

On Interpretation

Author(s): Simon Rawidowicz

Source: *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, Vol. 26 (1957), pp. 83-126

Published by: American Academy for Jewish Research

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3622300>

Accessed: 27-05-2019 17:51 UTC

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of the Terms & Conditions of Use, available at <https://about.jstor.org/terms>



JSTOR

American Academy for Jewish Research is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*

ON INTERPRETATION*

By SIMON RAWIDOWICZ

I

When one thinks of Israel's spiritual and literary work through the ages — its essence, manifestations and style — one is faced, at first thought, with a peculiar double-layered phenomenon: a "text" on the one hand, its "commentary" on the other. The "text" is limited in space and time, confined to one "cycle" in the history of Israel's existence, to one layer in its thought; it has a beginning and an end, while the "commentary" has no end. The "text" is comparatively short, while the "commentary" is of very great length, continuing on and on through the centuries, our own century included. Technically the "text" is the Bible, all the rest is "commentary." In brief: *Bereshith bara Israel*, in the Bible Israel was creative, afterwards it was only "commenting"; it has become a people of commentators, all post-Biblical Jewish literature being a chain of commentaries on the "text" and commentaries to commentaries. This widely spread thesis assumes in various forms the character of an axiom, and serves also as basis for some religious and political ideologies concerning Israel, for the evaluation of its spiritual character in the past, as well as its prospects for the future. I am not concerned here with the value-judgment predominant in this thesis, repeated again and again in and outside the House of Israel, mostly in a critical and even negativistic attitude; but rather with the factual aspect of this axiom which seems to me to need fundamental revision. First, the adequacy of the understanding of "commenting" which underlies this "axiom," has to be examined; then — the distinction it makes between the "text" and the particular "commentary" as it has developed in the course of Israel's history.

* Unfortunately the author's untimely death made it necessary for others to read proof. Some corrections could not therefore be made.

This axiom is unsatisfactory in two respects: a) it fails to distinguish between the various kinds of commenting, and thus bars the way to the understanding of the meaning of interpretation; b) it goes too far in deepening the gap between "creating" and "interpreting" which adds to the misunderstanding of the very essence of "interpreting." It is not admissible to separate to such an extent creative from interpretive thought as implied in this axiom. There is no creation which is not at the same time interpretive. Still further, not only a thought but even our sense experience is deeply steeped in interpretation. Without undertaking here an epistemological analysis we may say that as soon as we become aware of our sensory impressions, still more so the instant we begin to conceptualize our sense data, while applying certain laws and forms to them, we are already involved in a process of *interpretatio*; we see the "given" in our sense-experience in an interpreted shape. *Interpretatio* is inseparable from any act of thinking or judging; it pervades all our emotional and intellectual apparatus in all its manifestations. If this is the case in the sphere of "primary" perception and thinking, how much more so is it in that of "receiving," "secondary" experience — emotional, aesthetic (the sphere of *Nachfuehlen*, *Nacherleben*, the understanding of the other man in its most elementary meaning). As recipients of matters spiritual of all kinds, for instance as auditors of music we receive most of it in an interpreted form. Who has ever heard a symphony or any musical composition "as such," as it was originated in the mind of the composer? Whenever we hear a musical work, we "get" it interpreted by this or that conductor, performed by this or that orchestra.¹ The philosopher who will be discussed later, who turned *cogitatio* and *extensio* into the two attributes of God said: *Homo cogitat*.² *Homo cogitans* means *homo interpretis*, man is an *interpretator*. The "political animal" is always an

¹ Some of the points alluded to in this study find their more detailed elaboration in the chapter dealing with the problem of *Interpretatio* in Jewish Thought in my "Introduction to Jewish Philosophy" (to be published).

² *Benedicti de Spinoza Ethica* . . . , Part 11, *Axiomata*, 11, ed. C. H. Bruder, 1843, p. 224.

interpreting animal, in his "political" sphere as well as in his personal world of experience at large; more than that: he never ceases by his very nature, and by the nature of "things" outside him, to be an interpreted interpreter.

Without going into a terminological history of the attributes designating all kinds of commenting, which can not be our concern here, I would suggest that we distinguish between the various types of commenting: *explicatio* and *commentatio* on the one hand, *interpretatio* on the other.³ *Commentatio* or *explicatio* are tools for easing the burden of a "document," reliving, bringing nearer the somewhat remote in it, paraphrasing an older statement, substantially repeating the gist of the "document" thus explained. This activity is mainly dictated by an attitude of identification between the commentator (and his "surroundings"), and the commented "document," its meaning and purpose.

In contradistinction to *explicatio* and *commentatio* I would understand by *interpretatio*, with which I deal here, an attempt at reshaping either the "document" interpreted or the world it came from. Here an act of transference is always involved. An invasion of one system by another takes place. *Interpretatio* lives by crisis, in various degrees. The crisis that stimulates it will become its criterion. *Interpretatio* can be characterized by a particular attitude of the *interpretator* who struggles between preserving and rejecting some forms or content of the world at his interpretative "mercy"; by a tension between continuation and rebellion, tradition and innovation. It derives its strength both from a deep attachment to the "text" and from an "alienation" from it, a certain distance, a gap which has to be bridged.

³ The study of the history of the various terms for commenting and the development of their connotations in older languages and civilizations is a task to be undertaken by students in those fields. Here it may suffice to note that in Latin, unlike *explicatio* and *commentatio*, — *interpretatio* (*interpretas*, *interpretator* etc.) has in addition to the connotation of explaining, exposing, etc. also that of *mediating* (linguistically) and *translating* (also more in the spirit than in the letter, *interpretabilis* = also translatable, *interpretamentum* = also translation) which is an act of transference in "body," form, content and atmosphere of a text.

Interpretatio is the "way out" when man is compelled to "take it" or "break it." Many a battle was fought and lost on the battlefield of *interpretatio*. And the battle goes on and will go on as long as *homo* is an *interpretans*.

Explicatio and *commentatio* follow the "text" step by step, "uncover" and explain it from the aspect of its form and content, language and historical background. *Interpretatio* is centered on the "soul" of the text, its *leitmotif*, its main purpose, its essence, its particular character. *Interpretatio* assumes that there is a hidden layer both in the "form" and the "content" of the document to be interpreted; this "hidden" needs uncovering. There is a mystery between the words and between the lines, that which the document ought to have said and did not say, either because it could not say (for various reasons) or it did not want to say — this it is which intrigues the *interpreter*, who will naturally dig in the hidden layers of the "text." He wants to make the implicit in the text explicit, to "spell out" that which is implied.

Needless to add, there are various degrees in *interpretatio*. Not in all of them does *interpretatio* go all the way, manifest all the characteristics mentioned here. One may distinguish between perfect *interpretatio*, where it reaches its peak of fulfillment, and imperfect, partial, or unfinished *interpretatio* (where the reasons for "not finishing" may vary).

Interpretatio does not begin with the Alexandrians — who would naturally come to the mind of a contemporary student in any field of learning, when pondering the problem of interpretation — though they have played such an important role in this field. It is probably as old as man thinking and feeling, expressing himself, communicating, understanding or mis-understanding the other man. Primitive man must have become aware of the first manifestations of the problem of interpretation in trying to "understand" his night-reality, his dreams, to decipher their language, to find the link between visions of dreams and notions of all kinds gained during the waking part of life. (Dream and waking life are perhaps even to the average man of our society, and still more so to the psychologist, to some extent a kind of system of "mutual" interpretation). This natural process of

interpretatio in the life of the individual, his society, and civilization, under "normal" conditions, became more complicated, richer in problems, as tradition and authority were established, which man tried to undermine or to eliminate; as man became heir to some past, and his inheritance became a problem which he had to "solve" either by getting rid of its burden or by making it bearable for himself.

Thus the various stages in the development of religious, social and political ideas and institutions, in early and recent times, including all transition from myth to reason, magic to science, "intuition" to knowledge, from the many to the one (pluralism to monism) and vice versa, from heaven to earth and from earth to heaven with or without a Jacob's ladder — are substantially stages of *interpretatio*; in every step made in them by man *interpretatio* is deeply involved. The necessity of *interpretatio* lies at their very roots. It brings them into being and shapes their character. There is no work of thought or of art which has no *interpretatio*, which is not at bottom interpretative. In some of the great works of world literature, old and modern, *interpretatio* of "human conditions" is their very core. Every poet, novelist, playwright, composer and painter struggles with *interpretatio*, is constantly interpreting. The problem of *imitatio*, so prominent in arts, has to be viewed fundamentally from the perspective of *interpretatio*. No area of man's spiritual activity is free from *interpretatio*. "Modern man" is often surprised at and makes fun of the older, classical or mediaeval interpretations — in religion, visual arts, literature. He does not realize how much his own system of understanding, research, evaluation, appreciation of arts, all his creativity is *interpretatio*-centered. When in an adequately critical frame of mind, he avoids the pitfalls of older *interpretatio*, only to fall into new ones, made by him and his time.

In most kinds of *explicatio* and *commentatio* there is "something" — and usually even much — of *interpretatio*. As soon as a statement about a given "text" (document, or another statement) is not purely tautological, strictly verbal paraphrasing — it is already in the web of *interpretatio*. Literal *interpretatio* is a *contradictio in adjecto*. All *interpretatio* transcends by its

very nature the literal. The literal can only be identical with itself, repeating itself. Even in the purely philological sphere, in explaining words, terms, or sentences, an act of *interpretatio* is involved. This would apply also to synonymic explanation. *Explicatio* that "defends" its text is nothing but *interpretatio* that comes to save the text, to avert a danger threatening its validity or authority. Still more so is the conscious rejection of *interpretatio* (as described here) an *interpretatio* in itself. Here most literalists are probably mistaken when they feel safe on the ground of their verbalism and are seemingly happy not to go astray and fall into the trap of *interpretatio*. Yet it is conscious and purposed *interpretatio* — where acceptance and rejection, continuation and breaking up are interwoven — which is capable of absorbing a "given" world and reshaping it, giving it a new meaning and direction (and there are various degrees in this giving). *Interpretatio* worthy of its name — when reaching some measure of perfection — is a revolution from within, planned and executed by insiders with the purpose of reshaping their "home," without any pressure (or any decisive pressure) from outside, disregarding adjustment to the outside.

Interpretatio is a fundamental phenomenon in the world at large in the sphere of religious, political and social ideas. An adequate grasp of this phenomenon is essential for the evaluation of the decisive battles in the spiritual life of ancient and modern civilizations. It is of still greater relevance for the evaluation of the development of Israel's thought in ancient times, and its transitions from them to modern times, especially for the understanding of the relation between the "text" of Israel's beginning and the accumulated interpreting work that followed.

Needless to say, when I allude here to the need of seeing *interpretatio* as the elementary function that pervades every act of feeling and thinking, thus preparing the ground for "elevating" *interpretatio* to the high status of what is generally called creative writing and thinking,⁴ I do not think of the

⁴ It is obvious to any student of the work of the spirit how unjustified is the current description of certain branches of literary work as "creative writing," as if a novel or a poem or a play were not interpretative, and an Essay in

predominantly “technical” aspects or parts of research in general. Far be it from me to be disrespectful of the many devices of research, especially of grammatical-philological and historical scrutinizing of the documents of the past, of the great work involved in editing reliable texts and all the indispensable annotating and footnoting. Yet in the footsteps of our Masters who distinguished between *melakhah* and *hokhmah* I would say with the greatest admiration for *melakhah* in the field of learning that no culture can live by the bread of *melakhah* alone. *Interpretatio* has certainly a claim to *hokhmah*. The beginning of wisdom is *interpretatio*.

II

All spiritual and literal activity of post-Biblical Israel has to be viewed in the light of a more adequate understanding of the very essence and function of *interpretatio* than the current one. This applies with special relevance to two fields of Israel's activity to which I shall confine myself here: 1) The work Israel achieved during the *Bayith Sheni*, 2) Jewish philosophy from Saadya Gaon onwards. If one is allowed to distinguish between an “external” time (in the chronological sense) and an “inner” spiritual or ideological time, I would like to state that by *Bayith Sheni* I understand here the “time” which starts with the Babylonian Exile and Ezra the scribe, and goes on till a few centuries after the destruction of the second Temple, including the time of the final shaping of the Babylonian *Gemara*.⁵ As hinted, the *Bayith Rishon* is generally considered the era of Israel's creativity, while the *Bayith Sheni* inaugurated Israel's “commenting” activity which has not ceased since. The picture drawn of the relation between *Bayith Rishon* and *Bayith Sheni* is usually that of a beginning and a continuation. The prophets

Philosophy and History, etc. were not “creative.” It would be more correct to distinguish between different kinds of interpretative creativity; technically also between research-writing and non-research writing.

⁵ For the presentation of this concept of *Bayith Sheni* cf. Part One in my *Babylon and Jerusalem* (1957), pp. 55 ff.

started and the *Sopherim* brought "it" to final fulfillment. What the prophets and the seers have done in the *Bayith Rishon*, the *Sopherim* and the men of *Halakhah* and 'Aggadah have done in *Bayith Sheni*. Some would reduce the difference between the *Torah* of the *Bayith Rishon* and that of the *Bayith Sheni* to that which exists between a general law or statement and its detailed application.⁶ It is more than questionable whether, e. g., the *Aggadist's* identification of the third of prophet Micah's postulates of goodness and of God's askings of man with the burial of the dead and the bringing the bride to the *Huppah*⁷ and many many similar identifications stated by the men of the *Bayith Sheni*, known to students of *Halakhah* and 'Aggadah, can be described as a commentary or as a "detailed" inference from the broader general statement thus "commented." He who spoke of the special kind of man's walking with his God said one thing, while he who identified this "walking" with the burial of the dead and the bringing of the bride to the *Huppah* said another; they have not said the same thing just in different language. Their divergent approach in formulating the ultimate ideal of man's walking with his God is derived from a set of differences in their reality and thinking, a difference which cannot be overlooked and described just as a "commentary" or a kind of detailing of implications involved in the text.

To consider the work of the *Bayith Sheni* a "commentary" means both to miss the essence of the work of the *Bayith Sheni* and not to grasp the meaning and inner structure of *interpretatio*. The great measure of freedom which the *Bayith Sheni* took with the world of the *Bayith Rishon*, the revaluation of personalities of the Biblical era in all its values, and the reshaping of leading

⁶ They follow — perhaps unknowingly — in the footsteps of Midrash Tanhuma, *Noah*, 2: ונתן לנו את התורה בכתב ברמו צפונות וסתומות ופרשום בתורה שבע'פ' וכו'. ולא עוד אלא שהתורה שבכתב כל לות ותורה שבע'פ' פר טות ותורה שבע'פ' הרבה ותורה שבכתב מעט וכו'. This *kelaluth-peratuth* concept is no help towards a better understanding of the problem discussed here.

⁷ Sukkah 49b, והיינו דא"ר אלעזר מאי דכתיב הגיד לך אדם מה טוב ומה ה' דורש: עשות משפט זה הדין ומאהבת חסד זו ומילות חסדים והצנע לכת עם אלהיך זו הוצאת המת והכנסת כלה לחופה ומאהבת חסד זה ומילות חסדים והצנע לכת עם אלהיך זו הוצאת המת והכנסת כלה לחופה. Cf. also Makkoth 24a.

figures in later forms of the *Bayith Sheni* are manifest to the student of Talmud and Midrash. The usual concept of commentary can in no way be applied to the Oral Law in its relation to the Written Law nor to the *Bayith Sheni* in its deep-going "struggle" with the *Bayith Rishon* in its totality. The Oral Law or the *Bayith Sheni* did not just add something of its own to the Written Law or the *Bayith Rishon*. It is not just a continuation or a development but a new act of weaving undertaken by master weavers of rare power. In brief, the *Bayith Sheni* is not a commentary but an *interpretatio* of the highest order. *Bayith Sheni* is second only in time, it is first in essence, in its own particular essence. I dare say *Bayith Rishon* and *Bayith Sheni* are two beginnings of a system of thought and mode of life. This means, that Israel has two beginnings. The second beginning or the *interpretatio* achieved by the *Bayith Sheni* may serve as a model for *interpretatio* in the sphere of thought at large. It established one of the great patterns for the way in which to deal with tradition, with an inherited world of facts, ideas, and values. This act of free recreating will always, when properly understood, teach man (not only Jew) how to interpret; to uproot and stabilize simultaneously; to reject and preserve in one breath; to break up and build — inside, from within, casting a new layer on a previous layer and welding them into one mold (which became later the great problem of Jewish thought and being).⁸

Hence that cardinal thesis of the representatives of the Oral Law formulated in various ways, especially in this classic one: "that which a *talmid vatik* will teach in the future was already said to Moses on Sinai,"⁹ is of paramount relevance to the

⁸ For a detailed discussion of the problems involved in the relation between *Bayith Rishon* and *Bayith Sheni* cf. *Babylon and Jerusalem*, pp. 77 ff., 104 ff.

⁹ Yerushalmi Pe'ah 2,4; Hagigah 1, 5 and in other sources; also Midrash Rabbah, Koheleth 1. 29: כתיב (דברים ט', י') ויתן ה' אלי את שני לוחות האבנים . . . כחובים באצבע אלהים ועליהם ככל הדברים. אר' יהושע בן לוי עליהם ועליהם כל ככל דברים הדברים המצוה כל המצוה ללמדך שמקרא ומשנה הלכות חוספתות והגדות ומה שתלמיד ותיק עתיד להורות כבר היה וניתן הלכה למשה מסיני וכו'. ר' ברכיה בש"ר חלבו . . . כך שמעת תורה מפי תלמיד חכם יהי בעיניך

understanding of the *interpretatio* of the *Bayith Sheni*. This thesis of the ancients, with which Maimonides opens his *Mishne Torah*: "All the commandments which were given to Moses on Sinai were given in their *Perush*,"¹⁰ opens up a series of problems as regards the very concept of the Sinaitic revelation as well as the absoluteness and uniqueness of the Written Law and its precedence over the Oral Law, which is not our concern here. For our problem it is of great importance to see in this persistent effort of the creators of the Oral Law to elevate it to the status of the Written Law a decisive moment in the struggle to give the *Perush* an equal status with the "text" it interprets in so far as they share the same origin. Equality of origin and time for the *Perush* with the "text" means absolute equality of value (irrespective of the distinction in the degree of their validity). This equality of value is bound to lend the *Perush* an autonomy, a self-sufficiency *sui generis*.

From Neh. 8.8,¹¹ describing that memorable half day when Ezra read the Torah,¹² we learn that he read the Torah in an "interpreted" way. Yet the redactor of the final version of the *Mishnah*, R. Yehudah Ha-nasi', teaches us that *interpretatio* is inseparable from the revealed Written Law from its very beginning: Israel on Sinai did interpret each word which they heard on Sinai as they heard it.¹³ R. Yehudah Ha-nasi' shows here a deep insight into the essence of *Perush*. Support can also be found here for our thesis of the interwovenness of creativity and *interpretatio*, their simultaneity and their equality.

כאילו שמעוה אונך מהר סיני וכו'. See also Sifra, Beḥuḳḳothai 8, 12; B. Megillah 19b; Shir Hashirim Rabbah 1.29; B. Berakhoth 5 D; Shemoth Rabbah 28.4.

¹⁰ *Mishneh Torah*, opening sentence of the Introduction, based on the Tannaitic and Amoraic sources quoted in the preceding note: כל המצוות שניתנו כל המצוות שניתנו בפרושן ניתנו וכו' לו למשה מסיני בפרושן ניתנו וכו'. Cf. also *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhoth Mamrim*, I, 1.

¹¹ ויקראו בספר בתורת האלהים מפורש ושום שכל יובינו במקרא.

¹² Neh. 8.3. The two instances in the Pentateuch where the verb פּרַשׁ is used, in qal and pu'al (המקלל) — Lev. 24.12, מקוּשׁשׁ עֲצִים — Num. 15.34) are both linked with God who supplies Moses with the unknown פּרַשׁ (לפרש להם) פּרַשׁ (על פי ה'). Together with Ezek. 34.12 (בחוך צאנו נפרשות) the verb פּרַשׁ occurs in the Bible four times.

¹³ *Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael* . . . by Jacob Z. Lauterbach, 1949, vol. II, p. 267.

III

This concept of *interpretatio*, its essence and function, becomes especially manifest in the idea of God as developed in the *Bayith Sheni*. *Interpretatio* did not mean here a limited spiritual act but a permanent activity, an intellectual concentration which never ceases. *Interpretatio* and learning are one, and both are attributed to God.

The unique contribution of the *Bayith Sheni* in the field of religious thought lies in the concept of God, namely in visualizing God as a learning being, an eternal learner. Not only Rav who gave us a description of God's twelve hour work day,¹⁴ or 'Ula' who reduced God's world after the destruction of the Temple to *Halakhah* only,¹⁵ but many others of the creators of the Oral Law emphasize God's learning, His participation in man's learning. The very fact of God's learning is liable to arouse much questioning as to His "essence." Learning as such comes to satisfy a want in the mind of him who learns, to fill a gap in his deficient knowledge, to eliminate ignorance, to satisfy curiosity and amazement. In brief, it is a "human, too human" activity. How can one ascribe it to God, the most perfect Being Who is above any want, desire, deficiency; everything needs Him while He has no needs whatsoever?¹⁶ No wonder that this concept will be considered "blasphemous" not only by any religious man outside the House of Israel but will also seem very strange and even absurd to many a Jew who has not gone through the metamorphosis of post-prophetic *interpretatio*. Of our concern here is not the "that" of God's learning but its "what." God learns the *interpretatio* of the Torah given by Him. Although whatever a *talmid vatiḳ* might teach before his master was said by God to Moses, He has to learn the teachings of His

¹⁴ 'Abodah Zarah, 3b.

¹⁵ Berakhoth 8a: מיום שחרב בית המקדש אין לו להקדוש ברוך הוא בעולמו אלא ארבע. אמוה של הלכה בלבה. Cf. Maimonides' interpretation of this statement in his Preface to his *Mishnah Commentary*, ed. M. D. Rabinowitz, 1948, p. 69.

¹⁶ As formulated by Maimonides in the opening of *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoth Yesodei Ha-Torah*, I.

interpreters. Many are the Talmudic-Midrashic descriptions of God's participation in the intellectual work of the Tanna'im and 'Amora'im, learning with them and from them, as if the giver of the Torah has to use the *interpretatio* of the Tanna'im and 'Amora'im in order to understand the Torah, His Torah. God is a partner in the *interpretatio* of His Torah, although He is in no need of the practical implications of this *interpretatio*: The Torah was not made for angels, still less so for the Giver of the Torah Himself. God's active interest in the *interpretatio* of His Torah is purely for the sake of *interpretatio*; human *interpretatio* becomes divine. Aristotle established the concept of God as the Thought of Thought. The Thought of Thought is the prime mover of Nature (and History). God-*Interpreter* of Israel of the *Bayith Sheni* (that preserved the Biblical idea of the creative God with all its attributes in its absolute fullness) is the first mover of Israel, the participant in its intellectual activity and in its national survival. Were Rav and the Tanna'im and 'Amora'im who shared his concept of the learning God to establish an analogy between God and man in the spirit of Lev. 19.2, they might have left us the imperative of *interpretatio*: ye shall be *interpretatores* for I am an *interpreter*.

The learning, i. e. interpreting God, who quotes the decisions of interpreters of His Torah, which aroused the amazement of Moses;¹⁷ who is forced to sit and "bind crowns" to the letters of the Torah¹⁸ in anticipation of the *interpretatio* of one of his interpreters, R. 'Akiba', to whom "things" were revealed that were not revealed to Moses;¹⁹ who invites Moses for halachic discussion,²⁰ — does not bar doubting in *Halakhah* discussion,²¹ —

¹⁷ Midrash Tanhuma, *Huḳḳath*, 8.

¹⁸ B. Menahoth 29b.

¹⁹ Debarim Rabbah 19.4. Also Midrash Tanhuma, Deut., *Huḳḳath* 8; Pesikta de-Rav Kahana, ed. S. Buber, 1868, 39b; Sifre, ed. Meir Ish Shalom, 1864, Deut. 1.17.

²⁰ God's speaking to Moses "face to face" (Ex. 31.11) which has troubled the interpreters of the Torah — the "rationalists" in particular — is interpreted in this spirit by R. Yiṣḥak, Berakhoth 63b: אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא ב:למשה אני ואחיה נסביר פנים בהלכה. God interprets (שפירש) the Torah to Moses also in Bemidbar Rabbah, *Huḳḳath* XIX, 3, where God and Moses are seen as master and pupil.

²¹ B. Gittin 6b.

employs the support of mortal interpreters so that His opinion will prevail as against that of His heavenly Academy, that is united in their Halakhic decision against Him.²²

Of exceptional relevance to our problem is the statement made by one of R. Yehudah Ha-nasi' 's pupils, R. Yann'ai: The words of the Torah were not given in an absolutely clear-cut way but God stated about each of his words "49 aspects (faces) of *tahor*" and "49 aspects of *tame*' "; when asked by Moses as to the decision, He answered: it is up to the majority to decide.²³ Such a statement is certainly one of those over which one should "startle the world" (to use the expression of some of the men of the *Bayith Sheni interpretatio*, when faced with Biblical verses which shook them strongly). The attribution of "49 faces" against "49 faces" to the revealed Torah contains a great danger to the main value of the Torah, its very claim of authority and absoluteness which it is bound to make on man. Is there any revealed religion that would allow itself to go so far as to tell its receivers and keepers that it does not say definitely yes or no, it does not establish and order behavior for all times but is open to reasoning, to arguing, leaving all decisions to them? Is there a God Who reveals a Law and surrenders its understanding for all purposes to men, entrusts its application to a majority of humans which by its very nature depends on circumstances of all kinds, is not stable, consistent, can not claim absoluteness "from eternity to eternity?"²⁴ Seen from our approach, the main meaning of this concept of the not "clear-cut" Torah lies in the establishing of the interpretability of the Torah, announced by God Himself to an extent not to be found, even to a much lesser degree, in any other system of revelation. Here *interpretatio* reaches not only the high degree of equality with the "text" it interprets. It takes for itself some — or

²² B. Baba Meši'a' 86a. See also B. Menaḥoth 23b; Ruth Rabbah 4.7; Bemidbar Rabbah, 23.6; Yer. Berakhoth near the end.

²³ Midrash Tehillim, ed. Buber, 1889, 12.4; Yer. Sanhedrin 4.6; Midrash Tehillim 7.7.

²⁴ For God's "bowing" to the principle of human majority vote in Halachic matters, His enjoyment of the *Tanna'im* who dare to disregard His intervention through a *Bat Qol*, cf. the R. 'Eli'ezer controversy in B. Baba Meši'a' 59b.

much — precedence over the “text.” For the very equalization of a secondary source of authority with a primary one is liable not only to add tremendous prestige to the source elevated to that equality but also to deprive the primary source of some of its natural primacy.²⁵ All authority is finally vested in *interpretatio*. What did God give to Moses and Moses brought to Israel? A “text” for *interpretatio*; not a finished, independent, self-sufficient text, but one which is open and has to remain open to *interpretatio*;²⁶ more than that, one which demands *interpretatio*, obliges Israel to go on interpreting, thus discovering in the process of learning the Torah the duty of *interpretatio*; also of *interpretatio* as a secret of the account Israel was able to give of itself in history.

So overpowering was the love of the *Bayith Sheni* interpreters for learning, for reasoning and discussing the problems of Torah, for the *masa' u-mattan*,²⁷ that they were not afraid to impose the process of learning and interpreting on God himself, and to such an extent that His Torah was not closed up, but open for all possible fluctuations of *interpretatio*. Only a God Who learns Torah, loves *interpretatio*, can give an “open” text, — in order to encourage learning, to incite the “battle of Torah.” Only He can entrust man with a multi-faced Code — deficient from the perspective of the most perfect Giver —, the validity of which will depend on man, not on one superman, or on the perfect moral or intellectual man, but on the many, on those who will carry the burden of the *shakla' vetarya'* and will be able to form the majority in any dispute to arise.

Hence it should also become clear that the Oral Law is not

²⁵ As to the precedence of *Mishnah* and *Gemara'* over *mikra'*, *Dibrei Soferim* over *Dibrei Torah*, cf. e. g. the Baraitha in B. Baba Meši'a' 33a–b; *Ḳiddushin* 30a (about the division of man's time for learning); Yer. Berakhoth 1.4; Pe'ah 2.4; Sanhedrin 11.4; *Tanḥuma, Noah*, 3. The problems involved in this process of equalization can not be discussed here. Cf. “Sha'ar Ha-Bayith” in *Babylon and Jerusalem*, pp. 89 ff.

²⁶ Cf. my suggestion concerning an “open Judaism” in chapter XIV of Part Two of *Babylon and Jerusalem*,” pp. 512 ff.

²⁷ Cf. e. g. *Sifra, Beḥuḳḳotai* 1. 2: וְכִי לֵהִיּוֹת: אִם בַּחֲקֵי תִלְכוּ [וְיִקְרָא כִּי, ג'] וְכִי לֵהִיּוֹת עִמָּלִים בַּתּוֹרָה וְכִי עַם לֵיָם בַּתּוֹרָה. וְכֵן הוּא אֹמֵר אִם לֹא תִשְׁמְעוּ לִי וְכִי לֵהִיּוֹת עִמָּלִים בַּתּוֹרָה וְכִי

to be viewed either as a mere “commentary” on the Written Law, or a kind of “distortion” of it. It represents as an *interpretatio* the creativity of Israel during a considerable number of centuries in its second attempt to crystallize its essence and establish for itself a status in the world. It is a work that has its value in itself. It stands on its own. As was said before, its creators not only elevated it to the degree of the text, but were sometimes not afraid to hint at a kind of “if not higher,” or “if not more” for this, Israel’s second beginning.²⁸

IV

The second illustration for my suggestion concerning the revision of the text-commentary thesis is taken from the field of Jewish philosophy.

Students of mediaeval Jewish Thought usually divide it up in three main sections, following the three streams or systems of thought of Kalam, Neo-Platonism, and Aristotle with his school. Far be it from me to minimize the need of tracing the work of mediaeval Jewish thinkers to the sources of classical Greek thought and Muslim thought and theology, in their broadest lines as well as in their minute details. As in regards to the other areas in the field of Israel’s work, its political and social

²⁸ As an encouragement for a more adequate understanding of the work of the *Bayith Sheni* as well as of the Sinaitic origin of the Oral Law — or its standing up to the Sinai measure, of its concept of its own creativity — I may refer here to Rabban Yoḥanan b. Zakkai’s reply to his pupil R. ‘Eli‘ezer b. Hyrkanos, in Pirḳei Rabbi ‘Eli‘ezer 3.2, who says: *אמשול לך משל למה הדבר דומה. לבור הזה שאינו יכול להוציא מים יותר ממה שהיה מוציא כך אני איני יכול לומר דברי אמשול לך משל למה הדבר דומה. למעיין זה שהוא נובע ומוציא מים ויש בכוחו להוציא יותר ממה שהוא מכניס כך אחר דומה. יכול לומר דברי חורדה יותר ממה שקבלת בסיני* R. Yoḥanan b. Zakkai’s “*mashal*” seems to have been problematical to one of his 18th century *interpreters* — either the Gaon of Vilna or one of his pupils (cf. *ibid.*, . . . David Louria’s note) — who emended *ממני* for *מסיני*.

R. Yoḥanan b. Zakkai’s comparison of the disciple to a *מעין*, not to a *בור* — is of high relevance to the evaluation of the *Bayith Sheni* and the Oral Law as such. They are in their relation to *Bayith Rishon* and the Written Law not a *בור* but a *מעין*. So is *interpretatio*.

ideas, utmost attention is also to be paid to the general background and atmosphere surrounding Jewish mediaeval and post-mediaeval thought. But the decisive meaning and relevance of Jewish thought are not to be found in its "traces" of the outside sources.

Viewed from the perspective of the inner development of Jewish thought and being, the contacts of the Jewish thinkers of the Middle Ages and subsequent centuries with one outside source or the other, is of a rather peripheral character. The center of gravity lies in all efforts or systems of Jewish thought in their understanding and presentation of their Jewish heritage, in their reshaping of Israel's past, in their attitude towards this past; in establishing or strengthening a basis for Israel's survival at large; in brief, the center lies in their *interpretatio*. When Jewish philosophy from the 9th century onwards fought so hard to make Israel a thinking people, to establish thought in Israel, as if Israel should add to its commandments the commandment to think,²⁹ — it fought for *interpretatio*, for making Israel an interpreting people. Mediaeval Jewish thought, beginning with Saadya and reaching its peak in Maimonides grasped the full meaning of *interpretatio*. This is where its main relevance lies (and I am not going to evaluate in this study its achievements and shortcomings in this field).

One of the main features of this *interpretatio* is the transferring of the ancient Hebraic world of vision, the pictorial with all its forms of "simile" and "riddle," to the world of clear-cut concepts as developed by the philosophers from Saadya onwards.

A deeper analysis would show that mediaeval and post-mediaeval Jewish Thought continue — in their own way — the work begun by the *Bayith Sheni*, especially in the direction of interpreting both the remnants of the ancient *mythos* and the world of vision of the *Bayith Rishon*. The struggle between the "primitive" vision, the visual, the pictorial which is wrapped in the shape of riddles, puzzles, similes, "signs" on the one hand and the "secondary," more "mature" or "ripe" world of more or less clear concepts, as objects of conscious, critical cognition,

²⁹ Cf. my *Philosophy as a Duty*, London, 1935.

logical or scientific judgment on the other, is one of the decisive struggles of man, in his religion, thought and art, his civilization at large. The transition from the pictorial to the conceptual — and the “relapse” from the latter to the former —, also deeply connected with the struggle between *mythos* and *ratio* in their broadest meaning — needs probably the most urgent study for the evaluation of our civilization, ancient and modern. These struggles and transitions, for various reasons, assume a still deeper relevance for the making of Israel, its crises and transformations through the ages. In the beginning Israel lives in the visual, pictorial, “sees all the voices” (Ex. 20.18) on Sinai, before it and afterwards, during almost all the *Bayith Rishon*. At the end of the *Bayith Rishon* the process of transition from the pictorial to the conceptual sets in, which reaches its maturity in the *Bayith Sheni* — via *interpretatio*. It is here that the conceptualization of the first layer of Israel’s being takes shape (in *Halakhah*, as well as in other aspects of Israel’s civilization). From the visual to the conceptual — this is the road that Israel treads from the *Bayith Rishon* to the *Bayith Sheni*. It is here that Jewish philosophy — mediaeval and post-mediaeval — continues the operation of conceptualization, of purging, of strengthening *ratio* against *mythos*, of “translating” the vision of ancient Israel into clear concepts, (and here it has its fore-runners in the camps of *Halakhah*, *Targumim*, the Alexandrian School). The great battle of Saadya Gaon and Maimonides, e. g., against anthropomorphism (the natural vision of God in the first and even the second layer — the Biblical and post-Biblical — of Israel’s existence), is essentially a concept-*interpretatio* to Israel’s ancient world of the pictorial. Maimonides’ opening of the *Moreh Nebukhim* with the *interpretatio* of the “anthropomorphic terminology” of the Bible — its first 48 chapters — is not incidental or meaningless as it seems to some students of Maimonides.³⁰ It is most typical for the guiding stimulus which

³⁰ E. g. David Kaufmann, *Geschichte der Attributenlehre*, 1877, p. 367; Wilhelm Bacher, *Die Bibelexegese Moses Maimunis*, 1896, p. 45; cf. my “She’elath Mibnehu Shel Moreh Ha-Nebukhim,” *Tarbiz*, 1935, vol. vi, No. 3, pp. 42 ff.

animated the Jewish thinker of the Middle Ages, who considered it his duty to save the truth of the ancient vision through transferring it to the safe and well established realm of the conceptual. This transfer from the pictorial to the conceptual via *interpretatio* is most manifest in the efforts of mediaeval Jewish thought to establish a conceptually "satisfactory" concept of God (the highest "object" of vision to the *Bayith Rishon*), a compatibility between Revelation and Reason (*mythos* and *ratio*), between Prophecy and cognition; as well as in other areas of its speculative activity.

In brief, Jewish thought from about the 9th century onwards up to modern times, our own days included, is fundamentally an *interpretatio* of Israel's thought and being in the first two "layers" of Israel's existence. *Interpretatio* means shaping a new system of thinking, valuing and living. The problems of Jewish philosophy are not merely metaphysical or theological. They concern at bottom the very existence of Israel, mediaeval and post-mediaeval, struggling for the clarification of its essence, seeking grounds for its status and survival as Israel in a non-Israel world, trying to demonstrate its possibility, the necessity of its continuation. Jewish mysticism went up in its "*merkabah*" to discover a higher space where a new *interpretatio* of Israel's past and a new vision for its future could be gained. Some of the Kabbalists were yearning for a new era (*shemithah*) in which the Torah would be rearranged, read anew, and thus free Israel from this given system of Law. The men of *Halakhah* and *'Aggadah* on the one hand, the philosophers from the 9th century onwards on the other, did not wait with their *interpretatio* for a new *shemithah* to arrive. The liberty they took with the Torah is of a kind which is indispensable for any system of *interpretatio* within an established tradition.

In order to understand fully the meaning and function of *interpretatio* it would also be advisable to study the history of the opposition to *interpretatio*, as here understood. There are two kinds of opposition. The first is presented by traditionalists, strict literalists who would not go beyond "explaining" the text as it is or commenting on it in its own spirit. They fully accept the Tannaitic-Amoraic *interpretatio* of the Torah, but are afraid

of any other *interpretatio*: it might lead to undermining the authority of the established, to breaking up the monolithic unit of tradition. Identity judgment, repetitive continuation they accept. *Interpretatio* in the deeper and broader sense they reject. A second kind which has to be subdivided in various categories, includes those who do not consider themselves responsible for Israel's survival at large or do not even want to see Israel's spirituality continue its course in the arena of history. Christianity's rejection of the "law" is a rejection of *interpretatio* as achieved by the *Bayith Sheni*. In Israel, any antinomian tendency, ancient or modern, rationalistic or mystical, messianistic or this-worldly reformistic, is fundamentally a refutation of that *interpretatio*. In recent times, tendencies to start Jewish History with events or movements of modern times, as well as the longing for "*bereshit*," for a totally new "beginning," are strongly nourished by the deep desire to get rid of the inherited *interpretatio*, fundamentally of that achieved by the *Bayith Sheni*.

This struggle over *interpretatio* in Jewish thought which assumed various shapes through the ages is one of the greatest struggles in the House of Israel, though not always fully grasped or appreciated by those involved in the battle and their followers. I will confine myself here to one juxtaposition illustrating the position taken by two men of Israel, Maimonides and Spinoza. One is the Jewish philosopher par excellence,³¹ while the "Jewishness" of the other is of problematic nature. In both thought (Jewish or general) has reached a peak. One is the master, the other — his rebellious pupil.

V

From his beginning (*The Commentary to the Mishnah*) up to his end (*Moreh Nebukhim*) Maimonides was fighting for establishing in Israel the right, nay, the duty of *interpretatio*. Accepting the cardinal thesis of the double-facedness of the inherited

³¹ Recent discussions as to whether Maimonides is to be considered a "philosopher" or not do not make any contribution towards a deeper grasping of Maimonides' intellectual personality and achievement in Judaic thought.

“text” (Biblical and post-Biblical), — the visible (*ẓāhir*) and the hidden (*bāḥin*) —, to him as to Saadya *interpretatio* (or *ta'wil*,³² as distinct from *sharḥ* or *tafsir*) is a duty, a commandment.³³ It is no accident that Maimonides set out to elaborate his attitude to *interpretatio* in his extensive preface to the presentation of the 13 “roots” of Jewish religion (*'uṣul shari'atina*) in his commentary to the first Mishnah of the last chapter in Sanhedrin.³⁴ For there is a strong link between the struggle over *interpretatio* and the attempts at formulating the “roots” of Israel. Maimonides distinguishes between three *firaq* (categories)³⁵ — as regards the understanding of the words of the *hakhamim*³⁶ (the Talmudic-Midrashic interpreters) and this is still more applicable to the understanding of the Torah. The first category consists of people who accept the words of the *hakhamim*³⁷ “as they are” (in their *ẓāhir*) and do not apply to them the method of *ta'wil*³⁸ at all, the impossible is to them “necessary of existence,” because they are ignorant in sciences (*'ulum*), far from knowledge (*Ma'ā'rif*), have no perfection to be aroused (to knowledge) by themselves; neither have they found an awakener to awaken them;³⁹ they think that the *hakhamim*

³² The *ta'wil* in mediaeval Jewish thought is discussed in one chapter of my mentioned *Introduction to Jewish Philosophy*.

³³ Cf. my “Ba'ayath Ha-hagshamah Le-Rav Saadya Gaon ve-la-Rambam,” *Keneseth*, 1938, p. 324 ff.

³⁴ Here the original text of the Holzer edition is used: מבוא לפרק חלק מפירושו במאמר המונה לרבינו משה בן ר' מימון וצ"ל. בלשון ערבי ובהעמקה עברית עם מבוא והערות בליא מאת הק' יצחק אהרן . . . האלצער . . . ברלין תרס"א.

³⁵ Maimonides starts with *firaq* for category, group; then continues with *ta'ifat* (which has also a religious connotation).

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 8 ff.

³⁷ Maimonides does not translate this term into Arabic: *ibid.*, p. 7: אן א לח כמים כלאם החכמים עא"ס. Later, when speaking of their worthiness as scholars in general, he uses — only once here, in contradistinction to this traditional term — the term עלמא (*ibid.*, p. 9).

³⁸ The translator Salomon b. Yoseph ibn Ya'kub of Saragossa translates here פירושו נסתר: תאויל. The distinctiveness of the various terms for commenting as used by Maimonides (and other Judeo-Arabic writers) is unfortunately lost in most if not all Hebrew translations from Arabic.

³⁹ Maimonides returns afterwards in other works to the two sources of wisdom or knowledge, the one originating in the wise (or good), the other

meant in their sayings only what they understand in them, their *zāhir*, though what is “visible” from some of their words would arouse amazement with the ignorant (*‘aw’am ’alma’s*) and still more so with the élite (*khawaṣ*). These poor people (*‘alta’ifat ’almaskina’t*) believe that they honor the *ḥakhamim* while they lower them to the lowest degree, and, by God, they destroy the “beauty” of the Torah, (*maḥāsīn ’aldīn*), obscure its light. God said about the laws of the Torah⁴⁰ that the nations hearing all the laws will say that only a clever and wise people is this great nation, while the nations, when hearing the words of the *ḥakhamim* as presented (in their *zāhir*) by this people would say: only a silly people is this little nation.⁴¹ Maimonides thinks that these preachers⁴² would have done better if they would have kept silent or would have admitted (when preaching about certain *’Aggadoth*) that they do not understand the purpose of the *ḥakhamim* in those statements, neither how they should be interpreted.

The second group (*ta’ifat*), also numerous, consists of people who accept the *zāhir* of the words of the *ḥakhamim* as their real purpose, and mock at them,⁴³ considering themselves intellectually superior to the *ḥakhamim*.⁴⁴ Maimonides identifies the men of the second group, the “cursed” one, with those connected with

coming through instruction. Cf. *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoth De’oth*, I, 2; *Moreh Nebukhim* II, 29.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 8: פִּי טַחֵם אֶלְתֹּנִיִּל (Hebrew translation: בתורה התמימה).

⁴¹ *Ibid.*: Maimonides turned (Deut. 4.6, *רק עם חכם ונבון הנוי הגדול הזה*) exactly into its opposite: *רק עם סכל ונבל הנוי הקטן הזה*; *... קאלווא*]; the opposing of *נבון* to *נבל* is not without interest.

⁴² In the original: אֶלְדֵּרְשֵׁינִי. Maimonides did not change his negative attitude to them in his old age. Cf., e. g., *Moreh Nebukhim*, III, 59, II, 29; there these “preachers” are joined — for disrespect — by the poor commentators who think that the knowledge of the *sharḥ* of the words is the wisdom (or knowledge) — which is of singular relevance to the discussion of our problem: כַּמָּא יַפְעַל אֶלְדֵּרְשֵׁינִי וְאֶלְמַפְסְרוֹן אֶלְמַסְכִּין אֶלְדִּין טְנִיא אֵן מַעֲרַפֶּה שְׂרַח אֶלְאֶלְפֶּאֶטְ הוּ אֶלְעֵלֶם . . .

⁴³ Here Maimonides interposes (?) a Hebrew phrase into the description of this *ta’ifat*, *ibid.* 9: וִילְעִינוּ עַל דְּבָרֵי חֲכָמִים.

⁴⁴ Their “superiority” is both in *‘aql* and *ḏihn*, *ibid.* 9: וְיִזְעֻמוּן אֲנָהֵם אַעֲקֵל מֵאֶלְדֵּרְשֵׁינִי וְאֶלְכִי דֵּהֵן.

medicine and astrology who are philosophers in their own eyes.⁴⁵ He considers them more ignorant than those of the first *ta'ifat*. Were they trained in science, so that they would have known how things should be said to the vulgar (*gumhur*) and to the élite (*khawaṣ*) in matters pertaining to God, etc. and had they understood the practical part of philosophy, then it would have become clear to them whether the *hakhamim* are scholars (*'ulamā'*) or not and the meaning of their words would have been understood by them.

In contrast to these two groups Maimonides describes the third *ta'ifat*, the ideal one, i. e., those who accept the principle of *interpretatio*. This body, Maimonides says, consists of so very few that one can not describe it as a *ta'ifat* except in the way we call the sun a species (*nau'*).⁴⁶ They are men to whom the greatness of the *hakhamim* and the "goodness" of their thinking has been established. They know that the *hakhamim* have reached the truth and knew the impossibility of the impossible and the existence of the necessary. They realize that the *hakhamim* do not talk "nonsense"⁴⁷ and that their words have a *zāhir* and a *bāṭin*, and whenever they speak of things impossible they do so in the fashion of riddle and simile. Here Maimonides finds support in the opening of the book of the head of the wise men (*ra'is alḥukamā*) where *mashal* and *ḥidah* occur.⁴⁸ Mai-

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*: ואבחר מן יקע פי הדא מלאעתקאד מדעיי אלטב ואלהאדיין בקצאייא אלנום. Maimonides had little respect for his professional colleagues, who know "only" medicine. He often took the opportunity to underline his sharp rejection of astrology. E. g., *Mishneh Torah, Hilkhoth 'Abodah Zarah* II, 1; *Moreh Nebukhim*, III, 37; his letter to the Jews of Marseilles.

⁴⁶ For the second time in his analysis of the three *firaq* he underlines his emphasis by adding "by God" to his statement about the extreme smallness of this *ta'ifat*: ואלמאפיא אלמאלאה ודי לעטר אללה קלילה נוא. this time God is invoked for an enthusiastically positive statement.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 10: פעלמוא אנהם עא'ס לא יחכלמן פי מחאל.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*: כהבאה... וקאל להבין משל ומליצה דברי חכמים וחידותם, Prov. 1.6. Maimonides finds support in Prov. 1.6 also in his opening of the first part of his *Moreh Nebukhim* (צדד אלנו אלאל) in discussing the problem of interpreting the *mashal*. There he also quotes in this context the relevant *mashal*-verses from Hosea (12.11) and Ezek. (17.2, 21.5). Here, in referring to the pure linguistic meaning of *ḥidah* he quotes Samson, Judg. 14.12 (אחודה

monides takes for granted that he who “knows language” knows that *ḥidah* is a statement the purpose of which is in its *bāḥin* not in its *zāhir*. For the sayings of all men of science⁴⁹ “in the higher matters” are but riddle and simile. The author of Proverbs, Song of Songs and Ḳoheleth⁵⁰ — who “did this” by *Ruah Ha-Ḳodesh* is here called upon to justify the method of the wise men in the exposition of their wisdom.

What does *interpretatio* (*ta'wil*) intend to achieve? It intends to “take out” the words of the *ḥakhamim* “from” their *zāhir* so that they will conform to reason, truth, and the Bible.⁵¹ Maimonides points here to the employment of *ta'wil* by the *ḥakhamim* to the Bible — “taking them out from their *zāhir*,” turning them into similes, “which is the truth” (*alḥaq*), as a justification for his *interpretatio* of the words of the *ḥakhamim*. Maimonides asks his reader that if he be one of the two first *fiḥaq* he should not pay attention to any of his words in this matter, for they would not only not suit him, they would even harm him and he would hate them, as it is with a man used to bad and heavy food when given light and “balanced” food. (The Hebrews in the desert used to onion, garlic and fish in Egypt who complained about the Manna in the desert, Num. 11. 5 ff., furnish Maimonides with a suitable illustration for his food analogy). If you are, Maimonides concludes this passage, one of the third *fiḥaq*, and when you come across something of their sayings which *'akl* (*ratio*) would not accept, you will “stand still” at it and you will know that it is a riddle and a simile, you will lie down perturbed at heart, searching the mind in its *interpretatio* (*ta'wil*), pondering to find the way of truth and the notion of rightness, then you will look into my words which will be useful, God wishing (*'in sha'a 'allah ta'ali*).

(נא לכם חידה). This verse is not quoted in *Moreh Nebukhim*, though Samson is there referred to in the discussion of the first “degree” of prophecy (II, 48).

⁴⁹ The translator translates אהל אלעם חכמים, which is misleading, as by חכמים Maimonides here always means the men of *'Aggadah* and *Halakhah*. Cf. *Moreh Nebukhim*, I, chap. 17 and in other places.

⁵⁰ Ḳoheleth is mentioned here with a qualification: אעני שלמה פי משלי שיר השירים ובעץ קהלת.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 10: ואכראנה ען טאהרה חתי יטאבק אלעקל ויואפק אלחק וכתב אלחנייל.

Maimonides remained truthful to this commandment of *interpretatio* all his life. It was the urge for *interpretatio* which animated all his work. He was one of those very few of the third *firqat*. In him this *firqat* found one of its most perfect representatives — to be emulated later on by his followers, rejected violently by his opponents. His mastery as an *interpretator* found its expression in all his work, to reach its peak in the *Moreh Nebukhim* on the one hand,⁵² on the other in *Mishneh Torah* — this great “summing up” *interpretatio* by the leading mind of mediaeval Jewry of the greatest *interpretatio* of Israel, its work between the days of the Babylonian-Palestinian Ezra and the Babylonian Geonim. This *interpretatio* of Maimonides still waits in many ways for the revealing and deciphering *interpretatio* — of its philosophy, structure, its *zāhir* and *bāṭin*, that which is “summed up” in it as well as that which did not find its way into it. These two monuments of Maimonides’ *interpretatio* are to be studied together, without asking which of the two was more “important,” “decisive” for Maimonides, which came nearer to his own heart. As Maimonides was one and indivisible — to the extent creative, thinking, interpreting man is one, — so is his work (notwithstanding differences of purpose, frame of reference, and time), so are the *Mishneh Torah* and *Moreh Nebukhim*. Though varied in central purpose and subject-matter it is *interpretatio* they share as a common decisive stimulus that brings them so close to each other. They will always stand out as a testimony to Israel’s faith in *interpretatio*, to Israel’s capability of *interpretatio*.

VI

Many were the opponents of Maimonides’ *interpretatio* — the “literalists,” traditionalists of various shades — in his own days and in the subsequent centuries. On the eve of modern times there stands out one opponent of Maimonides, to whom he was very much indebted, against whom he rebelled so vehemently, a “literalist” of a new kind, without the faith of the

⁵² Cf. also the Introduction to the first part of the *Moreh Nebukhim*.

mediaeval anti-Maimonides literalists: Baruch Spinoza. Viewed from the perspective of our problem, one of the strongest and most polemical motives of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670) is Spinoza's passionate rejection of *interpretatio* as it was advocated and practiced by his predecessors in Israel from Ezra to Maimonides and his followers.

Spinoza states clearly his main purpose in the *Praefatio* to the *Tractatus*:⁵³ Seeing that the natural light (*lumen naturale*) is despised and even condemned as a source of impiety, *humana commenta* are given the validity of divine "documents," credulity is extolled as faith, noticing the controversies of philosophers raging in Church and State, he determined to examine Scripture *de novo integro et libro animo*, without attributing to it doctrines which he does not find in it as clearly as possible.⁵⁴

The "simplicity" of the prophets, their non-philosophical character, or irrelevance for speculation, their being confined to piety and morality,⁵⁵ the inadmissibility of interpreting them with the help of mediaeval *ta'wil* or similar methods, are some of the main pillars on which the *Tractatus* is built. Here Spinoza finds the decisive support for the separation of revelation and philosophy, (the main objective of the *Tractatus*⁵⁶) — which men of *interpretatio* of the revealed religions have identified, trying to demonstrate that the "message" of the one could in essence be brought to mankind by the other, with little or no serious effort.

Spinoza never misses an opportunity to emphasize his standpoint which forbids the attributing of any "doctrine" to the Bible which is not to be found in it *clarissime*.⁵⁷ He states this

⁵³ All references to the *Tractatus* (for *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*) are made to the Bruder edition (*B. de Spinoza Opera* . . . vol. III, Lipsiae, 1846).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 8, § 20: . . . "et nihil de eadem affirmare nihilque tanquam eius doctrinam admittere, quod ob eadem clarissime non edocerer."

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8, § 21: "Postquam haec novi, facile determinare potui, prophetarum auctoritatem in iis tantum pondus habere, quae usum vitae et veram virtutem spectant; ceterum eorum opiniones nos parum tangere."

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, *Praefatio*, p. 8, § 24 ff.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 103, § 3: . . . "sed contra nihil tamquam Scripturae doctrinam amplecti auderent, quod ab ipsa quam clarissime non edocerentur." Spinoza repeats eleven times in this chapter his warning not to attribute to Scripture any doctrine not stated there "clare," or "clarissime."

his credo in the beginning of the first chapter of the *Tractatus* — “De prophetia” — : All our statements (about matters concerning the Scripture) can be drawn only from Scripture (*ex Scriptura sola*); the writings of the prophets are the only source about matters which transcend our *intellectus* (here Spinoza points also to the non-existence of prophets in his days); thus we should not state or reason from the similes of the prophets, nor attribute to them anything they did not say clearly.⁵⁸

The full elaboration of Spinoza's approach in this field is to be found in the central chapter (not only for our problem) of the *Tractatus* — VII, “De interpretatione Scripturae.” It is there that he does not confine himself to critical allusions to Maimonides,⁵⁹ but undertakes an open frontal attack on him, which takes up a considerable part of the last section of the chapter. The opening of the chapter makes it clear that Spinoza is perturbed by, and very angry at the abuse of Scripture through the “human commentaries,” both by the masses (*vulgus*) who are not anxious to live according to Scripture, and the theologians who wring their inventions (*figmenta et placita*) from the Scripture,⁶⁰ the zealous interpreters of Scripture who are more eager to preserve their *auctoritas* than to arrive at the true meaning of the Scripture. Agitation of the mind, much of the hatred would

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, § 23, 24: There is nothing in Scripture that does not agree with man's understanding, the prophets have taught nothing that is not simple and easily understood by all (. . . “nisi res admodum simplices, quae ab unoquoque facile percipi poterant”), their teachings would move “maxime” the mind of the masses (*multitudinis animus*) to obedience to God; thus he became convinced of the separation of Scripture and reason: “omnino mihi persuasi, Scripturam rationem absolute liberam relinquere et nihil cum philosophia commune habere, sed tam hanc, quam illam proprio suo talo niti.”

Ibid., p. 17, § 7: . . . “hac quidem cautione, ut nihil de similibus rebus statuamus aut ipsis prophetis aliquid tribuamus, quod ipsi non clare dicaverunt.”

⁵⁹ For Spinoza's references to Maimonides in the *Tractatus* cf. chap. I, *ibid.*, p. 20, § 19 (about vision of angels); chap. V, p. 84, § 47 (the wrong quotation from Maimonides concerning the *Ḥasidei 'Umoth Ha-'olam*); chap. X, p. 158, § 16 (Maimonides' opinion on Job), p. 164, Note (on the *Synagoga*); chap. XV, p. 201, § 21 (in connection with contradictions in the Bible, relation between theology and reason).

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 103, § 1 ff.

disappear if people believed more in what they testify of Scripture (*quod verbis de Scriptura testantur*), if they would not attribute to the Scripture that which is not clearly there. The current *interpretatio* of Scripture — under the guise of religion — which he fights here, he calls a great crime.

It is not only the religious, social and political evils in society, resulting from the dominant interpretation of Scripture that cause Spinoza to reject all the “human commentaries” of the “divine documents.” His “naturalism,” his acceptance of *natura*, gives him a new and safe basis for dealing with Scripture. He is sure that the desired method, his method of Scriptural interpretation not only does not differ from the method of interpreting nature, but both methods are almost the same.⁶¹ As the *methodus interpretandi naturam* examines the history of nature and deduces from it — *ut pote ex certis datis* — definitions of natural matters (*rerum naturalium definitiones*), so the method of interpretation of Scripture treats Scripture.⁶² I am not concerned here with an examination of Spinoza’s study of Scripture, but with his attitude towards the “traditional” *interpretatio*. For our problem it may suffice to say that Spinoza’s very conviction of the possibility of the application of the method of nature-interpretation to the study of Scripture bars the way to a meaningful *interpretatio*, to seeing the real problem in Scripture, where *interpretatio* is most needed.

In elaborating his system of interpreting the Bible Spinoza was certainly guided by the criteria of truth established by Descartes: clarity and distinctiveness. To this extent Spinoza may be described as the first *peshat*-Jew of modern times, whose preference of *peshat* is stimulated not only by his reaction against the Jewish tradition of *interpretatio*, but also — and decisively — by the new mathematico-mechanical outlook which was the basis for his philosophy at large. This “Cartesian” Jew,

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 104, 61.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 104, § 7: . . . “sic etiam ad Scripturam interpretandam necesse est eius sinceram historiam adornare et ex ea tanquam ex certis datis et principiis mentem auctorum Scripturae legitimis consequentiis concludere.”

Spinoza’s concept of “historia” in the context of his discussion of the Scriptural interpretation needs special scrutiny.

man of *mos geometricos* (where, as it is known, he went further than his master, when he put his *Ethica* into the strait-jacket of that *mos*), was bound to reject the traditional inferring from this method at all. Here as in many other places in the *Tractatus* it is as if Maimonides' statement about *hidah* and *maschal*, in the preface to "Helek" and in the *Moreh Nebukhim*, were in front of him while he was writing the book of his great battle.

Did this *peshat*-interpretation help Spinoza in his undertaking? Was he able to arrive at the hoped for ideal of interpreting the Scripture solely from the Scripture? Did his not attributing to the Bible doctrines which he did not find there *clarissime* enable him to arrive at a better and closer understanding of the ancient world, which he tried to understand from "within" only, or, "as it was?" Spinoza showed a deep insight into the problems which face every interpreter of the Bible — particularly when he emphasized the indispensability of his mastery of the Hebrew language for the understanding of the Bible, even for the New Testament.⁶³ Then, however, he had to admit the insurmountable linguistic difficulties in trying to satisfy this fundamental requirement which make this indispensability a mere desideratum, hardly ever to be fulfilled.⁶⁴

Spinoza is, however, not aware of the main difficulty that

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 106, § 15: . . . "Et quia omnes tam vetreis, quam novi testamenti scriptores Hebraei fuerunt, certum est, historiam linguae Hebraicae prae omnibus necessarium esse, non tantum ad intelligentiam librorum veteris testamenti, qui hac lingua scripti sunt, sed etiam novi; nam quamvis alii linguis vulgati fuerint, hebraizant tamen".

This notwithstanding, though Spinoza was — as far as knowledge of Hebrew was concerned — adequately equipped to examine the New Testament, as he examined the Old Testament, he felt unfit to do so because of his ignorance of Greek, which he does not mention here. Cf. the concluding § 47 of chap. X, *ibid.*, p. 166.

⁶⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 113 ff., § 47 ff., where Spinoza enumerates the causes of "ambiguities" particular to Hebrew, in addition to those of other languages; also, *ibid.*, p. 112, § 44 ff. Many of the mediaeval Jewish grammarians and thinkers complained about the "loss" of (ancient) Hebrew and their deficient knowledge of it. Cf., e. g., Halevi, *Kuzari*, II, 68: כאשר חסר לנו היום בעבור . . . שאבד הלשון ממנו . . . עם דעתו שאנחנו; Maimonides, *Moreh Nebukhim*, I, 64: היום בלתי יודעים לשוננו and others.

confronts the student of the language of the Bible, the difficulty of language *per se* — language not only of an ancient text, the “secrets” of which are lost, but of any text, any text of his days (later on: also his own “text”) — namely: the difficulty of language as such, of this so-called “medium of expression” or communication, which is inseparable from its “contents” on the one hand, and is their *interpretatio* on the other. Not only verbal language, but the language of sound and color in all the arts, also demands by its very nature *interpretatio*; it opens up to the fortunate only through the magic key of *interpretatio*. The extent of his not being aware of the problem of language as such — of the “hidden” in that “instrument” of self-expression and communication, of the fundamental interconnection between language and thought — which makes itself so strongly felt in his identifying the method of Scriptural *interpretatio* with the *method naturam interpretationis*, — becomes particularly manifest when he presents Euclid as a model for the ideal “simplicity” and understanding in general.

Near the end of the first part of the seventh chapter, where he elaborates his method of Scripture-*interpretatio*, before opening the second part in which he examines the views differing from his in this field, Spinoza says: Euclid, who wrote only of very simple and most understandable things, can be understood easily by anyone in any language; we need not have a thorough knowledge of his language in order to understand his *mens* and true opinion; we have not to inquire about the author’s life, pursuits, and habits, in what language for whom and when he wrote, the *fortuna* of his book or its various readings (*neque varias eius lectiones*) etc. Then he establishes a Euclidean analogy which deserves utmost attention. Here he assures us that what he said about Euclid can be said about all books which deal with things perceptible by their nature. Ergo the *mens* of Scripture in moral questions and its opinion can easily be obtained from its “history.”⁶⁵

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 118: § 67, § 68: “adeoque concludimus, nos mentem Scripturae circa documenta moralia ex ipsius, quam habere possumus, historia facile posse assequi et de vero eius sensu esse certos.”

Was Spinoza justified in this analogy between Euclid and Scripture? If Euclid can be easily comprehended by anyone in any language, is it not because his subject matter does not depend on language at all, or in no way to such an extent as the subject matter of the Old and New Testament as well as of some other documents like those of Plato and Aristotle, Homer and the many playwrights — and again that of Spinoza himself? If thought — religious, philosophical, political — could have been expressed by as limited a number of signs, letters, or symbols, as mathematics, *interpretatio* would not have been the most vexing problem of man almost since his very beginning. Spinoza is not alone in this overlooking of the fundamental difference between mathematics and all kinds of verbal and visual creativity where language is so indispensable — and adds so much to the problems of the documents to be studied and understood.

The Spinoza of the *Tractatus* is here again in line with the Spinoza of the *Ethics*. There he sets out to deal with human nature and its affections as if they were lines of a geometrical figure.⁶⁶ Here his faith in *peshat* blinds him to the very nature of the problem of “*de interpretatione Scripturae*,” a problem which has confronted and will always confront the conscientious reader and student of any literary document, whether revealed by God or man-made, sacred or profane, old or new.

Spinoza is aware of the great difficulties in his method of interpretation of the Scripture *ex ipsius historia*, so that he does not hesitate to admit that we are ignorant of the true meaning of the Scripture in many places.⁶⁷ But he relegates these insurmountable difficulties to the attempts at finding out the meaning *mens* of the prophets in matters which have to be imagined, of which we can not get a clear and simple concept, since they are not conceivable through themselves.⁶⁸ In his *peshat*-optimism he proclaims proudly: matters which are easily conceivable through themselves will always be easily under-

⁶⁶ *Ethica* . . .

⁶⁷ *Tractatus*, 118, § 65: . . . “ut affirmare non dubitem, nos verum Scripturae sensum plurimis in locis vel ignorare, vel sine certitudine hariolari.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, § 66: Cf. *ibid.* the note on “*res perceptibiles*.”

stood, and quotes the proverb: *intelligenti dictum sat est*.⁶⁹ But how will the wise benefit from the one *dictum* if he does not go a little beyond it, if he does not try to link it up with other *dicta*, implied or alluded to in this *dictum*, connected with it, if he does not employ another method of *interpretatio* than the one demanded here by Spinoza?

On the one hand Spinoza is confident that he has established the true method of Scriptural interpretation,⁷⁰ dismissing matters in the Scripture which we can not get with the help of *ratio* and *intellectus* as being more of *curiositas* than of *utilitas*. The teachings (*documenta*) of true *pietas* are expressed in most ordinary words (*verbis usitatissimis*) and understood simply and easily. As true salvation (*vera salus*) and blessedness (*beatitudo*) consist in a true assent of the soul, we can gain certainty about the *mens* of the Scripture in (matters) concerning the two — and we need not trouble ourselves with other matters which we do not grasp by *ratio* and *intellectus*. Yet, these other matters — the *reliqua* — are just where the problem of *interpretatio* starts, where *interpretatio* becomes a most urgent task, this is when “*de interpretatione Scripturae*” ought to have begun to “dig.” These *reliqua*, the Cartesian *peshat*-Jew of the 17th century, the admirer of Euclid who can be understood in any language (as a matter of fact, almost without any language) was unable — or unwilling — to see. On the other hand, with all the confidence in his approach to the Scripture, Spinoza admits that his “true method” of Scriptural interpretation, which requires “only” the aid of *lumen naturale*, is not sufficient to explain everything in the Scripture. Yet not the method is to blame for this *defectus*, but the fact that this path has never been used by men, and has thus become difficult and hardly passable⁷¹; in other words,

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 118, § 66.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 119, § 69.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 119, § 70: . . . “quod via, quam veram et rectam esse docet, nunquam fuerit culta, nec ab hominibus trita, adeoque successu temporis admodum ardua et fere invia facta sit” . . . At the end of chap. VII, Spinoza describes his method of interpretation as the best and twice underlines that the cause of its “difficulties” does not lie in the nature of the method but only in the carelessness (*socordia*) of men who neglected the “history” of the Bible at a time when the necessary material for study was still available;

because of the negligence of men in this field, the right *via* was not taken, but the *via dolorosa* of the traditional *interpretatio*.

This *via* of the “true method” did not bring even its originator to the “promised land” of an adequately understood Scripture. For about five years before the publication of the *Tractatus*, Spinoza confessed that he never understood the Scripture, though he has studied it for a number of years.⁷² Notwithstanding the impassability of the *via* urged by him, Spinoza rejects sharply the traditional methods of *interpretatio* — and Maimonides gets the lion’s share of the attack. He dismisses sharply Maimonides’ method of *interpretatio*, not only as useless (*plane inutilis*; this adjective is used here twice by Spinoza, in two neighboring paragraphs) but also as harmful and absurd.⁷³ Spinoza rejects Maimonides’ method of the metaphorical *interpretatio* of Biblical sayings that contradict reason (quoting Maimonides’ statement about the interpretation of the Biblical texts in connection with the problem of the eternity of matter or *creatio ex nihilo*, in *Moreh Nebukhim* II, XXV), his acceptance of a dominant agreement among the prophets, and their perfection as philosophers and theologians; also his thesis that the true meaning of the Bible can not be found in the Bible itself and should not be sought there.⁷⁴ More than that, he is also the defender of the masses (*vulgus*) against Maimonides, whose method would make them dependent for the understanding of the Bible on the philosophers, depriving them of the certainty which they can get by their simple reading (*ex sincera lectione*).

Spinoza’s indebtedness (and “ingratitude”) to Maimonides

once he even adds malice to carelessness on the part of these men, *ibid.*, p. 120, § 73; p. 125, § 94.

⁷² Cf. Spinoza’s letter to Willem van Blyenbergh [January 28, 1665] *Opera*, ed. Bruder, Vol. II, p. 241, § 3: “Quod vero me spectat, quia plane et sine ambagibus profiteor, me sacram scripturam non intelligere, licet aliquot annos in ea insumpersim, . . .

⁷³ The final sentence of the Maimonides criticism in § 87, *ibid.*, p. 123: “Qua propter hanc Maimonidae sententiam [in § 86: haec methodus] ut noxiam, inutilem et absurdam explodimus.”

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 122–23; § 84: “Quare ex sententia Maimonidae neque eius verus sensus ex ipsa constare potest, adeoque neque ab ipsa erit petendus.” This statement too needs revision.

was often emphasized, especially since the middle of the 19th century. It seems to me that the elucidation of the contrast between Maimonides' and Spinoza's attitude to *interpretatio* would open a way to a somewhat deeper understanding of Spinoza's rebellion against Maimonides. He was to him — rightly — not only the symbol of philosophic *interpretatio*, trying to solve the age-old problem of Reason-Revelation through the *via interpretativa*. He saw in him also the symbol of the continuation of the *interpretatio* of the Pharisees.⁷⁵ This second aspect in Maimonides is to Spinoza of singular relevance. To examine Spinoza's attack on Maimonides would demand a detailed analysis of their respective philosophical standpoints, their concepts of *natura*, prophets and prophecy, and Israel at large. This is not our concern here. It is rather to point to the meaning of Spinoza's rejection of the *interpretatio* of both Maimonides and the Pharisees (whom he twice couples with the Popes, once using one against the other — let the one demolish the other);⁷⁶ and especially to indicate the results from his own "true method" for the understanding of Israel's existence, the connection between his method and his idea of the Torah, which was of such great importance for the development of the concept of Judaism in the post-Spinoza centuries, in and outside Israel.

VII

To what extent did Spinoza succeed or fail in his "true method" of Scriptural interpretation, how far was he — could he be — consistent, or how far was his criticism of his opponents justified — these problems, as well as questions concerning the relevance of his understanding of the Bible to his world of thought in general, need a special study. As has been hinted, Spinoza's

⁷⁵ Spinoza justly describes Maimonides as a Pharisee, but he is mistaken when he considers him the first of the Pharisees to demand the "accommodation" of the Scripture to *ratio* (chap. XV, *ibid.*, p. 198, § 4, where Yehudah Alfakhar is introduced as the representative of the majority of the — mediæval — Pharisees who dissented from Maimonides in this respect).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 111, § 38; p. 123, § 88.

“literalism” arouses many problems. All that can be argued — justly — against a concept of history or rather a system of historiography such as this of Leopold v. Ranke, who was sure he saw and described things of the past “as they were” (whom Johann Gustav Droysen called a “eunuch of objectivity”) can with no less vigor be said against the *peshat*-method of the author of the *Tractatus*.

Spinoza's limiting of Bible interpretation to a kind of purely immanent reading of the “text” — which practically has to be satisfied with a partial interpretation, ignoring many if not most of the “difficulties” of the Bible, amounts to a rejection of a deciphering, widening, re-shaping interpretation, i. e., of *interpretatio* as such. It is a kind of *explanatio* which leaves — even within its own system — most of the problems, especially the most relevant and thorny ones, unexplained.

Spinoza fights for the understanding of the Bible from within in such a way that the “within” neither discloses itself fully to its *interpretator* nor is “encouraged” to open itself, to go on struggling for its survival. Spinoza not only expels Maimonides' *ratio* from the field of Biblical interpretation, in fact, he goes much further in his rejection of the older methods of Bible interpretation. That there is a *bāṭin*, a hidden layer in the revealed text was accepted — with differing emphasis — by mystical as well as by reason-centered Judaic thought, by the *Targumim*, by *Halakhah* and *'Aggadah* — each one of them applying different methods, using different tools for the discovering of the *bāṭin*. Spinoza rejects the double-facedness of the Bible — and in so doing rejects all the *bāṭin* concepts of the past — the *bāṭin* as such which opens the way to *interpretatio* that “does something,” that uproots and builds, sustains and enlivens an old and inherited text and its world of ideas and values.

Interpretatio in its perfect sense — as said — is impossible where the *bāṭin* is so fundamentally excluded. *Interpretatio* bridges the gap between past and present, the interpreted “text” (the interpreted world in it) and the present of the *interpretator*. He transfers himself to the past to find the “point” where the present could be linked up. He revives the past, strengthens the present. *Interpretatio* means here: continuation,

expanding, welding past and present, through deciphering the *bāṭin* in the light of the *zāhir* — to prepare the ground for a new layer of *zāhir* and *bāṭin* in the living “text” of those who feel obliged to preserve the old one. It is here an act of renewal from within — and how different is this *bāṭin-zāhir* “within” from the “within” of the *Tractatus*. It is also as if Spinoza, who could be described as the philosopher of Being (of the Parmenidean type, if one may continue the fundamental distinction between the Parmenidean and Heraclitean schools of thought in “modern” times, and one certainly may), rejected the traditional *interpretatio* which was too Heraclitean for him, full of movement, movement of the past, of the present to the past, of becoming.

From Ezra to Maimonides and his followers *interpretatio* was a process of continuation of the Bible (the “text” of Israel), which means the extension of its life-force. Spinoza offers an interpretation confined to the “within” — with the elimination of the *bāṭin*, *ratio* and tradition, — to its “language” and “history” (neither of which is fully accessible). This *interpretatio* narrows the text, “strangles,” stultifies it. No Pharisaic *perush*, no Maimonidic *ta’wil*, nor any other *interpretatio* is admissible. This means the “text” remains “as it is,” is finished, nothing can and should be “added” — it is isolated, it is bound to disappear in its splendid isolation. This also means, the post-Biblical at large has to confine itself to that which it finds absolutely clear and distinct in the Bible. There is no “talk” of the present with the past, no contact, no clash or conflict which intensify contact, no discussion with the *zāhir* through the medium of the *bāṭin*, no struggle with the “true meaning” of the past from the perspective of the present, of time old and new. To Spinoza the Scripture *was* — it is no more, i. e., it is no more in a sense that it can not satisfy all the needs that only science and philosophy are able to.

Spinoza did not set out to destroy the Bible. On the contrary, he came to cleanse it from the “dust” of prejudices of the *vulgus* and “additions” by theologians and philosophers. In the process of this “cleansing,” the restoration of the Bible to its “what it is” — it becomes a text that only *was*, can not be now as it

was.⁷⁷ Since he does not want to see the Bible as a life-giving body for the future, he embalms it. The Bible is “saved,” and becomes petrified. The *Tractatus*, seen in this light, — the great attack on traditional *interpretatio* —, is thus also the document of emancipation for Europe and Israel from the Bible, closes the gates for a return to the Bible, terminates the possibility of turning it into a fountain of a revival. In the beginning was the Bible. From now on there is *natura*, philosophy, where matters are clear and distinct — where there are no “difficulties” of history and language.

Only some one like Spinoza, who was (“technically,” legally) neither a Jew nor a Christian, (and here lies one of the most vital problems in the understanding of his personality and philosophy, as well as of the rise of the “modern Jew”), — could allow himself to take up such a position. He was not responsible to anybody, to anything, to any tradition — he was the great irresponsible of modern times. He did not come to rescue any past, any tradition (hence his rejection of the “older” *interpretatio*). He was one of the first Jews, if not the first, who did not “belong” anywhere — and he could afford it. He was a man without a yoke (maybe his yokelessness was a matter of envy for many a Jew in later times, though I do not overlook here Spinoza’s dependence on the political and philosophical background of his time), a man who could live without one. *Deus sive natura* — a “jealous God” in his way too — does not put the “usual” yoke on his followers. Summa summarum: No *perush* — means here no continuation, no expansion. No continuation of the Bible — means no survival of post-Biblical Israel.

In the light of this analysis one can see that Spinoza’s “new method” and rejection of the old one (or ones) is not an isolated effort in his system of theologico-political thought. For it will be possible now to arrive at a deeper understanding of the link between Spinoza’s rejection of the Bible interpretation from Ezra to Maimonides and his followers and his concept of the

⁷⁷ About the impossibility and “non-advisability” of the *imitatio* of the first *imperium* cf. *ibid.*, chap. XVII, p. 243, § 114 ff.; chap. XVIII, *ibid.*, § 1 ff.

Torah, of Israel of the Scriptural past, as well as of the past that follows the Scripture.

The basis of Spinoza's philosophy of Judaism, of his "Jewish" political philosophy, is the concept that the chosenness of the *Hebraea natio* by God is not in respect to its *intellectus* or the *tranquilitas* of its mind, but in respect to its *societas* and *fortuna* as its *imperium* obtained and kept it so many years; its *electio et vocatio* confined to the political and social spheres (*in sola imperii temporanea felicitate et commodis*). We learn from Scripture that the Hebrews surpassed other nations in these spheres only.⁷⁸ The Torah (*leges Mosi*) was given for a society, a state, a land. The *ceremoniae* commanded in the Old Testament were given only for the Hebrews, and were so accommodated to their state that they could be observed mostly only by the whole society; they had nothing to do with *beatitudo* and *virtus*, but only with their temporal bodily *felicitas* and the *tranquilitas* of their *imperium*, so that their validity was limited only to the time of the duration of their *imperium*. The Pharisees in their *ignorantia* did not arrive at the true meaning of the Mosaic Law which pertained only in the realm of public welfare.⁷⁹

The land, the state for which the Torah was given, is a *conditio sine qua non* for its validity and authority. From this thesis Spinoza draws the conclusion that the destruction of the first *imperium* and the Exile to Babylon meant the end of the claim of the Torah on the Hebrews.⁸⁰ Three times Spinoza goes here to Jeremiah for support. His "true method" of interpretation does not prevent him from deducing from Jer. 11.23⁸¹ that the Hebrews were not obliged to practice their law after the destruc-

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, chap. III, p. 51, §§ 16–19; p. 48, § 3 ff. and in other places.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, chap. V, p. 76, § 9: . . . "quum tamen ipsa, uti diximus, nullam nisi reipublicae rationem habuerit, nec tam ad Hebraeos docendum, quam cogendum inserviverit"; *Praefatio*, p. 8, § 22 ff.; chap. XVII, p. 225, § 30 ff. and in other places.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, chap. xix, p. 254, §§ 13–14.

Spinoza considers the second *imperium* (i. e. that of the *interpretatio* of the Pharisees) as a mere shadow of the first (*ibid.*, p. 243, § 113), since the Hebrews of the second *imperium* were bound to the laws of the Persians to whom they were subject.

⁸¹ *Tractatus*, p. 77, § 13.

tion of their *imperium*; as if God would require nothing of them beyond the natural law obligatory for all men. How Spinoza arrives at this conclusion either from Jeremiah's warning against the "boasting" of the *hakham*, *gibbor* and *'ashir* or from his praise for him who knows God, is a problem in itself. Jer. 29.7⁸² which had been quoted after the destruction of the Second Temple — in conjunction with Jer. 27.9 ff., 22 — as a warning against "pressing for the end,"⁸³ the coming of Messiah, and in later centuries up to recent times as a support for the acquiescence in the status quo of Galut-existence,⁸⁴ while preserving the full authority of the Written and Oral Law in all their practical implications — serves Spinoza as another source for his fundamental thesis concerning the abrogation of the Torah: No state — no Torah. Spinoza goes back to the old Davidic concept.⁸⁵ All Torah became to him a "commandment that depends on the land." Here Spinoza follows the line of the ancient negators of Exilic Israel's *raison d'être*, foremost Christianity and other sects, for whom the "philosopher" spoke to Rabban Gamli'el.⁸⁶ Israel's survival after the loss of the first *imperium*, or the continuation of its distinctiveness, is to him sheer obstinacy of the Pharisees, their spiteful opposition to Christianity.⁸⁷

⁸² *Tractatus*, p. 254, § 14; p. 257, § 30.

⁸³ Cf. Khethuboth 111a.

⁸⁴ Cf. Mosheh Chagiz, *Sefath 'Emeth*, 1697, p. 7, on his experience with Jews in Amsterdam: . . . יודעתי את מאובם כי זה נמשך להם לפי שרואים עצמם יושבים . . . בהשקט ובבטח איש חחה גפנו ותאנתו . . . לכן בכח הדמיון ההוא שמציירים בשכלם כי בהם בחר ה' ושבעשים אלה הוא חפץ לפיכך הם מבקשים ליתן טענת פטור לעצמן מקרא דכתיב . . . בירמיה כ"ט פ"ד.

⁸⁵ I Sam. 26.19. Spinoza refers to David's statement to Saul in chap. II of the *Tractatus*, *ibid.*, p. 43, § 40.

⁸⁶ Shabbath 116a-b: . . . א"ל מן יומא גליחון מארעכון איחנשליה אוריית' . . . דמשה ואיחיהבא אורייתא אחריתא . . . פילוספא . . . פילוספא . . . שאלו פילוסופין על 'Abodah Zarah 54b . . . The problem involved in the "philosopher's" conversation with Rabban Gamli'el who died before the destruction of the Second Temple is not our concern here.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 77, § 14: "Quod autem Pharisaei post amissum imperium eas aut saltem magnam earum partem retinuerint, it magis animo Christianis adversandi, quam Dio placendi fecerunt." Cf. about the *perfinacia* of the Pharisees, chap. X, *ibid.*, p. 165, Note, where again the *prudentes* are contrasted to the

Spinoza did not exclude the possibility of Israel's return to Zion, an idea current to some extent in some non-Jewish circles in the 17th century, which might have been encouraged by the Sabbatai Zevi movement.⁸⁸ There has been a tendency — especially invigorated in recent years — to overrate Spinoza's "messianism." Some speak of Spinoza as a "dreamer" or a "prophet" of the Return to Zion, as if he were one of those who brought the message of the Return to Zion or even commanded it to Israel.⁸⁹ They overlook the condition attached in Spinoza's statement on Israel's being chosen again.⁹⁰

Whatever *interpretatio* one might tend to give to Spinoza's statement on Israel's future, his attitude to Israel's past between the destruction of the first *imperium* and his own days and the days to follow, if the miracle does not repeat itself and Israel is not rechosen by God, is absolutely negative. His "true method"

Pharisees; about their *contumacia* and *ignorantia* in chap. II, p. 47, § 56; also p. 245, § 11; p. 248, § 24 ff.

⁸⁸ Spinoza was asked by Heinrich Oldenburg — in his letter of December 8th, 1665 — as to his information (also to that of the "Judaei Amstelaedamenses," from which one may infer to some extent the way in which Spinoza's Christian friends identified him with the Jewish community, after the ban) about the widely spread rumors concerning the return of the Israelites to their homeland, as well as to the impression this made on him. Oldenburg, who belongs to the unbelievers in these rumors, points to the world catastrophe which might result from such a return (. . . "qui, verus si fuerit, rerum omnium in mundo catastrophem induturus sane videtur") *B. d. Spinoza Opera*, vol. II, pp. 189–90.

Spinoza's answer is not to be found in his correspondence published so far.

⁸⁹ Cf. chap. XIV in Part One in *Babylon and Jerusalem*, pp. 521 ff.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, chap. III, p. 61, § 55: "Signum circumcisionis etiam hac in re tantum posse existimo, ut mihi persuadeam, hoc unum hanc nationem in aeternum conservaturum; imo nisi fundamenta suae religionis eorum animos effeminent, absolute crederem, eos aliquando, data occasione, ut sunt res humanae mutabiles, suum imperium iterum erecturos, Deumque eos de novo electurum." Spinoza equates the survival value of circumcision of the Jews and their being preserved "for ever" with the mark on the head of the Chinese, ("qui etiam comma aliquod in capite religiosissime servant") who have often recovered their *imperium* and will do so again (*ibid.*, § 56).

Among those who hailed in recent times Spinoza's Zion-"vision," George Eliot was probably the most cautious one. Cf. *Daniel Deronda*, Vol. II, XLII, p. 144.

of Bible interpretation means here: the law given to a people of a country, for a country or state, can not be interpreted, i. e., transferred to another reality of a people without a country. No interpretation of the Bible of the various traditional kinds means: no expansion, no continuation of the *people* of the Bible; no meaning, no justification for Israel's survival outside the original "natural" theologico-political "*peshat*"; no *halakhah*, no *'aggadah*, for the whole *Bayith Sheni* was just sheer obstinacy, as mentioned, the absolute reversal of *natura*, still more so all that followed until the year an excommunicated son of Marranos published the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*, 1670. Negation of the "old" method of *interpretatio* thus results in a rejection of Israel's duty and right to *interpretatio*, as well as its capacity for *interpretatio*.

VIII

This may suffice for my allusion to the two poles in the struggle over *interpretatio* in Israel. In Maimonides Israel's will and power to interpret reached its peak. Spinoza rejects both Maimonides' *Moreh Nebukhim* and *Mishneh Torah*, becomes the fore-runner for all those in Israel (and in the world) who rejected in the last centuries the "old" *interpretatio* — and consequently the *raison d'être* for Israel's survival, present and future. His *Tractatus* is thus to be viewed as heralding a turning point in the political philosophy concerning Israel's past and future. From this perspective, all subsequent discussion in Israel and about Israel, inside and outside Israel, by individual thinkers or by religious and political movements, is at its source a discussion concerning the theological and political meaning of Israel's past and future. Practically it is either acceptance or rejection of the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*. Since 1670 each generation adds a page of its own to the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* of Israel. Some of these additional pages would have found the approval of Baruch Spinoza, some would have encouraged him to renew his fight against the "old" method of *interpretatio*, to write part two of his *Tractatus*. The adding of page after page to the *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* goes on — until our own days.

It ought to have become obvious by now that I view the *interpretatio* problem as the central one in Jewish thought. In most of its periods it is deeply linked with the attitude to *ratio*, to the Revelation-Reason problem in its broadest meaning. On the whole, this problem transcends the boundaries of mere theological or religious speculation.

Here one illustration for the continuation of the problem of *interpretatio* may suffice. The two poles of mediaeval Jewish thought (also of the antagonism between Maimunists and anti-Maimunists) found their modern expression in two 19th century Jewish thinkers: the Italian Samuel David Luzzatto and the Galician Nachman Krochmal. Luzzatto, the sharpest opponent of Spinoza in 19th century Jewish learning, almost repeated Spinoza's words when he rejected — in his introduction to his commentary on Isaiah (in which he singles out Spinoza for one of his very sharp rebukes) — any attempt to find in the Bible support for beliefs and ideas which we get from other sources, not even traditional beliefs current in the nation.⁹¹ It was probably his opposition to Maimonides which made him share here to some extent the platform with Spinoza. In line with his above mentioned principle in his commentary on Isaiah, he comes again nearer to Spinoza than to Maimonides and his school when he emphatically rejects any kind of multi-facedness of the Torah.⁹² Here — in the implied rejection of *bāṭin* in

⁹¹ Padova, 1855 . . . ספר ישעיה מתורגם איטלקית ומפורש עברית מלאכת שד"ל . . . p. 4: היסוד הרביעי הוא אהבת האמת. והוא שתהיה תכלית מנמתנו להבין אמתת כוונת הכותבים. ולא תהיה בחררי לבנו השוקה למצוא בספרי הקדש סיוע וחזוק לאמונות וסברות שבאו לנו ממקום אחר, בין שיהיו סברות פילוסופיות או אמונות תורניות מקובלות באומה. המדה הזאת . . . מציאותה יקר מאד במפרשים.

In the second paragraph of his Preface, discussing the first *Yesod*, *ibid.*, p. 3: . . . מי שהורגל בפילוסופיאה המזויפת של שפינוזה ותלמידיו . . . I am not concerned here with an examination of Luzzatto's "literalism" and his "ideological" consistency.

⁹² Cf. Luzzatto's letter to Mordekhai Strelisker in *Ha-Maggid*, Lyck, No. 8, 20. II. 1861, p. 30: נעו"י. כי מראשית ימי נעו"י . . . אך אני לא כחלקך חלקי ולא כגורלך גורלי, כי מראשית ימי נעו"י . . . החל רוח בקשת האמת לקשקש בקרבי כפעמון, ולא מצאה נפשי מנוח במאמר וקנינו שבעים פנים לתורה, ולא במאמרים אלו ואלו דברי אלקים חיים, אך לבי אמר אלי כי האמת אינה אלא אחת, ולה לבדה ראוי לעבוד ולא לזולתה ראוי לעבוד . . . וכל מה שהיה בעיני הפך . . . האמת כנע נראה לי . . . Strelisker's preceding letter to Luzzatto, *ibid.*, No. 4, 23. I. 1861, p. 14; cf. also *ibid.*, p. 95; 13. III. 1861, 8. V. 1861, p. 95.

whatsoever form — Luzzatto is in deep disagreement not only with the “atticized,” Aristotle-imprisoned, “alien” Maimonides but also with the men of halakhic-aggadic *interpretatio* who staked all their intellectual activity, the very compatibility of their differing and contradictory methods of *interpretatio* (ad majorem Dei gloriam and for the sake of Israel’s survival), on the *bat kol*⁹³ which proclaimed that principle so vehemently rejected by the Italian anti-Maimunist. How different was Krochmal’s attitude not only to Maimonides but also to *perush* in general. If his *Moreh Nebukhei Ha-zeman* would not have remained a torso, especially if its planned second part would have been written (or reached us) and would have contained the purely philosophical “*she’arim*,” the missing parts of his opus which are as of now beyond any hope of being recovered, Krochmal the *interpretator* (in our definition) would have emerged in a still more conspicuous way than he does. But even so, as he stands before us now, Krochmal deserves a prominent place in the realm of Jewish thinkers who accepted *interpretatio* and fought for it wholeheartedly.⁹⁴

As I said at the outset of my deliberations, *interpretatio* is the central problem of all civilization, religion and philosophy, man and all his activities at large. In a still greater measure, and in an additional sense, it is a problem for Israel, *the* problem for Israel — the group and its individuals and their movements of all kinds. As long as Israel is alive it will start its definitive

⁹³ Cf. Part One in *Babylon and Jerusalem*, pp. 83 ff., 94.

⁹⁴ Cf., e. g., *Moreh Nebukhei Ha-zeman*, in *Kithbei R. Nachman Krochmal* 1924, pp. 191, 197–99.

In my analysis of Krochmal (in the Introduction to *Kithbei R. Nachman Krochmal*) I tried to draw the attention of students to Krochmal the revolutionary from within (cf. *ibid.*, chap. II, especially p. 159). It still seems to me that here lies his main relevance and value for Jewish thought and life of his century — and not in his adoption of the one philosophical school in modern Germany or the other. Hence my emphasis on the rejection of Krochmal’s “Hegelianism” — which was and is apt to obscure the main aspect of Krochmal’s personality and efforts in the field of Jewish thought. Students of Krochmal would do better to deepen the understanding of Krochmal the *interpretator* than to point repeatedly to a part of his “terminology” which puts him in one philosophic school or another in the German world of his days.

beginning with Sinai — including that earlier period which prepared the ground for it; it will always try to “reconquer” Sinai. Yet Israel lives in a non-Sinai world. It can not exist in this world, old or new, without *interpretatio* of Sinai. Here it is not the pressure from outside that is decisive; the adjustment to the outside is certainly not the best of stimuli for a constructive and stabilizing *interpretatio*. Of greater importance is the pressure from within, within Sinai, the inner stimulus for a more adequate understanding and evaluation of oneself and the world. This *interpretatio* is Israel's *creatio continua*. This is where Israel has been making — and will have to make — its greatest effort to preserve Sinai in all its implications, to dig and dig in Sinai in order to discover in it the opening of a better grasping of the not yet deciphered *bāṭin* of Sinai's past, as well as of a compatibility with the outside-Sinai, some kind of acceptance of the Non-Sinai within Sinai — on the basis of Sinai.

The men of *interpretatio* — from Ezra till our own days, since the days of the *ma'amad Sinai*, according to R. Yehudah Ha-Nasi' — have preserved Israel's thought from “Karaization,” from being stifled through limiting literalism and fear-filled *peshatism*. It is they who in different ways expanded Israel's Sinai, Sinai for Israel, and thus strengthened Israel's capacity and will for survival. As Maimonides said, the men of the third *firqat*, the interpreters, are very rare. But it was what emanated from their struggle for the right and duty of *interpretatio* — whether they achieved their objective or not — that sustained Israel since it started its way after the *ma'amad Sinai*, especially since the great disaster after the loss of the first Judean State.⁹⁵ *Interpret or perish* — is the voice Israel hears incessantly since Sinai; still earlier, since its beginning, since

⁹⁵ The struggle between “freezing” and “de-freezing” *interpretatio* in Israel — in older and modern times, — deserves a study in itself.

It should also be added that *interpretatio* as described here — especially as a trend of thought that comes to “reshape” Israel from within, which is not decisively “indebted” in its essence to a particular outside pressure, is not to be indentified with the concept of “reform” as developed in modern Israel, in various ways, from the 19th century onwards.

the covenant with Abraham while still *holekh* 'ariri,⁹⁶ in that hour of his fear of cessation, of no-survival, because of the lack of an heir — the fear of almost every generation in Israel since the "Father of the Nation." But is *interpret or perish* a categorical imperative for Israel alone? Not for man at large — as a thinking and feeling, doing and communicating being, inheriting and transmitting, forming, shaping and reshaping tradition?

The principles and methods of the first layer in Israel's *interpretatio*, in *Halakhah* and 'Aggadah, their hermeneutics in all their minute details and conditioning circumstances, have to be scrutinized in all their implications. Of still greater urgency — in so far as one is allowed to speak of degrees of urgency in learning — is, however, the study of the very phenomenon of *interpretatio* in its totality — particularly the *interpretatio* of the Bible and the *Bayith Rishon* in *Halakhah* and 'Aggadah, in the *Bayith Sheni* in its entirety, as well as in Jewish Mysticism, then of the *Bayith Sheni* and the Oral Law in their turn in the centuries that followed the destruction of the *Bayith Sheni* up to our own days, be it in systems of thought by individual thinkers (or interpreters), be it in religious and political movements which represent *interpretatio*'s meaning, purpose, relevance for Israel's struggle to survive.

To get at the sources of Israel's *interpretatio*, to study its laws, decipher the *bāṭin* that underlies it to the ultimate degree (without neglecting in any way the scrutinizing of the *zāhir* work of Israel), is the task of Jewish Learning in our days, and in the days to follow. To learn from Jewish Learning the secret of Israel's *interpretatio*, in order to help Israel preserve its passion for *interpretatio*, strengthen its capacity for *interpretatio* — this is the duty of the spiritual and political movements which shoulder the responsibility for Israel's survival. Here — and not here alone — learning and living are inseparable (and not in Israel alone). Both stand and fall with the rise and decline of *interpretatio*; one law for the two: *interpretatio*.

⁹⁶ Gen. 15.2.