

FROM THE PAGES OF TRADITION

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ABRAHAM'S IBN EZRA'S CONCEPT OF MAN

INTRODUCTION

The philosophical notions of Abraham Ibn Ezra do not appear in a coherent, systematic work of philosophy. They are scattered through his writings, especially in his commentaries on the Books of Exodus and Ecclesiastes.

Abraham Ibn Ezra was born at Toledo, Spain, in 1092. His education was many-faceted. Besides philology and exegesis, he studied mathematics, astronomy, astrology, and religious philosophy as developed by Arabs and Jews in his native land. He was also a poet of no mean order. As a philosopher he was a neoplatonist, following closely in the footsteps of Solomon Ibn Gabirol whom he praises as a great thinker. He was also influenced by some doctrines of Kalam, especially when he adopted the atomistic theory of Democritus as developed by Mutakallimum.¹ Of special interest is the allegorical interpretation he adopted from Philo concerning the Garden of Eden, the Tree of Knowledge and the river issuing from the Garden, although as a philologist he generally condemned the symbolical method of interpreting the Bible.²

Motivated by a crusading zeal, like his contemporary, Abraham Bar Hiyya, he left his native land and visited the Jewish communities of Rome, London, Egypt, Morocco.³ Everywhere his intention was to bring a rationalistic, scientific spirit to the non-Arabic speaking Jews as enlightened Spain had developed it in Jew and Arab alike.

I have chosen for translation some of Abraham Ibn Ezra's commentaries on Ecclesiastes because they reveal more than any other of his interpretations the true concern of his philosophical judgments. To both Moses and Abraham Ibn Ezra the supreme emphasis in philosophy is to know one's own soul. For only as the soul first knows itself will it ultimately know the Creator. He who can surrender his mundane pleasures and subdue his corporeal sense to the rational faculty and rise to the highest sphere will find there his reward by being reunited with the World Soul.

It should be noted, moreover, that Abraham Ibn Ezra regarded Ecclesiastes as a profound book of metaphysics. The

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alleged contradictions inherent in the book, which almost prompted the rabbis of the Talmud to conceal it, are easily resolved in the context of philosophic doctrine. He likewise repudiated the assertion by some critics that Ecclesiastes was a collection of several authors with diversified views. The book, he argued, represents a coherent work provided we apply to it the proper philosophical notion, which in this case was the neo-platonic classification of the souls. Thus he demonstrated the enduring value of philosophical exploration even for the proper understanding of biblical texts.

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ABRAHAM IBN EZRA'S INTRODUCTION TO ECCLESIASTES

The highest virtue in life is reason. Its achievement will save one from the nether-world. As the captive longs to return to the land of his birth and be reunited with his family, so the rational soul strives to ascend to the upper reaches of the sphere until it rises to the highest sphere of the living God which is completely devoid of earthly matter. For human bodies are perishable flesh and resemble houses whose foundations are of clay.

This process of ascent can be achieved if the spirit purifies itself and is purged of the defilements of corporeal desires which drag it down to the nether-world. The soul must further take pains to know its own origin and comprehend its own nature,⁴ with the help of Wisdom whose "eyes" are undimmed, bringing the far-off, remote places near to us and making night appear like day.⁵ The soul will then be prepared to know the truth which will be indelibly impressed upon her and will not disappear even when she separates from the body.

The Lord decreed that the soul make her appearance here and remain locked in an enclosure for an allotted time for her own benefit and welfare. If she endured much anguish during her life span, she will then enjoy everlasting bliss without end. For every activity may be divided into four headings: it is either all good, partially good and partially bad, totally bad, or partially bad and partially good. The first division is a gift of God; the second represents the average life on earth. The remaining

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two are non-existent, for the Lord God can do only good. Everything in the world is good, as scripture says, "And God saw everything He made and behold it was very good." And if some evil prevailed, it was only on the fringes, which cannot obviate God's abundant goodness.

The root of evil lies in the deficiency of the recipient. For as far as God is concerned, we have no other way of comparing His deeds in the world except by His own handiwork, for indeed everything is His handiwork. Thus, for instance, when we behold that the sun, which is one of God's handiworks, will let white garments exposed to its rays remain white while at the same time cause the face of the launderer to turn tan, we must assume that effects vary with the differences in the nature of the recipient. For, in truth, only one form of activity can emanate from one source. Hence changes are due to the specific nature of the objects. By the same token the thoughts of people are governed by the variety of their physical natures. The changes in the nature of objects are due to motions in the heavenly bodies, the position of the sun and the recipients of its influences. Likewise, the events of the sublunar world, its laws, crop production and innumerable objects are governed by the same process.

The Lord, the God of Israel, stirred the spirit of his beloved Solomon to probe significant matters and instruct us in the paths of righteousness. For all of man's work is in vain; it cannot endure. Man can neither create a substance nor annihilate anything until it is reduced to nothingness. All his activity consists only in combining and separating accidents as well as moving about and resting. Hence, man's deeds are vain and empty. The only thing of value is the fear of God. But no one can reach this stage of the fear of the Lord until he ascends the ladder of wisdom and has acquired understanding.

ECCLESIASTES 7:3.

Medical men have already indicated that man possesses three souls. One is the vegetative soul; that is to say, just as in the vegetative kingdom (as in grass, plants, and trees) there

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is a power we call soul, responsible for growth and reproduction, so man possesses a similar power. This soul grows in strength for a specified time. Its main attribute is corporeal desire and it requires the intake of food for its realization.

The second soul is the animal soul. It uses the faculties of the five senses and is responsible for the power of motion, moving animal and man from place to place.

The third soul, which only man possesses, is referred to as "neshamah." This is the faculty of reason that distinguishes between truth and falsehood. The second soul is midway between the other two souls. God endowed man with a rational faculty, which is also referred to as *lev* in order to actualize every soul's potential in due time. He also provided him with *mitzvot* to make it possible to maintain everything in proper proportion.

Now although the three souls are alluded to by one all-embracing name, we shall distinguish the three different powers of the soul by three specific names: *neshamah*, *ruach*, *nefesh*. This will avoid undue elaboration on the various qualities associated with each of the three souls. Thus the term *nefesh* refers to man's desire to eat, to be merry, and indulge in sexual pleasures. The name *ruach* alludes to our sensations that stir feelings for mastery and self-glorification. *Neshamah* denotes our rational faculty. Saadia made a similar classification of the three souls.

It is, moreover, apparent that when the *nefesh* increases in power, the *neshamah* becomes weaker and has no strength to resist the power of the *nefesh*, reinforced as it is by all the other organs of the body. Hence one who overindulges in food and drink can never acquire wisdom. And when *neshamah* and *ruach* get together they overpower *nefesh* and pave the way for a partial opening of the "eyes" of *neshamah* to comprehend the physical but not yet the metaphysical disciplines. The reason for this limitation is due to the power of *ruach* which strives for mastery and gives rise to the sensation of anger. This is then the implication of the verse: "Better is vexation than laughing, for through the sadness of the countenance the heart is made better" (Ecclesiastes 7:3). Sadness of the countenance refers to

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vexations (cf. “why are you so vexed?” [Gen. 40:7]), and the “heart” alludes to our rational faculty.

Subsequently, when *neshamah* finally prevails over *nefesh* with the help of *ruach*, it becomes necessary for *neshamah* to be preoccupied exclusively with wisdom in order that with the help of the latter, *neshamah* will be able to overcome *ruach* and render her subservient to *neshamah*. This is the meaning of the verse, “Be not rash in thy spirit to be angry; for anger resteth in the bosom of fools” (Ecclesiastes 7:9). Anger resteth with fools forever but with the wise only temporarily and when necessary (cf. “For where there is much wisdom, there is much vexation” [*ibid.*, 1:18]; “neither show thyself otherwise” [*ibid.*, 7:16]). For much wisdom increases indignation over the petty vanities of the world and its inhabitants.

Thus the apparent contradictions that appear in the book of Ecclesiastes where the author seems to say one thing in one instance and its opposite another time are only on the surface. The same applies to the Book of Proverbs where the author says: “Do not answer a fool according to his folly” (26:4) and in the following verse: “Answer a fool according to his folly” (26:5). In the Prophets and the Torah, our principal source book, we find similar contradictions, e.g., “Although verily there shall be no poor among you” (Deut. 15:4) and later, “For the poor shall not cease in the land” (*ibid.*, 15:11). In reality they are similar provided we apply to them the proper philosophic notions.

NOTES

1. Cf. Ibn Ezra's concluding statements in his introduction to Ecclesiastes.
2. Like Philo he imputes to Eden the concept of the celestial world of divinity; to the Garden, the intermediate world of the Spheres and Intelligences; to the river, the substance of the sublunar world; to the fountainheads into which the river divides, the four elements of air, earth, fire, and water.
3. Some historians claim poverty as the reason for his travels.
4. To know one's soul, according to Ibn Ezra, is the main objective of philosophic speculation.
5. The mind is the most unique organ in the human body. It is closest to us and yet furthest from us in the sense that it apprehends things that are so far removed.