears him. Albeit he too derives from it a certain merely relative perfection, for that of a son determines perfection in the father, though not really and essentially; as with the mother or supreme being.[699] In like manner, from the perfect male and the imperfect female man is

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stronger emphasis on aesthetics (and particularly art) than was classical Platonism.

[697] The translation is not altogether accurate. See the Italian text (p.355): "*perfettissimo maschio*" and the new English translation (p.329): "a very perfect man."

[698] This more literally means companion. See Italian text (p.355): "la sua compagna," new English translation (p.329): "the beautiful mate"

[699] The Italian text (p.356) reads: "*come fa in essa belleza,*" new English translation (p.328): "as it occurs in beauty."

> born, who is a microcosmos, or world in miniature; and again in the heavens it is the sun and moon which, like human lovers, generate all things in the lower world, as I have described to you.

Once again Abrabanel reveals his assumption of feminine inferiority. But such an assumption on his part is mitigated somewhat by the extraordinary knowledge, virtue and wisdom that he ascribes to Sophia as a character in the dialogues. Likewise, on a much higher spiritual level the feminine is hardly inferior, unless it be compared to the most High God, being described here as "the highest wisdom and also "the supremely beautiful." The harmonizing conclusion of this passage and his later statements seems to be that the root of the universal love of the human intellect and created universe for God is the particular love of the First Intellect for God. And this is also the root of the mutual love between man and woman. Philo (Judah Abrabanel?) speaks here only of the *Song of Songs* but why does he assume that the female speaker in that poem is "the highest wisdom," "supreme wisdom" or "true beauty"? And why does he attribute this belief system to "Solomon and the followers of Moses"? Where does Solomon ever refer to God as beauty? [700] He also alludes to King Solomon in *Song of*

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[700] These names (supremely beautiful, true beauty) are jarring from a traditional Jewish perspective. I do not know of any common, traditional Jewish appellation for God that even contains a word meaning beauty. See *Encyclopedia Judaica*, volume 7, pp. 674-684 for a fairly comprehensive treatment of those names. Indeed, earlier on p.416 Philo advised Sophia that: "God is not beauty, but the first origin of His beauty, and his beauty, or the first emanation from Him, is His highest wisdom or intellect and mind containing the Ideas." This is somewhat difficult to understand and appears to be an equivocation that ignores his earlier distinction between divine wisdom and intellect (p.302). It has been noted that this was a problem for Plotinus as well, who sometimes identified beauty with Form but at other

(later) times with Life. And though the Good or the One for Plotinus is beyond beauty, it is also its source. Hence, those who thirst after beauty have somewhat different characteristics from those who seek the One. See R.T. Wallis, *Neoplatonism*, pp.86-87. It seems that Abrabanel also wants it both ways. He likes to use the word "beauty" as a name or adjective of God but as a good follower of Maimonides and perhaps of Plotinus he equivocates. But, as I pointed out, even this ambivalent use of the term "beauty" in relationship to God is somewhat novel in Judaism. Something close to beauty is sometimes attributed to God as an attribute in that tradition. Ibn Gabirol's *Keter Malkhut* (*Kingly Crown*, p.41), for example, does include *tiferet*, a word that could mean beauty, as one of its praises of God. The passage in the *Keter Malkhut* is actually a repetition of King David's praises of God in I *Chronicles*, 29:11. It is often translated as "splendor," however, as in the new JPS and Jerusalem Bibles. See new JPS translation of "*The Writings* (*Kethubim*), p.556. King James, Septuagint and New American Standard render it "glory," as does the New English Bible. The only translation that I know of (in that context) where it has been translated as "beauty" is the *New World Translation* (Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, 1984). Admittedly, "beauty" and "splendor" are sometimes synonyms. In psalm 96:6, KJV translates *tiferet* as beauty in "*oz v'tiferet b'mikdasho*" ("power and beauty in His holy place") while the new JPS translates it as "splendor." Perhaps, however, the concepts of beauty and splendor were much closer in the medieval period than they are now. We already saw that Plato, in the *Phaedrus*, had associated beauty and "shining." Thomas Aquinas argued that beauty requires perfection, proportion and brightness. I think we would no longer require the latter. J.Huizinga thought that: "This tendency to explain beauty by light sprang from a strongly marked predilection of the medieval mind." See *The Waning of the Middle Ages*, p.269. For the medieval mind, brightness connoted mystical experience (as it often does for modern mystics as well). The terms "*bahir*" and "*zohar*," the names of the two seminal works of Kabbalah both mean brightness. It is also true that one of the *Sefirot* is called *Tiferet*. But that *Sefirah* is not the supreme God or even the first emanation, but the sixth *Sefirah*. There may, however, be something that we have overlooked since the *Book of Lamentations*, II:1 speaks of "*tiferet* Yisrael." Whether this means the beauty, splendor, majesty, glory, etc. of Israel is unclear but perhaps there is a general Jewish connection between beauty and love, especially as regards Israel, God's first love. Nevertheless, I would conjecture that the association between beauty and love, which is obviously so important to Judah Abrabanel, comes not so much out of his Jewish heritage as from Renaissance thought. Ficino, for example, had defined love as the desire for beauty. The obvious problem here is that aesthetic experience and religious experience, while related, are not co-extensive. The latter has a reverential quality that involves apprehension of the holy that the

Songs speaking of "his love" in relationship to "the most beautiful beloved," which is God. We already know (from *Genesis* III: 16) that after the first sin the desire of the woman was now supposed to be towards the man. This fits in with Abrabanel's general dictum that the beloved is in some sense superior to the lover, even when this is not essentially true on the basis of fundamental qualities in the two. But Abrabanel may also visualize that relationship as a much more fundamental metaphysical one. So Solomon (perhaps symbolizing Israel) is feminine in relationship to God and his wisdom is somehow related to the "supreme wisdom," at least analogically or symbolically. Perhaps Abrabanel, who we have seen takes rabbinic ascriptions of authorship quite gullibly, really believed that Solomon was indeed the author of both *Proverbs* and *Song of Songs* and identified the speaker in the one with the speaker in the other. Wisdom is a celestial female figure (First Intellect) in love with God but in some strange sense it is also a human being (King Solomon) or an entire people (Israel). This explains the crucial significance of the Jewish people, Moses, etc. The mother (Wisdom) is, therefore, identified with the offspring (Israel)! In the same way perhaps, the *Torah*, according to Akiba, is the instrument of God's creation (therefore the mother of creation) and also identified with an offspring (Israel). What I find quite evident is that despite the fact that these views are advertised as those of Moses and Solomon, they have little to do with any *literal* reading of the biblical texts. They involve very complex

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former does not possess or at least need not. Shlomo Pines must have sensed a problem here and noted that the sources for this notion of beauty as an attribute of the "Separate Intellects" or "intellective souls of the heavenly bodies" can be found in Avicenna and Alfarabi. See "Medieval Doctrines in Renaissance Garb?" in *Collected Works of Shlomo Pines*, Volume V, pp. 639-640.

assumptions between the lower world and the higher worlds and might hardly seem Jewish at all, if it were not for Kabbalah! This way of thinking does indeed appear quite kabbalistic, as we know that one of the major motifs of the Kabbalah is the parallelism between what goes on here on earth and in heaven (the higher realms). This allows us a glimpse into those higher spiritual realities that might otherwise be impossible. So perhaps we have found explicit kabbalistic influence here but it may also be an even earlier mystical motif, at least according to Moshe Idel who writes: "a hypostatic understanding of the role of Knesset Israel may be part of an earlier ditheism."[701] This is a very interesting suggestion that deserves further investigation. It may enlighten us regarding some of the roots of Kabbalah but Abrabanel fails to draw the kinds of extreme particularistic conclusions that some kabbalistic literature does. It is also somewhat Platonic, if interpreted in a broader sense. The earthly things (in Plato's thought) always have their ideal counterparts in heaven and in some places he likens the human soul to those heavenly entities. Perhaps to an even greater degree, however, it closely resembles the views of Ficino. The emphasis on beauty, of course, is a typical Renaissance motif but stems specifically from Ficino's definition of love, as we will soon see.

There is something rather puzzling about this pan-eroticism, however. If the female lover of God (Wisdom) is inferior to Him, one might expect their offspring (Israel) to be superior to her (but still inferior to Him). This is especially so if one considers the male contribution to be dominant, as many of the ancients and medievals might have thought, at least in so far as earthly humans are concerned. But the offspring of the

[701] See Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, p.26.

supremely beautiful and the supreme beauty would seem to be inferior to both of them; male dominance does not seem to be the case here and, assuming that I am right about this, there is no direct explanation for it. But perhaps the explanations have already been provided earlier in the book. God's reciprocal love between an inferior (feminine) being (wisdom) and the male beauty allows the former to dominate the procreative relationship and put her stamp upon the offspring just as in general the actually inferior beloved (female) is existentially superior to the essentially superior lover in the thought of Judah Abrabanel and in a sense dominates the love relationship. Remember that he has explicitly stated that the women and children somehow dominate the human family.[702] Again, we are impressed by the mutuality of the love relationship, which even renders God somewhat powerless because within Him the inferior (feminine) lover is also God's beloved and therefore is placed in a more powerful position than she perhaps deserves.[703] In fact there seems to be a gender role reversal

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[702] This ability to transfer goodness from the higher to the lower is not universal and does not extend to purely physical things, as he makes clear on pp.429-439 where he attempts to distinguish between love and carnal desire. For example, he classifies both love of jewelry and vain (but beautiful) speech in the latter category. While love is the love of the beautiful, some things appear beautiful though their essential matter is base and not worthy of love. For Abrabanel temperance consists not so much in quantitative discrimination but in a qualitative one (p.434). Hence it appears that even those relatively inferior beings such as women and children are essentially good, beautiful and spiritual even if they are mixed with the base material substance. This is also true of human beings in general, which while physical are created in the image of God.

[703] This powerlessness of God (in relationship to the feminine) would be even more the case if we were to conceive of this gender polarity as extradivine rather than as occurring within God. And in either case it results from the position of God as lover. The emphasis on being loved, while perhaps extending to God (as both lover and beloved), is more significant for human beings and especially for those (like Philo) who are more prone to loving others than to seeking the love of others. Superior people may

from what one might expect within the deity. For some reason I failed to see this clearly until I read Seymour Feldman's "Platonic Cosmologies." While in that article (p.566) he quotes Abrabanel (p.302), I have chosen to give an expanded quotation (pp.301-302) here since I think it conveys the amazing extent of this reversal.

> Sophia: This abstraction greatly pleases me. But there is one thing with which I cannot agree: although I will allow you that our intellect apprehends the divine unity as transcending in its extreme simplicity and containing in a threefold relative form the three aspects of love, to wit, beloved, lover and love, yet I cannot grant you that it perceives one of these three aspects as depending on the other, namely, the lover on the beloved, and that the third which is love is born of these first two as of a father and mother, which would seem to be your opinion. For all production and birth is in every way alien and opposed to the simplicity of the divine unity.
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> Philo: It is not only fitting but necessary that divine unity should be impressed on us even in this creative form; for just as one must be multiplied into three in our intellect, so this threefold nature must be represented in it as interdependent, for otherwise it would be three natures and not one, and moreover, our intellect would be deceptive. And it is impossible to

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consider it nobler to love than to need love and this may create difficulties for them since all human beings need love. The philosophical reminder that it is actually better (in a sense) to be loved may be a new take on the ancient role of philosophy as therapy.

conceive of the multiplication of unity if that unity is not preserved within the product. This is why I have told you that in the Divinity the mind or wisdom, which is the lover[704], eternally proceeds from beauty, which is the beloved, and the eternal love of these two is born of beauty or the beloved as the father and of wisdom or the lover as the mother. And therefore the lover was produced but not born, because he has not two parents which are essential to birth but only one forebear, just as Eve our mother was produced from our father Adam, and Chaos or matter the universal mother from the divine intellect which is the universal father. But love, I say, was born because it was begotten of the father or beloved, and the mother or lover, just as every man has been born since Adam and Eve, and also the whole world of intellect and mater.

Hence, while here on earth Philo (love) is a wise man and lover and Sophia (wisdom) a beautiful woman and the beloved, their divine exemplars are reversed, gender-wise. This is surely very strange, even though it is somewhat predictable from Abrabanel's philosophy. Also, here on earth the lover projects a part of his own being on to the beloved but in heaven the lover proceeds eternally from the being of the beloved. It should also be noted that a sharp distinction is made here between the divine mind or wisdom

[704] Italian text (p.256): "*o ver sapienzia amante,* " new English translation (p.245): "which is loving wisdom"

and the divine intellect. The former is a feminine emanation and the latter is masculine and primary, just as in ibn Gabirol's system. But in the latter the love relationship between an emanated lover and the primary beloved is not elaborated and it is the Will that appears most masculine, both in relationship to the emanated Matter and to the primary Divine Wisdom. Certainly Abrabanel has reworked ibn Gabirol's system and quite possibly transformed masculine aspects in it (Will and Sphere of Intellect) with something feminine (Wisdom). What we see in Abrabanel is a quite stark contrast between what goes on here on earth and what is going on in heaven. And this may also underscore the difference between his views and a common kabbalistic one, which views earthly evil as reflecting something going on in heaven. Could this reversal of gender roles on earth (where the masculine spirit lusts after the feminine matter) possibly contain the source of evil in the world? There may also be another reason for this dominance of the feminine on earth, which I will deal with shortly. It should also be noted again that God as the "supremely beautiful" being initially loved by the supreme wisdom" (though using different names) is a major theme of Ficino, who defined love as the desire for beauty. This idea may have come form Plotinus, especially in so far as it relates to artistic creations.[705] But Ficino also seems to have

[705] For a good discussion see Robert M. Berchman, "Aesthetics as a

allowed for God's love of the world and perhaps (if Abrabanel is in agreement with his definition) that is why he calls God's beloved "true beauty."[706]

Moshe Idel's Conclusions

Moshe Idel, quite rightly, sees the marriage of the supremely beautiful (God) with the highest beauty (Wisdom) as the metaphysical point of origin of the universe in the thought of Judah Abrabanel. He also views this as an "extradivine process," perhaps because it does not mention the *Sefirot*.[707] Of course Abrabanel never mentions the *Sefirot* anywhere so I would not expect him to do it here even if he had thought that he was actually dealing with an intradivine process.[708] Idel

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Philosophic Ethos."

[706] See Jill Kraye, "Moral Philosophy" in *The Cambridge History of Renaissance Philosophy*, edited by C. Schmitt and Q. Skinner, p. 354. "Ficino defined love as the desire for beauty and described beauty as a ray which emanated from God and progressively penetrated the created world, moving downwards from the angelic mind to the material substance of bodies. All beauty in the universe was therefore the radiance of the divine countenance."

[707] It is possible that the strong distinction between intradivine processes vs. extradivine processes is a legacy of the thinking of Gershom Scholem, who emphasized the intradivine nature of the *Sefirot* as a contrast to some apparently similar conceptions of the philosophers. This may have been part of an effort to strongly distinguish Kabbalah from philosophy, a distinction that Idel quite rightly has been attempting to blur as it applies to real historical persons. At any rate, the strong distinction that Scholem made may not always apply to non-kabbalistic religious philosophers. This is a rather technical point and in no way undermines Idel's thesis and in fact strengthens it since it could be argued that the failure to deal with intradivine processes does not preclude kabbalistic influence. For a good discussion of how philosophers and theologians interpreted the Platonic Forms as being either within God or outside of Him see Harry A. Wolfson, "Extradeical and Intradeical Interpretation of Platonic Ideas."

[708] We have seen in other contexts that the distinction between intradivine and extradivine is a blurry one for Judah Abrabanel and perhaps for that

believes that this idea of the marriage of Wisdom and God has its origin (at least as a source) in Rabad's "passage on the *du-partzufin.*" He notices an affinity to ibn Malka's view of sexual polarity as "an appropriate model to explain the continuous emergence of the lower levels of reality." He also sees a similarity to the kabbalist R. Abraham ben Eliezer ha-Levi in

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reason he has been considered a pantheist and a forerunner of Spinoza. In my view this feature is an obvious and unavoidable fact in his thought. But I have hesitated to call him a pantheist and prefer to use the term "pantheistic tendencies." Although a whole book could be written about this, I tend to interpret him in a philosophical yet mystical fashion, which would allow for an ineffable and infinite God along with more finite appearances that could also be interpreted as being God. I recognize that many people will have a problem with this but it appears to me to be the only way of harmonizing the various strands in his thought. The sefirotic approach of the Kabbalah seems to me to be quite different since it ostensibly conceives of parts of God (the Sefirot) as being (at least temporarily) separated from (and even opposed to) one another. Now it is quite possible that many kabbalists did not believe that to really be the case but I am reporting how it appears on the surface. And I am quite sure that Judah Abrabanel could not relate to that separation at all unless it was a purely phenomenal one from the standpoint of human or other lower intelligences or consciousness. For example, he is quite willing to discuss pagan mythology as if it were descriptive of something real. But we would have to interpret these discussions in an allegorical way or as descriptive of human consciousness rather than ultimate reality. On the other hand, the Kabbalah (without the benefit of a philosophical interpretation) seems to retain real mythological elements, as the following quotation of Gershom Scholem will attest. See *On the Kabbalah and its Symbolism*, pp.106-107.

> Both as woman and as soul, the *Shekhina* has its terrible aspect. Insofar as all the preceding *sefiroth* are encompassed in it and can exert a downward influence only through its mediation, the powers of mercy and of stern judgment are alternately preponderant in the *Shekhina*, which as such is purely receptive and 'has nothing of its own.' But the power of stern judgment in God is the source of evil as a metaphysical reality, that is to say, evil is brought about by a hypertrophy of this power.

that "the same *Sefirah* may play first the male and then the female role, without, however, any assumption of a process of sexual transformation or androgyneity."[709] I am not capable of opining on much of what Idel has written regarding kabbalistic sources but I would like to take issue with him on one point and raise a question on another,

I do not see where the same entity may be male or female (as a general rule) in Abrabanel's system, unless we are discussing the first intellect and the human soul. All other spiritual entities, it seems to me, would be female, love God and are (figuratively speaking) impregnated by Him in order to produce new entities.[710] This is similar to ibn Gabirol's system where every type of matter is acted upon by forms from the Divine Will, which is obviously masculine. In ibn Gabirol's system, however, those (masculine) forms can become feminine matter after uniting with some other kind of matter. I don't see this occurring in Abrabanel's system since it does not appear to be based on matter as substance to the same extent as ibn Gabirol's. Nevertheless, a different reading might reveal how that is possible for Abrabanel. Ibn Gabirol's metaphysics includes an all-pervasive spiritual material substance (apparently female yet also substantive) acted upon by male forms. This substance appeared earlier in the *Dialoghi* as Chaos, which was described as feminine and as a mother. It seems to me that the relationships between God and Chaos and

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[709] Kraye, "Moral Philosophy" pp. 189-190

[710] I realize that this sounds strange and of course should not be taken literally and the whole concept of sons (or children) of God is rather taboo in modern Jewish discourse. While much could be said about this subject, it does not seem particularly pertinent to our subject and it will suffice to say that the term "son of God" did have a place in Jewish literature. See Moshe Idel, *Ben: Sonship and Jewish Mysticism.*

between God and the First Intellect are all incestuous in a way. We should not necessarily view that characterization as pejorative on such a high metaphysical level but one cannot help getting the impression that Abrabanel might have been utilizing two incompatible models. It also seems to me that in what Idel considers Judah Abrabanel's "extradivine" system there is basically (non-substantive) chaos as material substrate and that all beings play the role of female directly with God, rather than with subsidiary forms. This is true despite the fact that Abrabanel attempted to model his system after ibn Gabirol's but perhaps never quite got beyond the Platonic characterization of matter as chaos (from the *Timaeus*). As Ficino interpreted Plato, there are actually three chaoses, corresponding to the Mind, Soul and Body. Those three entities are all worlds, according to Ficino.[711] Idel is quite right regarding the first intellect and the human soul, however, and it points out something very interesting. If I am right about my next objection, we might note that unlike all other creations man (in Abrabanel's system) has no fixed form or nature and therefore shares with God a certain degree of freedom, something that we usually associate with the thought of Pico della Mirandola more than with Judah Abrabanel.[712]

It is not entirely clear to me that the birth of love according to Judah Abrabanel is *really* an "extradivine process" even though it certainly appears to be at times and even more so

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[711] See Marsilio Ficino, *Commentary of Plato's Symposium on Love*, pp.

[712] In Abulafia's system, according to Idel, there seems to be a human alternation between male and female, even in relationship to God. In general God (through the Active Intellect) is the male and the human soul is the female but in *Sefer Raziel* it appears that Abulafia likens the human soul's yearning for God to a young man's yearning for sexual relations with a woman. See Moshe Idel, *The Mystical Experience in Abraham Abulafia*, p.213, n.51.

in the thought of Ficino. I certainly do agree with Idel, however, that it has nothing to do with the *Sefirot*. But as Idel undoubtedly knows (because I learned it from his writings) there were a number of disputes regarding the actual unity of the *Sefirot*[713] and therefore it is not always clear what is intradivine or extradivine, both regarding the *Sefirot* and other spiritual entities. On previous occasions Judah Abrabanel had stated quite explicitly that the Active Intellect is God. He also stated on many occasions that God can be the lover and the beloved and can love Himself. It would seem strange that a man can be both male in relationship to a woman and female in relationship to God but God was not able to accomplish the same feat, unless one considers femininity a pejorative attribute not to be associated with God. This may indeed be a traditional attitude but there seems to me no reason to associate it with Abrabanel's system and we have already discussed this in some detail. Although Abrabanel now calls this heavenly female figure the "supreme wisdom," I am not convinced that this is not in fact the very same Active Intellect, which he so often associates with God. The problem seems to stem from confusion between the Divine Wisdom, which can be properly considered to be God and the first created intellect, which cannot. This is what Abrabanel actually says on page 425. It is obvious to me that the "highest beauty" and "supreme beauty" are the same here. But the question we need to answer is whether this is a created entity or not.

> Sophia: The marriage in love of man and woman is therefore a copy of the sacred and divine marriage of the supremely beautiful with

[713] See Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, pp. 123-124, regarding whether the Sefira *Malkhut* is with the others in "union" or merely "emanation."

> the highest beauty, from which the whole universe takes its origin, save in this difference, that supreme beauty is not only the consort of the supremely beautiful but also its first child.[714]
>
> Philo: You may find yet another likeness to this in the first human marriage: Eve was first taken from Adam as her father, and she was his daughter, and she afterwards became his wife in marriage. From this whole discourse I think that you must have gained a sufficient knowledge of the birth of universal love, and of how its father was the first beauty, and its mother the first created intelligence and mover of the highest sphere containing the whole corporeal universe, which having knowledge of this supreme beauty, desired it in so far as it was wanting in itself. In the same way, each individual love is engendered by participation in this supreme beauty, and in knowledge of it in him who lacks it and desires union with it...

In other words, it is the "supreme beauty" that plays the female with the "supremely beautiful" by loving Him but plays the male with everything else, including the "first created intelligence" by being loved by them. It is the love of the first created intellect for the supreme beauty which engenders universal love because the love of the supreme beauty for the supremely beautiful is strictly speaking God's love for Himself and not yet universal. That "supreme beauty," it seems to me, is God as lover just as the "supremely beautiful" is God as the

[714] New English translation (p.329): "first daughter," Italian text (p.356): "*figluola*"

beloved. He has already told us that (like everything else) God as beloved is superior to God as lover. The following quote from page 298 is quite explicit.

> Sophia: I am well pleased with Plato's answer to Aristotle's arguments, and you have told me much of the creation of the world according to three different opinions, to wit: the eternity of one single world, according to Aristotle; the eternity of many successive worlds, according to Plato; and the creation of one single world, and of the whole universe, according to the faithful. Now it seems fully time that we should return to our subject of love, and that you should answer my second question, to wit, when love was born and what was the first love.
>
> Philo: The first love is that of the first lover for the first beloved. But since neither of these was ever born, but both are eternal, it follows that their love, which is the first love, was never born, but is eternal as they are, having been created by them form eternity.
>
> Sophia: Tell me who are the first beloved and the first; for if I know of their love I shall know what is the first love.
>
> Philo: The first lover is God, knowing and desiring. The first beloved is God, the supremely beautiful.
>
> Sophia: The first love, therefore, is of God for Himself.
>
> Philo: Certainly.

Obviously, this is a difficult concept and Sophia notes the fact that "many contradictions and absurdities would follow from this." (p. 298). While Philo attempts to temper this doctrine (p.299) with cautions and the assertion that God is really a unity and not triune (as we have seen previously), he never is completely successful. But despite the inherent problems the weight of evidence seems to be that according to Judah Abrabanel we are dealing with intradivine events on the highest metaphysical levels. See pages 410-411 where the following discussion emerges regarding "primary beauty" or "Idea of the whole created universe."

> Sophia: Now since this Idea of the universe is the first and true beauty, as you say, it would follow that the beauty of the world in form would be above every other beauty as being the first, which opinion seems to me utterly unreasonable; for the beauty of the divine intellect or mind clearly precedes the beauty of the Idea and pattern which is laid up in it and conceived by it, as the beauty of the cause takes precedence overt hat of the effect which it produces. This idea is not, therefore, the first beauty, as you say, but that of the intellect and divine mind from which the Idea and its beauty emanate.
>
> Philo: Your difficulty comes from false and inadequate knowledge[715], and is brought about by the inevitable use of inappropriate terms; for

[715] The new English translation (p.320) reads: "false and insufficient cognition," which is obviously to be preferred since knowledge cannot be false.

because we say that the Idea of the world is in the divine mind or intellect, you think that the Idea is something other than that intellect or mind in which it exists.

Sophia: And perforce, for that which exists in something is of necessity other than that in which it exists.

Philo: Yes, if it truly existed in it, but the Idea does not truly exist in the intellect, but is the intellect and divine mind itself. For the Idea of the world is the supreme wisdom by which the world was made, and the divine wisdom is the Word and its intellect and its true mind. Because not only in it but in every active and created intellect, wisdom intent and intellect itself are one and the same, and only to us humans is its simplicity and pure union represented in this threefold form. The union is greatest in the highest and purest divine intellect, which in all its aspects is one and the same as ideal wisdom. Thus the beauty of the Idea is the very same beauty of the intellect; not that beauty is in it as a quality in a subject, but the intellect of idea is the same first beauty by which everything is made beautiful.

I also, as previously indicated, have reason to believe that ibn Gabirol considered the Wisdom personified in *Proverbs* as God. That of course proves nothing about what Abrabanel himself believed but since the two thinkers are often linked, due to Abrabanel's own accolades of ibn Gabirol, it may be worth discussing. When we discussed the controversial verses from

Proverbs about the pre-existing Wisdom, we noted the unusual term *amon* and the differences between various translators regarding what it meant. Basically, some view it as an intimate associate and others as a builder or architect. We also mentioned that ibn Gabirol seemed to interpret it as neither, as the following verses from the *Keter Malkhut* indicate.

Keter Malkhut, IX

> Thou art wise; and wisdom, the source of life, flows from Thee, and every man is too brutish to know Thy wisdom.
>
> Thou art wise, pre-existence, and wisdom was with Thee as (*amon*).
>
> Thou art wise, and Thou didst not learn from any other than Thyself, nor acquire wisdom from another.
>
> Thou art wise, and from Thy wisdom Thou didst send forth a predestined Will, and made it as (*aman*).[716]

Ibn Gabirol was obviously aware of the controversial passage from *Proverbs* and the disputed word (*amon*).[717] Since the Divine Will (in his philosophy) is obviously a craftsman, artisan, etc. (*aman*), the Divine Wisdom from which it comes must be something else (*amon*). The Lewis translation says "nursling." Whether that is the correct translation is questionable. Lewis probably got it from the old J.P.S. translation. As was mentioned previously, judging from what I

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[716] See Solomon ibn Gabirol, *The Kingly Crown*, p. 52.

[717] For discussions of this word see Wolfson, *Philo*, Volume I, pp. 267-269, Schafer, *Mirror of His Beauty*, p. 26.

know of ibn Gabirol's philosophy, none of these translations really fit. Divine Wisdom would be God Himself and the description of it as a separate being is purely metaphorical. This would of course not be the first time that philosophers or theologians spoke of one appearance of God as if it were a separate being.[718] Therefore we need to be somewhat more circumspect when distinguishing between an "intradivine" process and an "extradivine" one. It seems that when a person thinks about these higher levels of reality there are always disagreements among scholars as to whether we are dealing with intradivine or extradivine processes.

Some More Conjectures and Opinions

The problem of the relationship between God and His first creation goes way back in intellectual history. It is a problem even for those who have no strong pantheistic tendencies and certainly is even more of a problem for a thinker like Abrabanel, who surely had such tendencies. Perhaps the concepts "intradivine" and "extradivine" pertaining to processes on the highest levels do not really apply to the *Dialoghi*, which is a mystical and metaphysical treatise *par excellence*. As I have mentioned on a number of occasions, this distinction may also not be of the essence in medieval philosophy, despite the fact that Maimonides was very particular and even severe in refusing to speak substantively about God, at least in his more philosophical utterances. But it is not at all clear to me that Jewish philosophy as a whole followed that taboo. In fact, one could argue that some awareness of God's inner life is really crucial to any knowledge of God since we no longer (thanks

[718] Actually, medieval Jewish philosophers, following Saadiah Gaon, were generally reluctant to consider those appearances as God. See Schafer, *Mirror of His Beauty*, pp. 104-108 for a good discussion.

partially to Maimonides) are capable of thinking of God as a being in space. If we cannot fixate a being in time or space how are we to individualize it or know anything at all about it? Is it by the sound of the voice, the visual appearance? Those sensations when part of a mystical experience are obviously human subjective reactions that tell us more about the subject perceiving them than about their source. Maimonides would say that we can only know God's actions but this hardly tells us much about God. It seems to me that Judah Abrabanel was dissatisfied with that rather severe restriction (as perhaps was Maimonides himself). The best (and most scandalous) example is Judah Abrabanel's discussion of a triune description of God even though he makes it clear that God is ultimately one. In other words (referring here to the thought of Abrabanel) in relationship to His creation God may legitimately be assigned attributes and perhaps even different personalities without ultimately detracting from His Unity. That would have been a pleasant confirmation for his Christian readers (at least the more liberal ones) and might even have led them to believe that he was really one of them. It should also be noted that the kabbalists were also willing to consider the *Sefirot* to be separate personalities, to which one could even address one's prayers, and the top three *Sefirot* also constitute a Trinity. If it is the case that Jewish philosophers never really followed Maimonides' strict interpretation of knowledge of God, we may need to abandon many of the opinions and presuppositions that have hampered a correct understanding of this text. Perhaps Judah Abrabanel was not just speaking in flowery, purely stylistic language but in mystical language. Admittedly, however, I am not at all certain of that thesis. I only throw it out as a strong possibility. But if it is correct, then Abrabanel's distinctions between male and female and between lover and

beloved might have some real value in understanding God in relationship to His creation, which after all is the only understanding of God's inner life that we could possess, even though it would ultimately dissolve in the inscrutable oneness of God. In other words, God's actions in this world might mirror something that is going on within Him and allow us a certain glimpse.

Quite possibly, however, Abrabanel was far too indebted to Maimonides to take extremely seriously his own ability to really understand such "intradivine" processes.[719] This is a kind of paradox that follows us through the entire text. It may appear as a contradiction or inconsistency and depending upon one's views the "gnostic" element or the "agnostic" one (both meant in the broad sense) might ultimately prevail. That is because we can imagine for pedagogical purposes teaching something that is not really believed and then when it has been mastered one can then move beyond it. Yet that is not my feeling when I read this book. So, perhaps Abrabanel did have one very useful notion regarding God that Maimonides lacked. I will now attempt to explicate what that could be.

The *Dialoghi* is a unique work, which defies analysis in terms of either medieval philosophical concepts or kabbalistic ones. It appears to at least attempt to say something very profound not only about the world and man but about God as well. But it does so in a circular manner, which always brings the focus back to the human level. The key concept, of course, is love. This stems from the main thesis of the book: the love of God for His creation, which completes the flow of erotic

[719] See Shlomo Pines, "The Limitations of Human Knowledge according to Al-Farabi, ibn Bajja and Maimonides" *Maimonides: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Joseph Buijs, pp. 91-121.

energy that might otherwise be lost in the Godhead. This is part of the significance of the circle of love and it perhaps allows for a kind of knowledge of the intradivine as it exhibits itself in the extradivine. So, knowledge of God is also knowledge of the human love of God, reflected back again to the human mind by God's love of humankind. And such knowledge is ambiguous in its very nature because it is not knowledge of an objective being so much as it is knowledge of a relationship. Again, it reminds us of the following quite significant fact symbolically shown in these dialogues. Philo (love) has profound knowledge that Sophia (wisdom) lacks; yet Philo is also in desperate need of Sophia and will never be satisfied without her, despite all of his own wisdom. What is this quality that Sophia has and Philo lacks? It is the feminine perspective and despite the clear fact that it is considered inferior, it is essential nonetheless. And this is also why I have stressed the psychological so much in this book. It seems to me that what Philo so desperately lacks is something that most men receive from their mothers and/or their wives and that cannot be reduced to philosophical or intellectual language. In other words, there may very well be a mysterious, inscrutable wisdom being expressed here that is not entirely reducible to *rational* descriptions since it is only clearly apparent to one who loves. This may seem to be a radical departure from both medieval Jewish philosophy and from Kabbalah.[720] It might also explain a great deal of the anomalies of the book.

[720] I will grant, however, that modern thinkers can read symbolic and psychological meaning into kabbalistic doctrines in a manner that would not work as well in medieval philosophy. Perhaps that is because the thinking of the medieval philosophers is better understood and less amenable to anachronistic interpretation.

Chapter XI: Conclusion

In this final chapter I will attempt to wrap up what has been discussed. Most prominently, I will opine and draw a conclusion regarding whether Judah Abrabanel was indeed a kabbalist. I will put forward various tentative opinions and conjectures that fall short of being conclusions. I will also draw much broader conclusions from this study regarding the relationship between philosophy and Kabbalah.

The *Dialoghi* is often considered to be both an enigmatic and under-appreciated book. If there is a relationship between the two facts, perhaps the latter characteristic largely results from the former since it is so difficult to place it in any particular category. Nevertheless, many of us who do appreciate it still consider it enigmatic. It is also possible, however, that those two traits have nothing much to do with one another but flow independently from some other source. It is not always a simple matter to determine why a book is appreciated or not. I tend to think, however, that if this one were to become popular once again it would be because of its own distinct flavor and not because of its relationship to either medieval philosophy or Kabbalah. Much better and more representative examples of both genres can be found. The same error seems to have been made regarding the author's father, whose reputation has often suffered by including him within those categories rather than looking at him as a flesh and blood individual with not only a particular point of view but also with anxieties, motives, etc. Indeed, there is a great deal to be said for viewing *all* philosophers as individuals and not simply as representatives of schools or movements as the very nature of

philosophizing is essentially individualistic.

Unfortunately, unlike his father, we know almost nothing about the actual life of Judah Abrabanel. For that reason we will not be able (or perhaps willing) to construct a plausible narrative regarding his motives and other idiosyncratic characteristics unless new information comes to light. Perhaps the enigmatic nature of his book is also integral to it because it straddles at least two ways of thinking: the medieval and Renaissance and possibly others as well. One could also conjecture that the author was attempting to reconcile many world-views but was not always explicit regarding them. I believe the book is often misunderstood by attempting to fit it into various well-known categories and I have endeavored to correct that to the best of my ability.

But surely it can and must be placed in some context! And the kabbalistic hypothesis was not a bad one, both in terms of its historical milieu and in so far as bold conjectures often lead to major breakthroughs in human knowledge, even when they are ultimately rejected. Perhaps the major impetus for that conjectural hypothesis was Judah Abrabanel's failure to slavishly follow any particular school of thought. But why would we expect him to? Regarding his relationship to medieval philosophy, Judah Abrabanel was obviously greatly indebted to it but not subservient. Regarding Renaissance thought (and his father) the influence was immense and obvious but largely unacknowledged and perhaps not decisive. Regarding Kabbalah, however, whatever obvious resemblances exist might perhaps have been the result of common influences rather than direct dependence, though he was definitely knowledgeable about and interested in Kabbalah. His explicit questioning of the legitimacy of kabbalistic tradition is somewhat jarring

alongside his apparently implicit assumption regarding the legitimacy of other esoteric traditions (such as the Hermetic one). In fact, it seems strange that he should specifically mention Kabbalah at all since so many other influences are left unacknowledged. That might indicate a special fondness for or interest in Kabbalah or it might reveal an especially critical stance towards it.

I believe the main errors of the kabbalistic hypothesis are its failure to see those dual possibilities and to acknowledge other influences and especially other esoteric traditions. They are alluded to in the *Dialoghi* but never specifically questioned (as Kabbalah is) and might actually be better explanatory candidates regarding the author's unexplained views. But I am quite confidant that almost all the truly learned believers in the kabbalistic hypothesis would admit that those other influences were also at work. The sticking point then seems to be the question regarding what is really doing the heavy lifting for Abrabanel: other ancient esoteric traditions, Kabbalah or the author's very own reasoning and experiences. Interestingly, Judah Abrabanel was not at all averse to citing esoteric traditions as a justificatory tactic, though it is not altogether clear to me whether they were really a cover for his own reasoned or experientially based beliefs. In Jewish tradition it is commonplace to justify one's own point of view by citing traditional authorities and ancient traditions. For example, in a discussion of the relative merits of Plato and Aristotle's opinions the following rather startling statement of Philo appears on page 418.

> Since I am a follower of Moses in matters relating to the divine, I hold[721] to this second theory, which is in accordance with Mosaic teachings. And Plato, who was more versed in ancient lore than Aristotle, was of this opinion; whereas Aristotle, who penetrated less deeply into abstract things, and unlike Plato had not the testimony of our *ancient theologians*, denied that which was hidden from his sight, and united primary beauty with supreme wisdom. With this his mind was satisfied, and without seeing further, he affirmed supreme beauty and wisdom to be the first spiritual origin of all things. Plato, however, having learnt from *the ancient fathers in Egypt*, had a wider vision, even if it did not avail him to behold the hidden source of supreme wisdom or highest beauty; and the latter he made to be the second beginning of the universe, depending on the most high God, the first cause of all things. (Italics are my own.)

Let us put aside the intriguing suggestion regarding the "hidden source of supreme wisdom or highest beauty." Why does he equate the knowledge of the "ancient theologians" (presumably Jewish) with "the ancient fathers in Egypt"? One might have thought that the Jews acquired whatever esoteric knowledge they had either from their own pre-Egyptian family traditions or at Mount Sinai, *after* having left Egypt. Was it not the claim of the kabbalists that their esoteric knowledge came

[721] New English translation (p.325): "I feel closer to this second theory," Italian text (p.351): "*m'abbraccio con questa seconda via*"

from Mount Sinai, Abraham or Adam? Does esoteric *religious* knowledge come out of Egypt, the place that in Jewish tradition was a cesspool of spiritual impurity? It seems obvious to me that Abrabanel is referring here to Hermetic teachings, which were indeed widely believed to have come from Egypt. There are teachers of esoteric knowledge today who also attribute the esoteric wisdom of the Jews to an Egyptian Hermetic tradition but I do not know of any Jewish kabbalists or Jewish thinkers in the 16th century (except perhaps Judah Abrabanel) who did.[722] It was perhaps the opinion of Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim.[723] It may also have been the belief of Pico and

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[722] Moshe Idel did find evidence of cross-fertilization between Jewish and Christian Kabbalah in the Renaissance. It is quite possible that Alemanno knew of the Hermetic tradition but he also seems to have said some negative things about it. See "Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations of the Kabbalah in the Renaissance," p. 213. Elijah del Medigo, an opponent of Kabbalah, also seems to have equated many of the opinions of the kabbalists with those of the "Platonists" and "early philosophers," as opposed to the teachings of the "peripatetics" (Ibid. pp.218-219). The most explicit evidence of a Renaissance Jewish thinker's awareness of the Hermetic tradition that Idel found was that of Judah Moscato but again I do not see the same type of statement that Judah Abrabanel made (Ibid. pp. 228-229). Fabrizio Lelli points out the fact that Alemanno, David Messer Leon and Isaac Abrabanel explicitly mention Hermes. The sometime identification of Hermes with Enoch, which he points out, raises intriguing possibilities of an ancient esoteric tradition that long predates what we usually mean by "Kabbalah." See "Hermes among the Jews." Nevertheless, these somewhat more limited assertions that might equate the wisdom of Hermes with that of Solomon are not on the same scale as the claims of the kabbalists. Although I do not question any of the factual assertions of Idel or Lelli I think clarification of terms is necessary so that less innovative thinkers do not draw unwarranted conclusions from their groundbreaking investigations.

[723] See Antoine Faivre, "Occultism," *Encyclopedia of Religion*, volume XI, p. 38. Faivre distinguishes between occultism and esotericism, the former involving practices designed to approach or influence spiritual forces and the latter being more theoretical. He also claims that this is a rather recent distinction, implying perhaps that in pre-modern times the latter normally included the former. Moshe Idel thought that Abraham Yagel was influenced by Agrippa and interpreted Kabbalah in a Platonic manner but I do not see

Ficino, though the latter did not specifically investigate Kabbalah to the extent that the former did. The point that I am making here is that this association of Kabbalah and Hermetism seems to be a belief more characteristic of Christian Kabbalah. Whether or not it is correct is of little import to our discussion. It does suggest, however, that Judah Abrabanel's knowledge of Kabbalah might have been mediated to a certain extent by his Christian environment and that he was therefore not a real "kabbalist" in the normal Jewish sense of that term.

It also seems to me that he was more interested in experiential aspects of religion than are *most* kabbalistic writings. He, like his father, was his own man and his work must be understood as such and as an outgrowth of his own life experiences. But I still do not claim to understand it thoroughly and perhaps its enigmatic quality is here to stay. As I mentioned in the introduction, it is also a literary work with all the interpretive difficulties that such works carry with them. It might therefore be of some interest that neither of the characters in the dialogues seems completely enthusiastic about Kabbalah. Sophia hardly knows anything about it and Philo, who claims to know quite a bit, questions its epistemic foundations. If Judah Abrabanel had wanted to provide a wholehearted advocacy for Kabbalah he could have done it through one of the characters without necessarily committing himself as author to that point of view. But he fails to do even that much, which is quite telling.

Many years ago I was discussing the *Dialoghi d'Amore* with a rabbi who had simply assumed that it was a work

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where he made the type of statement regarding the seminal influence of Egyptian wisdom (and magic) that Abrabanel seems to be making. See "Magical and Neoplatonic Interpretations of the Kabbalah in the Renaissance," pp.224-226.

thoroughly under the influence of Kabbalah. I made the off the cuff remark that perhaps it was actually a somewhat anti-kabbalistic work. The reaction as I recall it was practically one of ridicule. As I have pondered over Kabbalah, the *Dialoghi*, other literature from the Italian Renaissance as well as much of the secondary literature on Judah Abrabanel, I continue to believe that my somewhat flippant statement may indeed have had some truth to it even though I would now choose to express it somewhat differently. I would now say that a plausible argument could be made that behind his outward stance of skeptical deference regarding Kabbalah was actually an essentially anti-kabbalistic attitude.[724] Yet it is also possible that despite an essentially different attitude he shared some beliefs with the kabbalists. Although that conclusion is no more than a plausible argument, I regard the rival hypothesis that he was consciously promoting kabbalistic methods and doctrines to be far less plausible given our present state of knowledge. There is however a third explanation that is perhaps just as likely but less satisfying than the one that I favor: he may have not really taken a stand on the matter at all.

I will now argue for my alternative anti-kabbalistic hypothesis, keeping in mind that it is perhaps at least as likely that Abrabanel was neither pro nor anti-kabbalistic. My strategy is that if it is possible to see the plausibility of the anti-kabbalistic hypothesis, then the one that views him as neither pro nor anti-kabbalistic becomes all the more credible and the kabbalistic hypothesis much less so.

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[724] This would not be unique. Even Elijah Delmedigo, a well-known opponent of Kabbalah, sometimes spoke as if he accepted it as a legitimate tradition. In a letter to Pico he expressed himself as follows: "Since I see your Lordship involved so much in this blessed Cabala...(*Quia video Dominationem tuam multim laborare in isto benedicto Chabala...*)" See Eugenio Garin, *History of Italian Philosophy*, volume 1, p.303-304.

We must consider that in an age in which the majority of his peers accepted kabbalistic tradition, at least in theory, mere skepticism regarding the authentic nature of that tradition could well qualify as being anti-kabbalistic.[725] We find for example that those who questioned the *midrashic* literature by rejecting claims regarding its authoritative nature were also somewhat opposed to the substance of many of the *Midrashim*. I suspect that the same association of skepticism and opposition might pertain to Judah Abrabanel's stance towards Kabbalah. If he had other reasons for accepting kabbalistic theories aside from esoteric tradition, he would have had every opportunity to express them in the book. Unfortunately, I find myself in a minority and at odds with scholars who I readily admit know more about this subject than I do. Naturally, that fact leads me to be somewhat circumspect in my opinions and I readily admit that there may yet turn out to be more to the kabbalistic hypothesis than we can currently determine. An opinion that is not justified is not necessarily wrong. Yet I must disagree with Moshe Idel when he says: "eroticism in kabbalistic writings did not create, Leone Ebreo aside, any aesthetics" and that "the expansion of the role of the supernal feminine in theosophical Kabbalah did not open the gate for introducing a distinct feminine voice into the kabbalistic discourse, again with the exception of Leone Ebreo."[726] I would never dare to disagree with Idel regarding Kabbalah and I am confident that he is right about all of that except for the following disagreement that I

[725] Y.Tzvi Langermann seems to deny this, at least in the case of David ibn Shoshan. See "David Ibn Shoshan on Spirit and Soul." While I agree with him regarding the lack of "open warfare" between the two camps, it seems to me that the questioning of kabbalistic doctrines, and especially questioning their epistemic bases, strikes at the root of the very concept of Kabbalah as an ancient esoteric tradition.

[726] Moshe Idel, *Kabbalah and Eros*, 241-242

have with him. The *Dialoghi* may not really be such an exception because (arguably) it is not one of those "kabbalistic writings."

Idel and I may perhaps differ on what constitutes "kabbalistic writing" and I would tend to think that his opinion is far more authoritative in that regard than mine but in at least one restricted area I may allow myself to disagree and I think it is crucial to the discussion. Given what he has said at a conference that the distinction between Kabbalah and philosophy is the product of modern scholarship, I will attempt to expand upon that somewhat. I agree somewhat with that statement and was happy to hear it enunciated. It was an important thing to say because we should not become the victims of our own categories. There is no doubt that many Renaissance thinkers could be classified as both kabbalists and philosophers and Idel has (perhaps for that reason) taken a great interest in the Renaissance. His method of investigating the actual writings of individuals instead of facilely placing them in convenient categories is the correct one. Yet the classifications do have some heuristic value and there is a plausible limit to declassification, beyond which we are not clarifying matters or allowing for new insights but simply clouding the waters. My reasoning is as follows. Even though Kabbalah and philosophy became intertwined in the 16th century (and perhaps even earlier) there is no denying the history of anti-philosophical trends in medieval Judaism; nor is there any dispute about the fact of philosophical questioning or reinterpretation of some Jewish "traditions." So there does seem to be a historical conflict between philosophers and other types of Jews, some of

who were kabbalists.[727] Now it is possible (and even likely) that the conflict is not primarily between Kabbalah and philosophy but between philosophy and a kind of uncritical traditionalism. Y. Tzvi Langermann has also stressed the sometime harmonious relationship between Kabbalah and philosophy and the lack of any real animus towards Kabbalah in David ibn Shoshan, despite his questioning of certain views of the *Zohar*.[728] According to Idel's methodology also, as I understand it, there is no conceptual difficulty in saying that a person was both a philosopher and a kabbalist and I agree with that. However, would not a philosopher like Judah Abrabanel, who was so interested in these matters and discussed them quite openly, see an incompatibility between the epistemic assumptions of the kabbalists and his own method of questioning and comparing various ancient and medieval philosophical systems?

After giving this some thought, I conclude that it would be quite a stretch under almost *any* plausible definition to include the *Dialoghi* in the category of kabbalistic writings and I will now attempt to demonstrate that. If my assertion were correct, the simplest way of viewing the *Dialoghi* would be not as an exceptional kabbalistic text, as Idel did, but as one whose relationship to Kabbalah has not yet been sufficiently determined. So, given that goal in mind, it might be useful to pursue that broader definitional question a bit further. I do this in the spirit of Moshe Idel, who perhaps more than any contemporary Judaic scholar has warned us regarding being captivated by convenient terminology and categories.

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[727] For good discussions and a review of some of the controversy see Y. Tzvi Langermann, "David Ibn Shoshan on Spirit and Soul and Yitzhak Baer, *A History of the Jews in Christian Spain*, pp.441-443, 508-509.
[728] See "David Ibn Shoshan on Spirit and Soul."

What is Kabbalistic Writing?

Is this merely a terminological question? Perhaps it is but I would hope that the question, and our attempt to answer it, produces some badly needed clarification. Once again I would cautiously agree with Moshe Idel that these categories are products of modern scholarship but I believe that they have some value nevertheless. Problems arise, however, whenever we allow standards of nomenclature to dictate conclusions regarding authors' intentions, beliefs, etc. and we should always look primarily at the text and only secondarily at other things. We have already attempted to provide a rough definition of Kabbalah; and even if there are those who believe it is too narrow, the attempt at definition should allow us to see where our differences are substantive and where they simply regard nomenclature. We will attempt the same thing with "kabbalistic writing." I assume that no one would consider it possible for a foe of Kabbalah to produce kabbalistic writing. But we surely cannot assume that Abrabanel was a foe just as we cannot assume that he was a kabbalist; these are conclusions that we are attempting to prove or disprove. Even regarding philosophical thinkers who accept certain kabbalistic beliefs, it is doubtful in my mind that all their products should be called "kabbalistic writing." And I would argue for this using a rather standard nomenclature that applies to kabbalistic writings. We know that the group of kabbalists who were influenced by Joseph Taitazak, the most prominent being Cordovero and Alkabetz, inserted some philosophical concepts into their writings.[729] An excellent example is the final part of the third stanza of *Lecha Dodi* by Alkabetz. It reads in Hebrew: *sof*

[729] See Moshe Idel, "Major Currents in Italian Kabbalah between 1560 and 1660," pp.350-351.

maaseh bimachashabah techilah (last in creation is first in thought). This turns out to be an Aristotelian concept, which shows the inverse methodology whereby ideas are translated into acts of production or creation.[730] Yet no matter how many philosophical concepts we find in their writings, it is not standard procedure to call those kabbalistic thinkers "philosophers." Another example is Michael Balbo, participant in the 1466 disputation in Candia regarding reincarnation. He obviously was quite adept philosophically and this led Efraim Gottlieb and Aviezer Ravitzky (to a lesser extent) to ascribe to him fundamental philosophical interests. Yet Balbo's own writings attest to his belief that some "Kabbalah" is directly revealed in the Bible, some in the Talmud and yet other parts must be produced by logical proofs. This is an obvious problem for purposes of nomenclature but I would agree with Brian Ogren that one who so obviously accepts kabbalistic claims with little critical examination is more of a kabbalist than he is a philosopher.[731] I see no reason why the converse would not be true: one who critically accepts only some kabbalistic claims ought not to be called a kabbalist. Hence, it seems to me that a philosophically adept person who rather uncritically accepts Kabbalah is a kabbalist and one who does not is not, even if he or she has kabbalistic beliefs.[732] There is yet another

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[730] See S. M. Stern, "The First in Thought is the Last in Action: The History of a Saying Attributed to Aristotle"

[731] See Briam Ogren, *Renaissance and Rebirth*, pp.40-43 for all relevant citations and his own analysis.

[732] There are of course borderline figures and some like Abraham Abulafia and Menahem Recanati, who accept some kabbalistic beliefs and reject others. I would say that such a philosophically astute person, such as Abulafia and Recanati, who develops his own system of Kabbalah is indeed a kabbalist and this is also standard nomenclature. Regarding Balbo, who seemed to be saying that the conclusions of reason are also "Kabbalah," there is a fundamental problem. Was he saying to those who might ordinarily be opposed to philosophy that it is also from God? If so, that

possibility that one who uncritically accepts kabbalistic teachings writes a book that is meant for people (whether Jews of Gentiles) for whom he thinks Kabbalah is not appropriate. He, therefore, conceals his actual kabbalistic beliefs. I would say that is not kabbalistic writing. But what of a person who was positively interested but had serious doubts about Kabbalah? I think that there too, few would answer affirmatively that such a person would produce kabbalistic writings. On the surface at least Judah Abrabanel *appears* to fit into that latter category. Of course appearances are often deceptive. But even if he were indeed a closet kabbalist, there would still be serious problems in calling the *Dialoghi* "kabbalistic writing." One would perhaps have to show that aside from intentional concealment there was also intentional revealing of kabbalistic teachings. This next example would be the most truly contested (and exceptional) one regarding fitting into the category of kabbalistic writings: the writings of a person who harbors kabbalistic beliefs but does not openly admit it. If Judah Abrabanel were such a writer, some might indeed be willing to call his writings "kabbalistic" but some might not. As I mentioned previously, Judaic studies seems to have retained an interest in individual motives and conscious states and I think this is by and large a good thing. But it can go too far, especially when we know little about the author involved. So if this crypto-kabbalism is what Idel means I cannot really say he is wrong though I might still disagree with him regarding what the underlying definition should be. In the case of a crypto-kabbalist I would only agree to that

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might indeed make him a philosopher. But if despite that effort he continued to believe quite clearly irrational propositions on the basis of some "reliable tradition," that would be problematic. Of course, metempsychosis is not clearly and obviously irrational and rational arguments regarding it are conceivable.

categorization if it were now *quite clear* that the writings pursued a kabbalistic agenda, even if in his time it was not so clear. Obviously, the belief that Judah Abrabanel was a closet kabbalist is still somewhat conjectural and the assertion that he was consciously pursuing a kabbalistic agenda even more so. It is not even clear to me how we would rationally evaluate such claims given what we currently know. Since I see no such clear kabbalistic agenda, I deny that his writings are kabbalistic. Yet it is still possible that he was close enough to Kabbalah to legitimately say that his work expressed some kabbalistic ideas, without calling it kabbalistic literature. That is a distinct possibility and might even fit in with what I have called a possibly anti-kabbalistic agenda. It should not really come as a surprise that a philosopher could see the good in a school of thought and also see the bad or have serious epistemic doubts about it. And perhaps that concern with epistemology, which we have already witnessed in the *Dialoghi*, holds the key to deciding whether a pre-modern (or early modern) thinker was a philosopher and/or a kabbalist. If he were not seriously concerned with epistemology we most likely would not call him a philosopher at all. Calling him a philosopher would also not preclude calling him a kabbalist unless he had epistemic or other doubts about Kabbalah.

What is the Evidence for Conscious Kabbalistic Influence or Intention?

Firstly, we must always endeavor to define our terms carefully to the extent to which that is possible. This is particularly of the essence in philosophy. If after attempting to do that we must still admit that there is no adequate definition, at least we have tried our best. Secondly, as I mentioned previously, it is important not to confuse conscious kabbalistic influence with

subtler, deeply rooted influences from the remote past (that may include kabbalistic features). If everyone agrees that A was influenced by B and if that influence is quite sufficient to explain A, why do we need to posit an influence of C, which is not generally agreed upon? That is a variation of that principle of parsimony called Ockham's Razor. In this case it seems to me that philosophical, mythical and perhaps Hermetic traditions are sufficient to explain any peculiarities in the thought of Judah Abrabanel without positing a substantial degree of conscious kabbalistic intent. But that is not to say that there is no evidence whatsoever for the kabbalistic hypothesis. Clearly there is. It is simply my claim that the evidence does not rise to the level required and that there is also quite a bit of evidence that he was not a kabbalist. So it may be useful to inspect that evidence once again.

For example, we had something to say about the Hermetic tradition, which found its way into Jewish thought, both kabbalistic and other. If, for example, Abraham ibn Ezra had been influenced by that tradition (as was Kabbalah) we would still not be constrained to call the former a kabbalist. Likewise, a later thinker like Judah Abrabanel (who, unlike ibn Ezra, undoubtedly knew of Kabbalah) might have had views similar to kabbalistic ones without really being a kabbalist. That could still be the case even if some kabbalistic motifs unconsciously or even consciously entered his world-view. In fact his insistence on questioning the kabbalists' traditions might have been a conscious way of signaling that he was not really one of them, *despite such obvious resemblances*.

We also found some areas of similarity between Christian mysticism and Kabbalah but in most such cases we were not dealing with "Christian Kabbalah" for the following

reason. A real kabbalist, it seems to me, is one who accepts the authenticity of a certain *esoteric tradition* as containing deep truths that are not normally achievable through *other* means. Many so-called Christian kabbalists might not qualify under that definition because they would probably think that the *New Testament* tradition trumps Kabbalah in that regard. But there might indeed be Christian kabbalists who view the *New Testament* as an exoteric work and kabbalah as esoteric. Now perhaps that definition is a little too stringent and we ought to broaden it to include Christians who merely claim that Kabbalah *confirms* Christian teachings that also go beyond the teachings of reason or of Moses. But even if that were to be our definition, to be a kabbalist would still mean much more than to accept beliefs based upon their rational warrant or a generally agreed upon religious tradition. Otherwise there would be nothing to distinguish such Christian kabbalists from their non-kabbalistic co-religionists. The same is true for Jews. To claim that someone is a kabbalist is, therefore, a quite significant claim (both for Jews and Christians), especially when that very person appears on the surface to be quite critical of some important kabbalistic claims.

But we could perhaps note the same skeptical tendency regarding some other relatively critical thinkers, particularly from Renaissance Italy, who were indeed kabbalists of sorts by almost anyone's definition, including my own. However, those critical kabbalists (if we are to call them kabbalists) did not deny the influence of Kabbalah nor were they explicitly critical of it. They openly embraced it even while perhaps consciously deviating from it somewhat in specific areas by reinterpreting it. That is typical of open-minded people in any tradition who may accept 90% of that tradition but not 100%. So those who insist Judah Abrabanel was either a kabbalist or heavily under the

influence of Kabbalah have (it seems to me) not one but two major barriers of proof to surmount.

Firstly they must explain why he was openly critical of kabbalistic claims and secondly why his thought deviated so greatly from it in some areas. I will attempt to help them with that. I want to practice charitable scholarship, but not necessarily out of pity or compassion for my opponents. As Karl Popper used to say, we are charitable because we want our attacks against our opponents to stick and not be blown away by a facile counter-attack. Therefore, I will attempt to find reasons for the anomalies that I just alluded to. And there are indeed possible reasons why Judah Abrabanel might have wanted to conceal his true beliefs. If this ultimately leads some to believe that Abrabanel really might have been a closet kabbalist, so much the better. At least we will have had a good airing of the various positions and readers can then make up their own minds based upon their own assessments of plausibility.

I discussed the nature of Kabbalah, as it existed in medieval Spain and Renaissance Italy. I also discussed philosophical literature, as it existed in those periods and places and the *Dialoghi d'Amore* as a philosophical and religious work. Finally, I inquired into the extent to which it reflects kabbalistic influences. I attempted to show how the thinking of Judah Abrabanel actually deviates radically from what we have come to expect from kabbalistic literature. I compared his writing with the topics that Gershom Scholem considered to be the most important ones in Kabbalah and found that Abrabanel completely ignores almost all of them. I attempted to show how his view of sexuality deviated markedly from the most common kabbalistic ones, as did his view of human action in general. Nowhere in Abrabanel do we find major traces of magical or

theurgic thinking, by which I mean the efficacy of human actions (mostly ritual ones) to affect the heavenly realms.[733] Nowhere in the *Dialoghi* do we find the fear and/or contempt for the Gentile world that is so characteristic of most kabbalistic thought.

I also recognize, however, that many great Renaissance thinkers were indeed entranced by Kabbalah and believed it to be of ancient provenance. They mostly fall into the aforementioned category of those who accepted but reinterpreted Kabbalah. It is conventional wisdom that Judah Abrabanel was one of them. Perhaps that conventional wisdom may turn out in the end to be right (as almost any conjecture can). All I have argued here is that what appears to be kabbalistic influences could very well be from other philosophical, religious or mythological sources and is more likely so. In science (and by extension all rational disciplines) we ought to cling to the hypotheses that are simplest, yield the best predictive power and which make sense in terms of some generally accepted theory and available evidence. Given the time and place in which he lived, kabbalistic influence might actually have been an excellent hypothesis in order to explain certain aspects of his thought if only he had not explicitly raised serious doubts about the correctness and the provenance of kabbalistic beliefs.

Every hypothesis must also be considered in the context of its rivals if we are to claim to be thoroughly rational. But perhaps we are not supremely rational and adhere to theories and hypotheses on the basis of tradition or habit until they are

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[733] According to some Neoplatonic interpretations theurgy really aims at changing the human soul but we do not find in the *Dialoghi* even the external signs of magical or theurgic thinking but only the direct interest in the soul.

more or less definitively disproved. That was Thomas Kuhn's thesis regarding scientific theories and I certainly cannot argue against it as a descriptive claim. Whether it is a valid normative claim is another matter to which I have no ready answer and to explore it further would take us far a field. But even if Kuhn's thesis were true as a normative claim, the kabbalistic hypothesis still fails because it is not sufficiently imbedded in a generally accepted *theoretical* perspective. It seems to me that it is merely a conventional habit of thought that has seldom been challenged. That is not to say definitively that it is wrong. It could be right. At any rate, I cannot claim to have disproved the kabbalistic hypothesis. I have merely attempted to show that other rival hypotheses regarding philosophical and mythological influences suffice and are simpler than the kabbalistic hypothesis. It was also of great importance to define "Kabbalah." because if we were to define it broadly enough then almost every Jewish thinker could be viewed as coming under its influence. In addition, we would like to distinguish between unconscious influences (which are typically very wide-ranging) and a narrower conscious agenda.

I think Judah Abrabanel did indeed have a great interest in Kabbalah but not nearly as much as he had in Plato, ibn Gabirol, Maimonides and some other thinkers many of whom he failed to even mention in his book. He also could not have failed to notice that Kabbalah was exercising great influence upon his contemporaries. In fact, a cursory, literal reading of the *Dialoghi* would seem to bear those contentions out.

So my conclusion is that Judah Abrabanel despite an obvious interest in Kabbalah was no great fan of it. Yet we still find many highly respected scholars insisting that the influence on him of Kabbalah, and even of the *Zohar*, was profound. I

think they have gone beyond what could be considered a reasonable and critical conclusion. Whether that provides them with a good reason *not* to believe it is an axiological matter that I cannot productively opine about here. Everyone must make his or her own decision about that. But I can tentatively conclude that such a belief is not warranted by the facts.

The Significance of this Study

According to Gershom Scholem: "from 1500 to 1800 (at the most conservative estimate) the Kabbalah was widely considered to be *the* true Jewish theology, compared with which all other approaches were able at best to lead an isolated and attenuated existence."[734] I do not quarrel with that assessment even if it might be slightly overstated. But we cannot assume that all Jewish thinkers prior to the 19th century were kabbalists nor can we assume that they were not. If such thinkers as Ficino, Pico della Mirandola[735], Alemanno and Cohen de Herrera could be enamored by both philosophy and Kabbalah, why should I be so stubborn regarding excluding Judah Abrabanel from that illustrious group? I would argue that every great thinker must be looked at as an individual. They are unique and that is a major part of what makes them great. A thinker as profound as Judah Abrabanel might have accepted kabbalistic claims; or he might have applied critical reason to the study of Kabbalah and rejected them. It could have gone either way and is a matter to be decided by the textual and

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[734] *Encyclopedia Judaica* article "Kabbalah," volume 10, p.638

[735] Actually Ficino hardly studied Kabbalah at all but left it to Pico and even the latter seems to have become somewhat disillusioned with it though there is a dispute regarding to what extent his interest in Kabbalah really did lessen. See Eugenio Garin, *History of Italian Philosophy*, volume 1, p.312 for a credible view that it did.

external evidence. I consider this a matter of principle in historical and philosophical research. If we want to impute unexpressed ideas onto a thinker who can no longer affirm or deny them, we should always do so cautiously and tentatively. We must not attempt to *justify* bold conjectures even if we have every right to make them. At the end of the day there must be some way of falsifying them or ruling them out or at least suspending judgment. I readily admit that the case for conscious kabbalistic influence has not been completely discredited; I simply submit that there are more plausible and useful explanations at hand.

How did we arrive at the point where we must actually argue against unproven and even unlikely explanations in the field of history of philosophy? Perhaps we can blame Leo Strauss for a part of our problem.[736] As much as I am indebted to him and accept much of his conjectural methodology in certain areas, it is a mistake to project it into all intellectual phenomena. A perfectly valid method of investigation in certain restricted areas of research can become absurd if overly extended. We have perhaps reached the point where standards of interpretation of medieval and Renaissance figures are so loose that almost anything goes. It is problematic enough that philosophers rarely agree with one another; it is intolerable if we can't even roughly agree on what other philosophers really believed. Needless to say, there are legitimate hermeneutic problems at times in interpreting what past thinkers meant and thought. We can never be completely sure that we have interpreted them correctly since they cannot speak for themselves. Nevertheless, we should not quickly jump to facile

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[736] See Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* or "The Literary Character of the *Guide for the Perplexed*" *Maimonides: A Collection of Critical Essays*, edited by Joseph Buijs, pp.30-58.

esoteric conclusions, as has become so fashionable in Maimonidean scholarship, to give one prominent example. When we begin to view a thinker as having an esoteric agenda we first must ask why he or she would have had to hide that agenda. Next we must give evidence for this particular agenda rather than others. When all that has been done, we still have only a conjecture.

Changing Fashions in Jewish Scholarship

In the 19th century this book would not have needed to be written because Kabbalah had a bad reputation among the educated classes. Philosophers and kabbalists were considered two very different animals. Since Gershom Scholem's groundbreaking work became conventional wisdom, Kabbalah has become quite fashionable among some intellectuals. We may now suffer from the very opposite prejudice from our 19th century forbears. We tend to see Kabbalah everywhere! As a rather extreme and bizarre example of that phenomenon, I noted that the introduction to the Art Scroll *Sforno Commentary on the Torah* states: "He [Sforno] is not averse at times to interpret sections of the Torah allegorically or mystically, based upon the *Zohar*. See, for example, *Exodus* 13:15, *Numbers* 12:2, and *Exodus* 12:22."[737] These were poor "examples" indeed. I looked and looked and found no explicit reference to the *Zohar* whatsoever. Another example on a much higher level of scholarship is Richard Popkin's conclusion that Spinoza's "metaphysics may reflect a synthesis of Cartesianism and Kabbalism."[738] That conclusion was reached on the basis of claims by earlier thinkers that Spinoza might have been a closet

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[737] The word in parenthesis is mine. See *Sforno Commentary on the Torah*, p. xiii.
[738] See his "Spinoza, Neoplatonic Kabbalist," p.402.

kabbalist and on the basis of conjectures such as the following: "Spinoza could have learned something about the Kabbalah while a student at the Synagogue."[739] I have no doubt that Spinoza did become acquainted with Kabbalah in the synagogue just as he "learned" many other things there that he subsequently disavowed. But how does such tenuous evidence compare to the following explicit statement of Spinoza? "I have read and known certain Kabbalistic triflers, whose insanity provokes my unceasing astonishment."[740] To his credit, Popkin mentioned that latter statement and thereby allowed readers who may not have been otherwise familiar with it to draw their own conclusions. That was responsible scholarship, even if it was flawed in my opinion. There is never any harm in being wrong as long as you don't unnecessarily lead others astray. We have all been wrong and we will all continue to be wrong. The important thing is to allow oneself and others to falsify whichever conjectures one makes. Most people who attribute conscious kabbalistic influence and intention to Judah Abrabanel don't even bother to mention the latter's expressed reservations regarding Kabbalah or admit that there might be viable alternative hypotheses.

This book is but a modest attempt to turn back that tide of quasi-illusory thinking and/or semi-conscious deception and their resulting observations.[741] I also hope it was a needed

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[739] Ibid, p.395

[740] Spinoza, *Theological Political Tractatus*, p. 140

[741] One's theories often dictate one's observations. An example of this phenomenon of finding what one is looking for is to be found even in one of the greatest Judaic scholars, Shlomo Pines in "Medieval Doctrines in Renaissance Garb? Some Jewish and Arabic Sources of Leone Ebreo's Doctrines," n.51, he makes the following comment.

> In this context Leone evidently does not wish to give a personal opinion as regards the total number of the

exposition of what I consider to be one of the most profound religious and philosophical works ever composed: the *Dialoghi d'Amore*. I have argued that it can only be fully understood in relation to Kabbalah as well as other prior Jewish and non-

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> heavenly spheres. A clause occurring on fol. 76a may be rendered as follows: "...whether there be eight spheres as the Greeks [believed], or nine as the Arabs [thought], or ten as [was the opinion of] the ancient Hebrews [*gl'antichi hebrei*] and of some moderns..." The statement concerning the views of the Greeks and the Arabs is by and large correct. The reference to the opinion of the Hebrews may be founded on an astronomical or astrological interpretation of the doctrine concerning the ten *Sefirot*.

In ibn Gabirol's great poem the *Keter Malkhut*, which far pre-dates the doctrine of the *Sefirot* in medieval Kabbalah, we find ten heavenly spheres (*galgalim* in Hebrew), the tenth (highest) being the sphere of Intellect. If we are looking for those "ancient Hebrews" this fact should at least be mentioned. Since ibn Gabirol (unlike the *Zohar*) never refers to this doctrine as ancient Hebrew lore, Pines' point does have some validity, especially if Judah Abrabanel accepted such attributions to the ancient Hebrews as correct. Nevertheless, we cannot discount the possibility that Abrabanel assumed ibn Gabirol's ten spheres emerged out of ancient Hebrew literature, especially since he does question the validity of kabbalistic traditions regarding the provenance of their doctrines and never criticizes ibn Gabirol at all. We have seen that the number 10 has special significance in ancient Jewish thought. At any rate, it seems a bit of a stretch to bring in the *Sefirot*, although they may have their origin in medieval astronomy/astrology. On p. 166, Abrabanel (Philo) tells us exactly what the spheres are and how many there are. Perhaps he eliminates the tenth sphere of ibn Gabirol because he wants to maintain that the Intellectual Sphere (the Active Intellect?) is God. This would be quite contrary to the kabbalists, who held that all the *Sefirot* were God.

> The heavenly spheres, which astrologers have been able to discern, number nine. The seven nearest to us are those of the seven erratic planets. Of the other two highest ones the eighth is that wherein are fixed the majority of the stars we see, and the ninth and last is the diurnal sphere, which in one day and one night, i.e. in twenty-four hours, completes its entire revolution, and in that time turns with itself all the other heavenly bodies.

Jewish thought. Yet its relationship to Kabbalah is far more nuanced than many scholars have been willing to admit.

To repeat and summarize our prior observations, some of which confirm my present thesis and some of which raise doubts, Kabbalah impressed Judah Abrabanel but he may not have been altogether favorably impressed. His relative silence and clearly expressed doubts might be viewed as somewhat telling regarding his critical stance. He appears to be more of a Renaissance thinker than a medieval kabbalistic one. He is more similar to Ficino than he is to Pico della Mirandola, not to mention Moses de Leon. A thorough investigation of sources reveal many that he did not deny or seriously question regarding their methodologies, in contrast to his expressed doubts about Kabbalah. The former sources seem sufficient to me to explain his basic modes of thought and there seems to be no urgent reason to impute to him methodologies and ideologies that he himself explicitly questioned and criticized.

Revisiting the Kabbalistic Hypothesis

It may come as a surprise to some that this book is not yet finished. But every argument deserves a counter-attack in the light of new evidence and the discovery (or even suspicion) of flawed reasoning. I am sure that others could do a better job of criticizing my conclusions and perhaps will do so later on but I will now attempt to provide such a rebuttal to my own arguments. I would like to think that this kind of internal dialogue or argument is characteristic of critical thought. First we will look again at Abraham Abulafia.

If there were a significant kabbalistic influence on Judah Abrabanel's thought, the place to look would most likely be the school of Abulafia. We might also want to know why

Abrabanel failed to mention Abulafia and there may well be good reasons for that. Perhaps Abulafia's teachings were considered too radical by some influential people. We must remember that the Abrabanels were refugees from persecution in both Spain and Portugal and never even found complete peace in Italy, despite its generally more tolerant atmosphere. As we have seen, however, that did not prevent other members of the Abrabanel family from taking controversial stands at times. Hence while the fearful suppression of Abulafia's teachings is a possibility, it would in no sense be a necessary consequence of Judah Abrabanel's alleged or purportive embrace of them. It is also quite possible that he was aware of those Abulafian teachings but did not think they warranted special mention.

But in the final analysis and despite obvious similarities, the discrepancies between those two thinkers may not even warrant bold conjectural explanatory assertions regarding conscious influence, especially since Abrabanel specifically mentions so many other very interesting and provocative thinkers who presumably were conscious sources of his doctrines. Having said that, we must of course allow for unconscious, indirect influences and it would be foolish to deny the possibility of kabbalistic patterns of thought influencing any Renaissance thinker, including Judah Abrabanel. In fact, aside from such unconscious influences, it is also quite likely that he consciously wrote with the kabbalists, and perhaps especially Abulafia, in mind. Yet even that admission does not validate the kabbalistic hypothesis.

Crypto-Kabbalism as a Possibility

Was Judah Abrabanel a crypto-kabbalist? If one agrees with

my arguments so far, this is in a sense the last stronghold of the kabbalistic hypothesis. It must be viewed seriously but critically. Given the coexistence of three religions and the changing tides of toleration, crypto-religion might have been a prominent feature of Iberian culture and politics, even though it has been seriously overblown at times by scholars, and even more so by popular writers and journalists.[742] That recognition

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[742] An early and influential scholarly treatment that specifically addressed the so-called "Marranos" was *A History of the Marranos* by Cecil Roth. In hindsight we can now agree that his original treatment of the subject smacked of romanticism and wishful thinking, something that even he most likely came to believe to a certain extent. See the introduction to the fourth edition by Herman P. Salomon, who has successfully debunked many of the popular myths surrounding the Marranos in his writings. Yet we still do not really know (nor can we ever know) to what degree formerly Jewish *conversos* really did cling to their ancestral religion or those who had never personally practiced Judaism yearned for something that they never knew. Most likely the vast majority simply became good Catholics. The whole question of religious identity is now viewed in a far more nuanced manner than in previous generations. Recent work in the psychology and sociology of religion has emphasized the phenomenon of religious conversion as something far more fluid than what the average person imagines religious identity to be. There is some reason to believe that in the Middle Ages, despite strong religious polemics, religious identity may not always have been as crystallized as it generally is today. The then prevalent concern regarding heresy might be a reflection of that fact. See David Graizbord, *Souls in Crisis* for a description of New Christians who reverted to Judaism and then reverted once again to Christianity as a part of a return to the Iberian Peninsula. Perhaps the most definitive statement that can be made is that among the large numbers of Jews who converted to Christianity in the Iberian Peninsula between 1391 and 1497 (DNA evidence now suggests that it was a majority of the Jews) there existed both a very wide range of belief and a large variance as regards religious conviction or the lack thereof. While it is relatively easy to dig up unusual or romantic cases of people who clearly martyred themselves for their religious beliefs and even easier to find examples of people who confessed to crypto-Judaism under duress, we have no knowledge of how prevalent that phenomenon really was. Most people keep their unpopular beliefs to themselves and we don't believe confessions before inquisitional tribunals regarding witches, wherewolves, etc. Admittedly, being a crypto-Jew should not be compared to those obviously fictitious entities. It should not even be compared to phenomena such as

of its overemphasis in the past does not mean that hidden heretical movements were not more common in Spain (where three substantial religious communities co-existed for a long period of time) than elsewhere. This special historical fact might have led to more tenacious belief systems and the habit of concealing one's real opinions in periods of persecution or even for fear of it. It does not tell us anything, however, about the actual prevalence of such behavior, which was probably rather slight. But substantial minority belief systems do have a way of becoming popular stereotypes. Crypto-religion might then have been a real and prominent fact even if it was a phenomenon of a small minority. And it is a real possibility that the Abrabanel family also practiced some concealment of their actual beliefs. We have already seen that there were *conversos* in the Abrabanel family.[743] Iberian politics was complicated as was Italian politics. We may never know very much about the hidden relationships between relatives who had become separated by their respective faiths. This book, however, is not about *conversos* or crypto-religion but as we should have learned by now from Leo Strauss we cannot always take writers

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early Christian martyrs, regarding which we now believe they were few in number but quite large in influence. It is more in keeping with normal human psychology to harbor secret traditional beliefs that are unpopular than to martyr oneself for any belief, traditional or novel. Nevertheless, the Jewish Marrano serves a similar function in popular belief to the Christian martyr. Both were probably few in numbers but huge in their effects upon their respective faiths. That is true despite the fact that some Jews (mostly Ashkenazim) strongly believed that the Marranos were sinners who should indeed have martyred themselves for their faith rather than converting.

[743] Regarding Samuel Abrabanel, the great grandfather of Judah Abrabanel who converted prior to 1391, see Eric Lawee, *Isaac Abarbanel's Stance Towards Tradition*, pp.9-10. At least one of his sons (Judah) did not follow him into Christianity and was the progenitor of Isaac and (our) Judah. Of course conversion must not be confounded with crypto-religion but the former can lead to the latter and it can complicate the relations between relatives.

at their literal word and should be on the lookout for hidden agendas and motives for concealment. We must therefore consider the very real possibility that Judah Abrabanel might have wanted to conceal his true allegiances out of deeply ingrained cultural habits or other more current practical reasons. His new home in Italy was not immune from religious persecution. We know that Pico della Mirandola got himself into trouble with the Church regarding Kabbalah, among other things. In his later writings (*De Ente et Uno*, *Disputations Against Divinatory Astrology*) he hardly mentioned Kabbalah at all. Yet Brian Copenhaver insists that Kabbalah (and not Hermetism) is the key to understanding Pico's philosophy.[744] We also know that there were Jewish opponents of Kabbalah, such as Elijah del Medigo and that the printing of the *Zohar* was a matter of some controversy in Italy. On the other hand, prior to the Council of Trent (1545-1563) Christian Kabbalah was not uniformly or heavily condemned by the Church.[745] That is not to say that Kabbalah was entirely uncontroversial; there were indeed powerful opponents of Kabbalah, both in the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds just as there were many more in the Jewish community who were openly in favor of Kabbalah. We should also not minimize the power that pre-modern Jewish communities had over their members, which at times even expressed itself in violence.

But all that I have said about crypto-religion or the possibility of it is conjecture as regards our subject. Judah Abrabanel made no secret about the fact that he was a Jew and

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[744] See "The Secret of Pico's *Oration*: Cabala and Renaissance Philosophy," particularly p.57.

[745] The situation may have been somewhat more anti-kabbalistic in Spain after 1492. See Joan Estruch Tobella, "Francisco Manuel de Melo, el último estudioso de la Cábala."

normally that would place him outside the authority of the Inquisition. Nor did he make a secret about some of his other rather unconventional views. Unless we are to believe the story of his conversion, the Inquisition would have no direct power over him (because he was a Jew).[746] In the Jewish world,

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[746] It is true that the authorities in Naples were under some pressure from the Spanish crown to expel the Jews but even more so to expel Marranos. See Cecil Roth, *The History of the Jews of Italy*, p.282. The Roman Inquisition would not be established until 1542 but the Holy Office was active long before that in Sicily and other parts of southern Italy. See Cecil Roth, *The History of the Jews of Italy*, pp. 261-268 for a description of anti-Jewish and anti-marrano measures in Sicily and Sardinia. It is possible that the Abrabanel family was concerned not to cause unnecessary attention to themselves. The absence of a formal Inquisition by the Holy Office did not prevent a thinker like Pico della Mirandola from getting into trouble with Church authorities for his positive evaluation of Kabbalah in 1487. The Spanish Inquisition was established somewhere between 1478 and 1488 (depending upon which historian one believes). The Abrabanels were surely concerned about the Spanish Inquisition and may have had relatives and friends in Spain whom they sought to protect. Hence it is plausible that the author might have been fearful regarding espousing such particularistic Jewish beliefs, especially since Judaizers seem to have been the primary target of the early Spanish Inquisition. Kabbalistic beliefs might have been even more of a red flag than other views generally associated with Judaism, especially since so many sincere Christians seemed attracted to them.

I have not seriously explored or entertained the possibility that Judah Abrabanel actually did convert to Christianity. I would not rule the possibility out altogether but as far as I know there is no good evidence for it. At any rate, the impression that was given by those who made the claim was that it had occurred *after* the writing of the *Dialoghi*. But if he had converted (or was even considering it), that might have given him additional good reasons to deny kabbalistic beliefs even if he had actually harbored them. Obviously, kabbalistic views in a *converso* would be viewed quite critically, even more so than in an old Christian. Of course, compounding conjectures in order to construct a convincing narrative is not good history though it may be interesting and entertaining. History, unlike fiction, is subject by nature to Ockham's Razor and even fiction becomes unbelievable if it makes too many "improbable" assumptions. That parsimonious methodological principle has informed this entire book, at least in theory; whether I have followed it in practice is another matter. On the other hand, religious believers sometimes are more willing to believe stories that are more phantasmagoric than necessary and I cannot claim that the principle of

Kabbalah was generally though not uniformly respected at the time and in the non-Jewish world it was tolerated. Why would he have wanted or needed to conceal to his fellow Jews (or to Gentiles) the fact that he was a kabbalist?

There is a possibility that he felt the need to protect relatives or friends who had converted, were still in the Iberian Peninsula and therefore were indeed subject to the Inquisition. There might also have been a desire to keep his true religious identity somewhat ambiguous, while of course not denying his Jewish origins and the Judaic provenance of his beliefs. The power of the Church was perhaps felt in less formal ways than in the Inquisition, as was the power of the Jewish community. We may never know all of those details, as they have surely been lost in the fog of history.[747] They do make interesting exercises in conjectural interpretation and should make us humble and reduce our certitude regarding our own interpretations, even though the latter may be based on both rational and factual assertions. We can never really know what

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parsimony provides non-scholars with a reason *not* to believe. Nor do I have a firm opinion regarding the value of such an arational will to believe. These are philosophical questions that I have not yet completely resolved. At any rate, even if there is much that we don't know and despite the peculiarities of the book, which I have been at pains to point out, we can surely understand it quite well as the writings of a Renaissance Jew and there is really no reason to believe that he was anything other than that.

[747] Aside from personal danger, both to themselves and their allies, the Church and/or Inquisition may have had some financial leverage over the Abrabanel family. For example, Juan de Lucena owed 71,600 *maravedis* to Isaac Abrabanel in 1492. He was tried by the Inquisition and his property was confiscated, at least temporarily. His property was released in 1503. Incidents such as that may have contributed to reluctance on the part of the Abrabanels to express controversial views, at least until such debts were resolved. Yet we also saw that members of the family were willing to exhibit dangerous opinions at times. For documentation regarding Juan de Lucena, see *Records of the Trials of the Spanish Inquisition in Ciudad Real*, Volume IV, edited by Haim Beinart, p.478.

goes on in another's mind, especially when they leave no testimonies. Sometimes we need to construct hypotheses in order to reconcile the apparent contradictions in the diverse writings of a great thinker. Perhaps the best example of that is Maimonides. Here, however, I think the relevant facts are quite different. In my opinion the spirit and tolerance of the times and a fairly evident interest in the Hermetic tradition pretty much explain the views of Judah Abrabanel and we should take him at his word regarding his doubts about Kabbalah. While we can not know for sure, that seems to me to be the best explanation of the facts. That does not mean, however, that there are not hidden things in his teachings and in his relationship to the Jewish and non-Jewish worlds or that there were no kabbalistic influences in his philosophy. It only means that there is no rational basis for believing that he was hiding a kabbalistic world-view while simultaneously attempting to promulgate it.

Perhaps the most enticing mystery of all relates to the possibly intimate and surely unknowable details of his relationship with Gonzalvo Fernández de Córdoba, the Spanish viceroy of Naples from approximately 1501 until 1507, and through him perhaps even to the Spanish Crown.[748] Judah Abrabanel was Gonsalvo's doctor during most but not all of that period, having already left Naples in 1506. It was also in that very year that King Ferdinand visited Naples. Known as *el Gran Capitán* and sometimes as *Aguilar*, Fernández de Córdoba was a pioneer of modern warfare and quite likely descended

[748] The Catholic monarchs of Spain continued to have dealings with Jews outside of the country subsequent to the expulsion of 1492. See H. Beinart, "Relaciones entre Judíos y los Reyes Católicos Despues de la Expulsion."

from Jewish conversos on both sides of his family.[749] He first distinguished himself in the war of Granada and later against the French in Italy. It is quite likely that despite his great usefulness to Ferdinand and Isabella and his most unusual popularity in Spain, he had enemies in the Spanish Court as well as in Italy. After the death of Isabella, Gonzalvo was eventually retired by Ferdinand (who for some reason suspected him of treachery) and was left without any meaningful employment from 1507 until 1512, when another serious French military threat arose that required his expertise. Spanish politics was exceedingly complicated at this time and it might come as a bit of a surprise to some that the Abrabanel family continued to be indirectly in the employ of the Spanish Crown (by virtue of their services to Gonzalvo) after their expulsion from Spain. Is it possible that Judah Abrabanel toned down the Jewishness (including perhaps kabbalistic aspects) of his work in order to either placate or protect that powerful but precarious man (of reputed Jewish ancestry) who had protected him?[750]

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[749] See *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Micropaedia, Volume IV, p. 104. See William Hickling Prescott, *History of the Reign of Ferdinand and Isabella the Catholic*, Volume II pp. 40-71, 390-427. It has also been claimed that the famous Jewish philosopher and kabbalist Abraham Cohen de Herrera was descended from this famous Spanish general. Hence it appears that some members of this family, like many conversos, might have gone back and forth from Judaism to Christianity. See *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Volume 8, p. 391. This claim of descent might also lend some credence to Cohen de Herrera's claim, discussed previously, that Judah Abrabanel was a kabbalist, since this might possibly have been a family tradition. Of course such "inside information" is not necessarily to be trusted.

[750] The French effectively left Naples in 1504. Strong Spanish influence there dated back at least to 1495 and a decree for the expulsion of the Jews was issued in 1496 but never enforced. It was implemented in 1510 though 200 wealthy Jewish families were allowed to remain, including the Abrabanels. This raises a question regarding why Judah Abrabanel left at all. According to Roberto Bonfil, conditions for Jews were already "unbearable" there after 1492. See *Jewish Life in Renaissance Italy*, p. 56. Perhaps we could question the universal applicability of Bonfil's

Another lingering question is why his father never mentioned the book even though it appears that Judah was working on it during Isaac Abrabanel's lifetime and the latter was obviously quite proud of his son's philosophical accomplishments. And the Abrabanel family seems never to have been involved in its publication. Was it perhaps too controversial for them? Were there substantial areas of conflict and disagreement within the family, as there are in most? I will leave these as unanswered (perhaps unanswerable) questions and very interesting ones but of no value at this time in evaluating the kabbalistic hypothesis.

Was Judah Abrabanel a kabbalist? Penultimate Remarks

I now come close to the end and my initial conclusion is that despite the obvious resemblances between some ideas in the *Dialoghi* and some kabbalistic ones, there is no good reason to believe that Judah Abrabanel was really a kabbalist and perhaps there are good reasons to believe that he was not. More and more we are becoming aware of the historical interrelationships between Kabbalah, medieval philosophy and the intellectual currents within the three Abrahamic religions. Similarities should no longer signal direct transmission. Ostensibly he was a philosopher who was indeed interested in Kabbalah. His worldview was that of one who revered reason yet believed in esoteric traditions. In that respect he was close to Ficino and many other Renaissance thinkers. Of all such esoteric traditions

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generalization that the Jews in Renaissance Italy were not active players in politics. It is at least possible that the Abrabanel family while passively benefiting from political tolerance might also have actively contributed to the political fortunes of their benefactors. Judah Abrabanel was obviously a controversial thinker even if his book had not yet been published. Perhaps he left Naples in order to help Gonsalvo de Córdoba or other benefactors?

he heaps the most skepticism on Kabbalah. Of course he might have been a closet kabbalist but there is no real proof either way. I also admit that there are ways of reading kabbalistic writings that bring them much closer to a philosophical world-view. While we cannot give such theories all the attention that they deserve, I am not generally persuaded by them. I do admit that they may explain the motives of some kabbalists but not Judah Abrabanel. This conclusion certainly runs against the current of most scholarly and popular opinion. If, however, after reviewing the facts and the arguments a person still desperately wants to believe in the kabbalistic hypothesis at least he or she has engaged in some critical thought and in a sense it is that mental process and not any particular conclusion or outcome that is quintessentially human and rational. As I have said before (paraphrasing Karl Popper), just because there is no good reason to believe something does not necessarily mean that there is a good reason *not* to believe it. Yet there might indeed be such a reason not to believe. Everyone must decide for himself or herself.

In the preface I began to discuss the rather complicated relationship between rationality and human flourishing and perhaps we can say a little bit more about that now, after our journey has been completed. I suspect that the awesome power that rationality has over some people is ultimately based upon some passion. That might explain why it has far less power over other equally intelligent people. Sometimes those who are smitten by reason are quite aware of that passion but oftentimes they are not. As has been said many times and in many different ways (perhaps most famously by Pascal), passion has its own reasons that reason knows nothing of. That may be quite relevant to the *Dialoghi* as well, whose author was undoubtedly smitten by reason even if he also had other passions that might

at times have warred against it. Nevertheless, I have also tentatively concluded that Judah Abrabanel was arguing for a transcendence of reason that is actually quite extreme, perhaps even more so than most kabbalistic writings. That is because one needs to master something before he or she can really transcend it. He states that the ultimate and unifying end of human life is neither reason nor love but the actual taste of the Divine. This sounds to me like a mystic or at least an aspiring one. If I deny that he was a kabbalist it is surely not because I consider him unmusical, mystically, religiously or spiritually.

In ancient Hebrew the word for truth (*emet*) originally meant faithfulness and much of the time in the Bible it means just that. The relationship between truth (as usually understood in the correspondence theory)[751] and such faithfulness is not immediately clear. But perhaps it rests upon the ultimacy of the interpersonal, including of course the human relationship to God. That dependence upon personal relationships is indeed objective, factual and external but at the same time relies upon an intensification of the inner self. Quite often our normal reliance upon comforting illusions is shaken not only by external occurrences (facts) but also by the strongly held opinions of others. That way of looking at truth may therefore justify a distinction between truth and strict factual accuracy. When Judah Abrabanel maintains that both reason and love are trumped by the experience of the Divine, he is making a very bold truth claim that subordinates both knowledge and desire to mystical experience. It is a world-view that finds the infinite within the finite. That view, which he might have shared with

[751] The correspondence theory, one of the philosophical treatments of truth, is the most intuitively correct one for most people. It asserts that the truth of statements somehow corresponds to external factual conditions. It is normally taken for granted in many discussions regarding truth.

some other Renaissance thinkers, while indeed basing itself on experience, differs greatly from the more modern empirical temperament, which restricts truth claims to statements that are verifiable by sensory experience in a rather narrow respect. But within that more modern empirical epistemology, *personal* experience itself (even of the sensory kind) has no special claim to knowledge, which must be expressible in public language. Hence mystical or even intuitive type experiences, both of which are less socially confirmable, are not given much credence within what we nowadays call "empiricism." Such a restriction of truth claims may be laudable in natural science where it works quite well but it really fails to explain the human fascination with truth, such as it is. That fascination, albeit that of a minority of humankind, is not exhausted by the tentative factual and theoretical explorations of modern science but plows forward in areas where experience, interpretation and understanding play a much larger role and even where no practical benefits are at all conceivable. Hence our concept of truth is much broader than that which pertains to the natural sciences alone and certainly cannot be explained in terms of purely practical or technological interests, which are usually satisfied by mere heuristic devices. We have also known for a long time that strategies that are strictly speaking false can be marvelously adaptive — like keeping one's watch a few minutes ahead.

Further Conclusions

I promised that this study would be more than history of philosophy and I intend to make good on that pledge. I would like this study to contribute something to currently relevant philosophical and religious debates. But how do we infer methodological or even axiological conclusions from textual or

historical premises? We obviously need to make some other assumptions. I will restrict myself to two fairly innocuous ones. First I will assume that Judah Abrabanel was a first class religious philosopher. That is to say that he was not just a disciple of a few thinkers or a harmonizer of many but that his writings reflect not only great erudition but deep, profound thought. The second assumption is that we can't really take him at his word regarding his traditional sources. In other words, his references to the Bible, Plato, Aristotle, ibn Gabirol, Kabbalah, etc. do not so much reflect slavish acceptance of "sources" as they do cleverly thought out rationales for his own philosophical views. It must be remembered that controversial views then (as now) are accepted far more readily if they receive the stamp of tradition and authority. A close inspection of the *Dialoghi* (as has already been performed) shows that Abrabanel was well aware that philosophical arguments do not require traditional authority. So surely we ought not cite him as a source for our own philosophical thinking. Yet it might be interesting and even comforting to know that he may well have concurred with our own views. Another belief that he quite likely held was that traditional and even esoteric "sources" are subject to rational critique and interpretation. But many and perhaps most of his readers may not have wanted to hear that enunciated too loudly.

The conclusion, of course, is that from the perspective of philosophical and rational procedure philosophy trumps Kabbalah even if everyone who believes that (including Judah Abrabanel and myself) is not always willing to state it unequivocally. This, however, tells us little or nothing about what is cognitively feasible for those who have not yet devoted themselves to knowledge and rational argumentation. Nor does it tell us anything about the value of religious faith and

conviction that goes beyond the ability of human reason to opine. I will leave the former to the psychologists and the latter to the great religious philosophers. But if Judah Abrabanel, prior to the dawn of anything resembling adequate historiographical methods, would have been so skeptical regarding kabbalistic tradition, how much more so should we be? Regarding its actual truth, however, that must be decided by the application of sound methodological principles. Some of it will likely turn out to be true and even profound and other parts may turn out to be distorted or even grotesque transformations of traditional Jewish views and/or non-Jewish ones.

Final Remarks

Alvin Plantinga has argued that our fascination with truth is proof that we are much more than biological creatures fashioned by evolutionary adaptive forces.[752] This is an informative

[752] See Alvin Plantinga, "An Evolutionary Argument against Naturalism." Perhaps our fascination with beauty is an even greater argument against naturalism because beauty, unlike truth, seems almost *completely* devoid of any practical use. It has also been argued that both truth and goodness might boil down to aesthetic criteria in the end and it would be only fit to remember that Judah Abrabanel used beauty as a descriptor for the ultimate reality (God). This may be a corrective to the more fundamental religious experience of reverence or fear and in a sense might render that experience even more impregnable to rational critiques. While many skeptics criticize religion, it is hard to find one who deprecates aesthetics since it does not purport to make claims about a spiritual reality. While it is possible that non-adaptive aesthetic motifs can piggyback on to adaptive ones, as in Richard Lewontin & Stephen J. Gould's theory of spandrels (see Gould & Lewontin), aesthetic appreciation seems to be counter-adaptive from an evolutionary perspective. The animals that stopped to sniff the flowers, rather than to simply eat them, would have been easier prey to predators. Compare this with Abrabanel's insight that those who love God often end up not loving themselves. We can confirm this by observing people who love

argument. On the other hand, many people don't seem to have that great interest in truth and if God had wanted all of us to be fervent truth seekers He could surely have constructed most of us quite differently. Of course we can't completely fathom God's intentions but we could at least suggest that He is more concerned with our ethics than He is with our seeking of truth or beauty. Certainly, ethics has been the more primary focus of the Abrahamic religions. Interestingly, the pursuit of ethical perfection is not the primary concern of Judah Abrabanel and this may constitute a limitation for his philosophy. Ethical concerns are assumed all along in it and alluded to on many occasions but his more explicit concerns are for truth and beauty.

Our passion for truth and beauty may ultimately be related to our passion for God and both may be subordinate to mystical experience, in at least some rather broad sense of that term. I suspect that Judah Abrabanel might have concurred with that judgment. In fact it seems to me that the mysticism of Judah Abrabanel is actually more experientially based than that of most kabbalistic systems and perhaps less concerned with putative propositional knowledge or traditional opinions.

Unfortunately, there is a tendency to interpret thinkers of the past in terms of the systems that we know and which appear to us to be a good fit rather than making the effort to understand them as individuals. This is part and parcel of the general human tendency to view the new and unknown in light of what is already known. It caused Marco Polo to declare that the rhinoceros was a unicorn and even forced him to revise the then

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things for their own sake to their own detriment, as they fail to use the things they love as mere means for their own self-aggrandizement or survival.

common notion of the latter.[753] Perhaps this explains why so many people are utterly convinced that Judah Abrabanel was a kabbalist. And this is also why a *philosophical* study of individual thinkers may at times be superior even to a history of ideas approach because it is their very individuality that allows thinkers to survive what would otherwise be the almost inevitable oblivion of outmoded forms of thought.

Philosophers are by their nature individuals who question their respective traditions, whether they are scientific, historical, religious traditions, etc. Kabbalah is one of those traditions that are added to incrementally by each person who engages in it. Kabbalists are not generally people who question their tradition. Philosophy is the individual search for truth and understanding, which utilizes tradition but is independent of it to a certain extent. It is the elementary human ability to question and create new meanings. It does not however produce universalizable "truth" that can be shared by large numbers of people who submit to the various traditions that define truth for their adherents. I believe that in the medieval and Renaissance periods there were indeed spiritual cultural motifs that were "in the air" so to speak. In the Renaissance, Kabbalah was one of those motifs. Judah Abrabanel breathed that air but he was primarily a philosopher and did not believe that Kabbalah had all the answers to philosophy's incessant questioning. On the contrary, he found in Renaissance Italy a spirit of intellectual freedom that was in many ways antithetical to slavish, kabbalistic type reliance on tradition. His intention seems to have been to move Judaism in the direction of that kind of humanism.

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[753] For a description of this process, as regards this case (pp.54-55) and others, see Umberto Eco, *Serendipities*.

We are in a similar situation. When we read kabbalistic texts that reek with an alarming degree of essentialistic particularism, we might want to give them a more universal interpretation. Let us not forget that such moves are informed by philosophical sources. Even people incapable of studying philosophy are affected by it.

Needless to say, many may not accept my conclusion regarding the relationship between philosophy and Kabbalah. But perhaps some will view favorably my suspicion that philosophy can never become popular without betraying itself and therefore other types of traditions are required. In my view it is philosophy that purifies Kabbalah and not the other way around. But that is not to say that philosophy purifies human beings or offers them salvation in the manner claimed by religion. Philosophy, like all intellectual disciplines, works on the data that we have and does not produce the radical transformation of human life that many seek. For that we must seek elsewhere. It is perhaps a fundamental encounter with the divine that is at the root of human religious consciousness and morality. And that also seems to have been the opinion of Judah Abrabanel.

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