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RADICAL THEOLOGY IN DEFENSE OF THE FAITH: A FOURTEENTH-CENTURY EXAMPLE

One of the more intriguing phenomena in the history of religious thought—with possible contemporary manifestations as well—might be characterized as follows:

1) An individual interprets the views of a particular religious thinker as an attack—direct or indirect, deliberate or inadvertent—upon a fundamental principle of faith.

2) The individual proceeds to counter the objectionable view, while advancing a forceful defense of the principle perceived to be under attack.

3) The defense offered, upon critical examination, is itself theologically radical and problematic.

The following essay explores a fourteenth-century example of the above phenomenon, whose appearance may be traced and identified both earlier and more recently as well.¹

R. Joseph ibn Shoshan of Spain (c. 1310-c.1380), was characterized by R. Isaac ben Sheshet (Ribash) as a “venerable sage . . . learned in Talmud, familiar with philosophy, a kabbalist, a man of great piety, and meticulous in the observance of commandments”—an evaluation echoed by later writers as well.² R. Joseph’s only extant literary work is a commentary on *Avot*, a major portion of which is devoted to anti-Maimonidean polemic. Indeed, ibn Shoshan’s attitude to Maimonides distinguishes him as a founder of the tradition of scholars such as R. Shem Tov b. Shem Tov, R. Joseph Jabez, R. Meir ibn Gabbai and R. Joseph Ashkenazi, all uncompromising opponents of the Maimonidean

In memory of Rabbi Dr. Walter Wurzburger, ז”ל: master teacher, exemplar of personal ethics, dedicated rabbinic and communal leader, profound and elegant author, and distinguished guardian of *Tradition*.

rationalist orientation.³ Like Jabez, ibn Shoshan formally disassociates Maimonides himself from the extreme views of later “Maimonideans” (views which both denounce) and prefaces his sharpest critiques of Maimonides’ own positions with elaborate praise of Maimonides and protestations of his own inadequacy to challenge such an eminent authority. I have argued elsewhere that ibn Shoshan’s profuse apologies for his criticism of Maimonides should be read in light of the widespread and formidable authority of Maimonides’ works in the fourteenth century.⁴

Those Maimonidean views that most concern R. Joseph are those which he considers the basis for some of the later theological distortions of the *mitpalsefīm* (would-be philosophers)—distortions which include denials of: creation, divine providence, reward and punishment, free will, miracles, divine revelation, and the validity of the commandments. In particular, R. Joseph expounds at length upon Maimonides’ opinions concerning divine omniscience versus man’s free will and miracles versus natural law. Both problems may be classified broadly as conflicts between causality and freedom, in accordance with H. A. Wolfson’s formulation.⁵ In the first case, the causal element is God’s foreknowledge, opposed by the concept of human freedom. In the latter instance, natural causality impinges upon the notion of divine freedom. For the purposes of this essay, we will focus exclusively upon the first conflict.

R. Sa’adia Ga’on formulates the conflict in this manner: “If God knows that which is going to be before it comes into being, He knows in advance if a certain person will disobey Him; now that person must by necessity disobey God, for otherwise God’s foreknowledge would not prove to be correct.”⁶ R. Sa’adia resolves the conflict (as does Halevi)⁷ by maintaining that knowledge is not causative or determinative. In other words, God’s knowledge of what will occur does not itself cause the event or action to occur. Maimonides, however, is not satisfied with this answer; indeed, he does not even bother to mention it in order to refute it. Instead, he sets forth his affirmations (and proofs) of both divine omniscience and human free will.⁸ The resulting conflict is addressed by drawing a qualitative distinction between human knowledge and divine knowledge, the nature of the latter being a matter beyond the grasp of the finite human mind. Both omniscience and free will are affirmed, therefore, but reconciling them is necessarily beyond human endeavor—in the realm of antinomy.⁹

Already in the twelfth century, R. Abraham b. David of Posquieres (Rabad) was provoked to sharp criticism by this Maimonidean view as

presented in the *Mishneh Tora*. He assumed that Maimonides, in effect, had replied that there is no answer to the difficulty and he feared the consequences of such unfruitful discussion for the beliefs of the philosophically unsophisticated pious Jew. Why lead people into theological doubts and then abandon them without resolving newly raised questions?¹⁰

Ibn Shoshan shares Rabad's apprehensions concerning unchecked dissemination of problematic philosophic discussion. The primary targets of his concern, however, are the "fools"—the contemporary would-be philosophers who twist such philosophical dilemmas and doctrines into denials of God's knowledge of human affairs and his involvement in the world:

We must fear and dread and flee as before a sword from allowing our minds to wander among lofty matters [i.e., metaphysical speculation] and from granting permission for our thoughts to be dispatched to and fro, now in the streets, now in the broad places, all the more so to write them in a book which can be read equally by the wise and the foolish, for who gives speech to a book, that it may say to the fool: do not study it!¹¹

Ibn Shoshan therefore proceeds to a vigorous critique of Maimonides' position.¹² The Mishnah (*Avot* 3:15) states: "Everything is foreseen, yet freedom of choice is granted." Could anyone possibly believe, asks ibn Shoshan, that the Mishnah means to say that God knows Reuven will be righteous and yet Reuven has the choice of being wicked? And that the divine knowledge is true while the event unfolds as the opposite of that knowledge? Moreover, if Reuven must be wicked in accordance with God's foreknowledge, then why is he punished for his wickedness? R. Joseph rejects Maimonides' analogy between existence and knowledge, i.e., just as we know that God exists but do not grasp His essence, so too we know that God knows who will be righteous or wicked, but we do not grasp how each individual indeed retains the choice of acting either righteously or wickedly. This comparison, maintains R. Joseph, is invalid; for if we affirm that God truly knows Reuven will marry tomorrow and yet Reuven chooses not to, then we are left with a contradiction. Asserting, however, that God exists but we do not comprehend the essence of his existence, entails no such contradiction. After all, we have not posited that God exists and does not exist simultaneously, which would then entail a contradiction similar to that involving God's knowledge. It is clear that underlying ibn Shoshan's argument is the assumption that the concepts of God's knowledge and human knowledge have more than a merely homonymous relationship. It is,

rather, a matter of God's knowledge being more perfect than human knowledge; "knowledge," applied to God, signifies perfect knowledge.¹³ This assumption—along with the *reductio ad absurdum* argument to the effect that if God does know what will happen and things happen otherwise, then we are attributing error to God, not knowledge—is reminiscent of some of the objections put forth by Gersonides.¹⁴

R. Joseph adds another argument. In the last chapter of his *Eight Chapters*, Maimonides rejects the deterministic position of astrology—for were man's actions pre-determined, the notion of commandments would be rendered meaningless. If, however, we can resolve the problem of causality versus free will by positing the absolute uniqueness and unknowability of God's knowledge, then could not the astrologer rebut Maimonides with the same approach? The astrologer could argue, "We too accept the Torah, while also believing in astrology; and we justify ourselves by saying that we do not comprehend the essence of the commander of this Torah, in order to resolve this problem."¹⁵

Ibn Shoshan continues his critique by challenging Maimonides on the latter's resolution of the problem of the punishment meted out to the Egyptian people (for enslaving Israel), to Pharaoh and Sihon (whose hearts and spirits were hardened by God), and to those of the Jewish people who went "astray after the alien gods in their midst" (predicted by God).¹⁶ In every case the sin appears to have been predestined by God. How then could God fairly punish them?

Maimonides' resolution of the problem of the Egyptian people (and of the Jews who went astray) centers upon the fact that the decree of enslavement concerned the Egyptian nation as a whole, while each individual member of that nation remained free to choose whether to enslave Israel or not.¹⁷ But, questions R. Joseph, why shift the focus from the matter of God's knowledge to the nature of God's decree? The result is simply an added complication, i.e., why were these individuals punished for exercising their free will in fulfillment of God's decrees? Why then does not Maimonides once again reply that just as man cannot apprehend the nature of God's essence, so too he cannot grasp God's knowledge? The question could then be phrased: If, ultimately, God knew whether a particular individual would enslave Israel or not, why was that individual punished? The proper Maimonidean response would have been that we do not understand the nature of God's knowledge. Ibn Shoshan's original objections to this formulation would again apply, but at least additional complications would be avoided and Maimonides' opinion would be applied consistently.

R. Joseph continues his attack: Maimonides' apparent solution to the problem of the retribution inflicted upon Pharaoh and Sihon is that both were particularly wicked and God therefore decided to withhold the possibility of repentance from them, that they might perish in their wickedness.¹⁸ But, counters R. Joseph, is it possible to maintain that God would ever withhold the possibility of repentance from anyone? Reason, Scripture, and rabbinic sources, he demonstrates, would answer in the negative.¹⁹

After further apology for daring to challenge Maimonides, Ibn Shoshan offers his own resolution of the aforementioned difficulties. It is manifestly clear, he maintains, that true knowledge means knowing something exactly as it is (i.e., without possibility of anything, e.g., free will, invalidating that knowledge). It is also evident that all human activities are contingent. The latter point is apparent to one's reason, for man is composed of both higher and lower elements (and faculties) and it follows that at different times he may tend to one or the other aspect of his nature and act accordingly. That man's actions are entirely contingent is clear also from proofs far superior to rational demonstration—from Scriptural passages and rabbinic literature. Ibn Shoshan cites, among others, passages such as: "For now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your favored one, from Me" (Gen. 22:12)—now, and not before; "The Lord came down to look at the city and tower which man had built" (Gen. 11:5)—during the construction, not before; "I will go down to see whether they [of Sodom] have acted altogether according to the outcry that has come to me; if not, I will take note" (Gen. 18:21); "And *if* you obey these rules and observe them faithfully . . . He will love you and bless you" (Deut. 7:12-13). The Midrash states (*Tanhuma, Toledot*, 7): "God does not attach His name to the righteous until after their passing," for it is not known whether they eventually will stray from the right path or not. One Scriptural example was cited previously by R. Abraham ibn Daud,²⁰ to prove a similar point:

When David learned that Saul was planning to harm him, he told the priest Abiathar to bring the ephod forward; and David said, "O Lord, God of Israel, Your servant has heard that Saul intends to come to Ke'ila and destroy the town because of me; will the citizens of Ke'ila deliver me into his hands? Will Saul come down, as your servant has heard? O Lord, God of Israel, tell your servant." And the Lord said, "He will." David continued, "Will the citizens of Ke'ila deliver me and my men into Saul's hands?" And the Lord answered, "They will" (I Samuel 23:9-13).

David's subsequent departure from Ke'ila altered the circumstances, however, and Saul did not come, nor did Ke'ila deliver David to him.

Ibn Shoshan's view, therefore, is that the contradiction between God's foreknowledge and man's free will is grounded upon a mistaken assumption. Man possesses absolute free will and it is only when the action is actually performed that God gains knowledge of it, not before. The Mishnaic dictum, "*ha-kol tsafuy*," means not that "everything is foreseen," but rather, "everything is seen"—a tenable interpretation of the word *tsafuy*.²¹

Remarkably, ibn Shoshan's position on this matter places him—broadly speaking—in the camp of Gersonides, hardly a kindred spirit. Like Gersonides, R. Joseph has endeavored to resolve the problems engendered by the concept of divine omniscience through restriction of God's knowledge.²² This affinity between the views of ibn Shoshan and Gersonides is sensed by Abrabanel, who juxtaposes the two, respectfully but firmly rejecting R. Joseph's opinion, while abruptly and disdainfully dismissing that of Gersonides:

And I also saw a work written by one of the later scholars [R. Joseph], of clear vision, knowledgeable in heavenly wisdom, a kabbalist, and a man of great piety. It was his opinion that the Holy One, blessed be He, does not know that which will occur in the future, but only that which is present, as it occurs. He cited proofs for this from: "For now I know that you fear God," from "The Lord came down to look at the city," from "I will go down to see," stated with regard to Sodom, from "For the Lord your God is testing you. . . ." [Deut. 13:4], and from "That by them I may test Israel" [Judg. 2:22]. And he interpreted "*ha-kol tsafuy*" [to mean] "at the time of its occurrence," as the Mishnah states [Avot 2:1]: "An eye that sees, an ear that hears." I was bent (in anguish) from hearing a man of the offspring of Israel and of its wise men falling into such a snare. What will he do with the prophecies of Balaam, and the portion, "When all these things befall you—the blessing [and the curse]," and the song of *Ha'azinu* [Deut. 32], and all the prophecies of the prophets, whether concerning decrees or simply foretelling of future events; there is no doubt that all represent a foreknowledge of possible events. As for the view of Gersonides, he already revealed it in his commentary on "I will go down to see" [in Gersonides' Bible commentary] ... and in part three of his book *Wars [of the Lord]*. And I thought, I will not mention him nor speak in his name.²³

Gersonides himself, of course, would dismiss ibn Shoshan's theory, with its notions of God's knowledge of particulars and the implication of change in God's knowledge. Whether consciously or not, however, ibn Shoshan has followed Gersonides (and before him, ibn Daud)²⁴ in the radical step of placing limits upon God's knowledge.

What led ibn Shoshan in this direction is an intriguing question. Indeed, in another passage (concerning providence), he himself chastises those who would place a "limit and boundary" to the power of God.²⁵ R. Joseph does seem to prefer upholding a more literal reading of passages whenever possible, to the extent of interpreting the *Akeda* as a decree which God intended Abraham to carry out as part of a test, until the actions and prayers of Abraham had the unforeseen result of causing the decree to be annulled (an interpretation which maintains the plain meaning of verses such as 22:1 and 22:12 in Genesis).²⁶ It may be, however, that in this instance, his most pressing concern was contemporary denials of divine providence; he may have been willing, therefore, to ignore subsidiary problems raised by his interpretations, as long as the essential difficulty—that which endangered the concept of providence—was resolved.

Certainly, the position held by ibn Shoshan is not without difficulties, or ironies. He criticizes a Maimonidean view which, he seems to believe, is characteristic of the philosophic attempt to know matters beyond the ken of human reason—an attempt that succeeds only in perplexing some and leading others to heretical theological positions. R. Joseph's own proffered solution to the problem of God's foreknowledge, however, raises further questions regarding God's mastery of the world, the possibility of change in God's knowledge, and the idea of purpose in creation.²⁷ It also raises the question of who—ibn Shoshan or Maimonides—is adhering more closely to the apparent sense and orientation of the Talmudic dictum in question. I. Husik, in discussing Gersonides' solution to the conflict between God's foreknowledge and human freedom, states that:

Levi ben Gerson's solution, whatever we may think of its scientific or philosophic value, is surely very bold as theology, we might almost say it is a theological monstrosity. It practically removes from God the definite knowledge of the outcome of a given event so far as that outcome is contingent. . . . Maimonides was less consistent, but had the truer theological sense, namely, he kept to both horns of the dilemma. God

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is omniscient and man is free. He gave up the solution by seeking refuge in the mysteriousness of God's knowledge. This is the true religious attitude.²⁸

Whatever one may think of Husik's categorical affirmations of what is "truer theological sense," or "the true religious attitude," he may well be correct in asserting that keeping to "both horns of the dilemma" is the essence of the prevalent position of the Rabbis. It is true that R. Akiva's statement, "*ha-kol tsafuy*," may be, and has been, interpreted in two senses, both grounded in Biblical usage, but only one of which provokes the apparent contradiction between God's foreknowledge and human freedom. Ibn Shoshan, for example, interprets *tsafuy* this way:

He who gazes from on high downwards is called a *tsafeh*. Thus the lookout [stationed upon a wall] is called *tsafeh* [II Kings 9:17]. And since God is referred to as "dwelling on high" [Isa. 33:5], His providence over earth is termed *tsefiya*.²⁹

This is also the approach followed by several other medieval commentators,³⁰ and corresponds to the few other Mishnaic usages of the word.³¹ It is the other possible connotation of *tsafuy*, i.e., foreknowledge, which prompts the problem addressed by Maimonides and others.³² Ibn Shoshan is unique in interpreting *tsafuy* in the former sense, yet at the same time commenting upon it in the context of the problem of God's foreknowledge.

Even assuming, however, that R. Akiva's dictum of "*ha-kol tsafuy*" does not deal directly with our problem, enough rabbinic statements may be marshaled to indicate a definite affirmation of both the concepts of divine foreknowledge and human free will.³³ If R. Akiva's statement does indeed address our problem—as many modern scholars assume³⁴—then it would be characteristic of the rabbinic stress upon practical, educational objectives, rather than systematic inquiries into philosophic issues.³⁵ The paradox, "Everything is foreseen, yet free choice is given," would signify the Rabbis' insistence on affirmation of both principles, despite acknowledgment of the theoretical tension between them. Viewed this way, ibn Shoshan's opinion might be considered the more radical, in having pared away one of the horns of the dilemma; and having done so—paradoxically—in defense of fundamental principles of faith.³⁶

NOTES

1. See, e.g., the Rambam's introduction to *perek Helek*, where he chastises those who attempt to defend the literal interpretation of all rabbinic Aggadah, with the result that "they make the Torah say the opposite of what it intended." (See also *Guide of the Perplexed*, 3:43.) For a contemporary example, see S. Carmy's remarks in his "Editor's Note," *Tradition* 39:2 (2005), 4-6, concerning those who, perhaps "motivated by the fervent desire to safeguard wholesome belief," have responded to the views of a young religious writer by offering objections that seem "so sweeping, so censorious of so much that we consider mainstream Orthodox thought."
2. *Responsa of R. Isaac b. Sheshet* (Jerusalem: 1968), 157. For background data on R. Joseph ibn Shoshan and a digest of fifteenth-seventeenth century characterizations, see my article, "On Maimonides 'Conversion' to Kabbalah," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, vol. 2, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge, Mass.: 1984), 375-86.
3. "On Maimonides 'Conversion' to Kabbalah," 379-84. See R. Shem Tov b. Shem Tov, *Sefer ha-Emunot* (Jerusalem: 1969), esp. gates 1-2; R. Joseph Jabez, *Or ha-Hayyim* (New York: 1958), esp. ch. 9-12; R. Meir ibn Gabbai, *Avodat ha-Kodesh* (Warsaw: 1883). On R. Joseph Ashkenazi, see my mentor, Professor Isadore (Yitzhak) Twersky's, "R. Yosef Ashkenazi ve-Sefer Mishneh Torah la-Rambam," *Saló Baron Jubilee Volume*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem: 1974), 183-94; and G. Scholem, "Yedi'ot Hadashot al R. Yosef Ashkenazi, ha-Tanna mi-Tsefat," *Tarbiz* 28 (1959), 59-90. Significantly, the British Museum manuscript of ibn Shoshan's commentary was copied together with Shem Tov's *Sefer ha-Emunot* and at the request of the anti-philosophic R. Solomon Alkabez.
4. "On Maimonides 'Conversion' to Kabbalah," 380. See B. Septimus, *Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition: The Career and Controversies of Ramah* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1982).
5. See e.g., H.A. Wolfson, *Philo*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: 1947), ch. 14.
6. *Book of Doctrines and Beliefs*, treatise four, as translated by A. Altmann in *Three Jewish Philosophers*, ed. Lewy, Altmann and Heinemann (New York, Philadelphia: 1960), 122.
7. *Kuzari* (New York: 1964), 5:20.
8. *Mishneh Tora*, *Hilkhot Teshuva*, ch. 5; *Eight Chapters*, ch. 8; *Avot Commentary*, 3:15; *Guide*, 3:19-21.
9. *Ibid.*
10. See *Hassagot* of Rabad on *Hilkhot Teshuva*, 5:5. See also I. Twersky, *Rabad of Posquieres* (Cambridge, Mass.: 1962), 272 n. 48. While Rabad assumes that Maimonides did not resolve the contradiction, one might suggest that Maimonides did in fact provide a solution to the difficulty via one of the following methods: 1) Precluding the emergence of the contradiction, i.e., since divine knowledge is incomprehensible to the human mind, insufficient positive data exists for the contradiction to arise (see J. Gellman, "The Philosophical *Hassagot* of Rabad on Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*," *The New Scholasticism* 58:2 (1984), 156-159); or, 2) Interpreting Maimonides' formulation as an argument that divine knowledge is outside of

time, functioning in an “eternal present,” i.e., since divine knowledge operates exclusively in the eternal present, not the future, the apparent contradiction between foreknowledge and free will is eliminated (see *Pirkei Moshe*, the *Avot* commentary of R. Moses Almosnino, to *Avot* 3:15, cited also in *Midrash Shemuel* and *Tosafot Yom Tov*, loc. cit.).

Rabad’s critical comments are emblematic of the reaction of some segments of Provençal Jewry toward unchecked dissemination of Judeo-Arabic philosophical literature in Hebrew and Hebrew translation among the non-philosophically trained masses in Southern France in the late twelfth century. For the historical context, see I. Twersky, “Aspects of the Social and Cultural History of Provençal Jewry,” in *Jewish Society Through the Ages*, ed. H.H. Ben-Sasson and S. Ettinger (New York: 1971).

For recent scholarly discussion of Maimonides’ position concerning freedom vs. determinism, see J. Gellman, “Freedom and Determinism in Maimonides’ Philosophy” in *Moses Maimonides and His Time*, ed. E. Ormsby (Washington, DC: 1989), 139-50, and M. Sokol, “Maimonides on Freedom of the Will and Moral Responsibility,” *Harvard Theological Review* 91:1 (1998), 25-40.

11. R. Joseph ibn Shoshan, *Avot Commentary* (Jerusalem: 1968), 83.
12. *Ibid.*, 83-94.
13. See N. Samuelson, *Gersonides on God’s Knowledge* (Toronto: 1977), 28-30 (on knowledge as a *pros hen* equivocal term); and I. Husik, *A History of Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Philadelphia: 1946), 345.
14. Gersonides, *Wars of the Lord* (photo offset of Riva di Trento, 1560 edition, no date), treatise 3, ch. 2-3.
15. Ibn Shoshan, *Avot*, 85.
16. See Gen. 15:14; Exod. 10:20; Deut. 30 and 31:16.
17. See *Mishneh Tora*, *Hilkhot Teshuva*, 6:4.
18. See *ibid.*, 6:3.
19. Ibn Shoshan, *Avot*, 89. His rational demonstration is based upon the goodness of God.
20. Abraham ibn Daud, *Emuna Rama*, ed. S. Weil (Frankfurt: 1852), 6:2 (pp. 96-97).
21. See E. Ben-Yehudah’s *Dictionary*, vol. 11 (Jerusalem: 1945), s.v. *ts-p-h*. See also, E. Urbach, *Hazal: Emunot ve-De’ot* (Jerusalem: 1969), 229-30.
22. See Gersonides, *Wars*, treatise three. Also, N. Samuelson, *Gersonides on God’s Knowledge*.
23. Abrabanel, *Nahalat Avot* (New York: 1953), 179.
24. Ibn Daud, part 6. See also J. Guttmann, *Philosophies of Judaism* (New York: 1964), 151; I. Husik, 230-31.
25. Ibn Shoshan, *Avot*, 77.
26. In the critique of Maimonides’ theory of miracles, ibn Shoshan stresses the evident, literal implications of the passages recording miraculous acts, adding, “In every matter that you seek to explain and illuminate, seek after straightforward and plain Scriptural passages, or Mishnaic and Talmudic passages, and extract from them the clearly evident meaning which the whole context indicates” (*Avot*, 140). Yet, when absolutely necessary—in his view—in order to conform to the dictates of religious tradition and the

- canons of reason, ibn Shoshan recognizes and affirms the validity of allegorical interpretation (see e.g., *Avot*, 53-54, 73, 125, 130, 138).
27. See Husik, *ibid.*; L. Jacobs, *A Jewish Theology* (New York: 1973), 78.
 28. Husik, 345-46.
 29. Ibn Shoshan, *Avot*, 76.
 30. See, e.g., Rashi and Meiri on this *Avot* passage.
 31. E.g., *Mishna Sukka* 3:9; *Tosefta Shabbat* 13:11. See Urbach, 230 n. 12. Also, H. Kosovsky, *Otsar Leshon ha-Mishna*, vol. 4 (Jerusalem: 1960); Kosovsky, *Otsar Leshon ha-Tosefta*, vol. 6 (Jerusalem: 1961).
 32. See, e.g., R. Jonah Gerondi, R. Joseph ibn Nahmias, R. Isaac b. Solomon of Toledo, Abrabanel and Jabez on this passage.
 33. See e.g., *Sanhedrin* 90b; *Genesis Rabba* 1:4, 27:4; *Tanhuma, Shelah*, 5.
 34. See Guttman, 38; Jacobs, 77; C. Montefiore and H. Loewe, *A Rabbinic Anthology* (New York: 1974), 36; G. F. Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: 1955), 455.
 35. See I. Heinemann, *Ta'amei ha-Mitsvot be-Sifrut Yisrael*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem, 1966), 35; G. Appel, *A Philosophy of Mizvot* (New York: 1975), 10, 74.
 36. R. Joseph's resolution of the remaining questions concerning Maimonides' discussion of the punishments inflicted upon the Egyptians and others, at times appears to follow the lead of Nahmanides. Thus, the Egyptians were punished even though they fulfilled God's decree, because their intention was not to fulfill God's will, but to oppress and afflict Israel (cf. Ramban to Gen. 15:14). Furthermore, the hardening of Pharaoh's heart was not revenge, nor did Pharaoh and his countrymen repent; rather, God enabled them to persevere in order to multiply His wonders and thereby lead them to recognition of the truth (cf. Ramban on Exod. 7:3 and 10:1, and Seforno on Exod. 7:3). This "hardening" was actually an expression of God's mercy—an attempt to restore them to the proper path.

Some of R. Joseph's other proffered solutions appear to be novel. Sihon was already condemned to death by the fact of his being an Emorite, i.e., of the nations concerning whom Israel was commanded, "You shall not let a soul remain alive" (Deut. 20:16). The hardening of Sihon's heart, therefore, served to enable him to receive his just retribution. As to, "This people will thereupon go astray after the alien gods in their midst" (Deut. 31:16), this is not to be understood as a preordained decree or announcement, but rather as an admonition, similar to, "If you do not obey" (e.g., Lev. 26:27-28). The proper translation of the passage, in context, therefore would be: "If this people will thereupon go astray. . . ."