

Abraham Ibn Ezra's "Secrets" in the Early and Later Torah Commentaries

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Abstract

In this article, I compare Ibn Ezra's treatment of two esoteric doctrines in his early commentary to Genesis and Exodus, written in Lucca, and his later commentary on these books, written in Rouen. The first doctrine is the nature of the biblical angels, and the second is the rational soul and its ultimate end. The article opens with a brief account of Ibn Ezra's composition of the commentary on the Torah and the approach he adopts, and moves on to describe the changes in his approach in his later commentary on the books of Genesis and Exodus. It then presents an outline of the topics on which Ibn Ezra alludes to secret doctrines and the philosophical background of some of his secrets, before turning to a detailed analysis of the two topics under consideration. I argue that while Ibn Ezra expands upon some of these secrets in his later commentaries, only readers adept in the sciences and philosophy can truly appreciate them. This is even more true regarding the readers of his earlier commentaries. Yet Ibn Ezra elaborated on some of the secrets in his later commentaries not because the Jewish intellectual elite of Northern France were more familiar with the scientific and philosophical background of the secrets than the Italian Jewish intellectual elite, enabling them to better appreciate his exposition. Rather, he did so because he wished to prod his readers in the Christian world to study the sciences and philosophy, and he saw that the succinct hints he had provided in his first commentary were not sufficient to accomplish this goal.

A

Abraham Ibn Ezra wrote his magisterial commentary on the Torah, *Sefer ha-Yashar*, in the Italian city of Lucca between 1142 and 1145. He had already completed a number of treatises in Rome after leaving Spain in 1140. These included commentaries on Ecclesiastes, Esther, Job and Lamentations, a translation with notes on Judah Hayyuj's three grammatical treatises, and his own grammatical treatise, *Sefer*

Moznayim. While in Lucca, he completed still other biblical commentaries (on Minor Prophets, Ruth and Isaiah), grammatical works (*Sefer ha-Yesod*, *Sefat Yeter* and a defense of R. Saadiah Gaon), astronomical works (*Luhot* and *Sefer Ta'amei ha-Luhot*) and a treatise on mathematics (*Sefer ha-Mispar*). A number of additional commentaries may have been completed there, if not already in Rome, including his commentary on Song of Songs and his early commentaries on Daniel and Psalms. It also appears that in this period he wrote commentaries on some books of the early prophets, such as Joshua and Samuel, which are now lost.¹

In the introduction to *Sefer ha-Yashar*, in rhymed prose, Ibn Ezra sets forth and critiques four approaches to interpreting the Torah, before going on to indicate a fifth approach, the one that he will adopt in his commentary:

The fifth path is the one upon which my commentary is based, and in my eyes is the right one in the presence of God, Whom alone I fear. I will not be partial [to any previous commentator in the interpretation] of Torah, but to the utmost of my ability shall diligently seek out the grammar of each word, and afterwards explain it to the best of my understanding.²

- 1 An excellent catalogue of Ibn Ezra's treatises, with the dates and places of their composition, as well as a list of editions and secondary literature, can be found in Shlomo Sela and Gad Freudenthal, "Abraham Ibn Ezra's Scholarly Writings: A Chronological Listing," *Aleph* 6 (2006): 13–55. Ibn Ezra alludes to a commentary he wrote on the Book of Joshua in his commentary on Deuteronomy 32:4, and on the Book of Samuel in his commentary on Genesis 31:19 and Deuteronomy 6:16. Judah L. Fleischer published a series of articles in Hebrew on Ibn Ezra's wanderings around Western Europe. For an English summary of these wanderings, see Irene Lancaster, *Deconstructing the Bible: Abraham Ibn Ezra's Introduction to the Torah* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 1–21.
- 2 All the translations in this study are mine unless noted otherwise. I have used Asher Weiser's edition of Ibn Ezra's Torah commentary (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1976) as the basis for my translation, though I have consulted also with the edition of Ibn Ezra's commentary in Menahem Cohen's edition of *Mikra'ot Gedolot Haketer*, Genesis and Exodus (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1997–2007). For this particular passage I consulted also the translation of Lancaster, *Deconstructing the Bible*, 171; and that of H. Norman Strickman and Arthur Silver, *Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch: Genesis* (New York: Menorah Publishing Company, 1988), 11.

Though Ibn Ezra concentrated on discovering the plain meaning of the text, he accepted the view that the words of the Torah often hold multiple levels of meaning.³ For Ibn Ezra, the Torah addresses itself primarily to the masses and frames its presentation accordingly, but some of its verses also contain an esoteric level that the enlightened are able to discern. In some places, both the literal and esoteric meanings are true. In others, the literal meaning is false (as in the case of all corporeal descriptions of the Deity) and serves to educate the masses in a manner consistent with their comprehension. This is true not only of the Torah, according to Ibn Ezra, but also of the other books of the Bible. Some of the rabbinic homilies (*midrashim*) on the Torah also contain an esoteric level. In the case of these homilies, the esoteric meaning alone is the true intended meaning, as Ibn Ezra notes in the introduction while critiquing the fourth path, namely, the homiletical one: "There is a *derash* [a homiletical explanation of a passage in the Torah] that is the opposite of a *derash*, and it contains a secret which is not explicit." Among the examples adduced by him is the homily that the Torah preceded the world by two thousand years (Genesis Rabbah 1.1). Ibn Ezra's commentary, however, is rarely concerned with the Torah's esoteric level or the esoteric meaning of the rabbinic homilies, though it does not avoid this level completely. Throughout his commentary, Ibn Ezra makes occasional mention of these secrets and offers some hints as to their nature, often in a succinct manner.

During 1155-1157, Ibn Ezra returned to writing commentaries on the Torah in Rouen in Northern France. The previous five years he had spent in Southern France, primarily in the city of Narbonne, where he worked for the most part on astrological treatises. In his revised commentary on Genesis, Ibn Ezra experimented with a different form of presentation, separating his comments on the literal meaning of the words of the verses from a more general commentary on the matters discussed in the verses. Only the commentary up to the middle of the third portion, *Lekh Lekha*, survived, and the remainder was lost at an early date.⁴ The introduction to his revised

3 As he notes at the end of the introduction, the Torah has seventy faces.

4 For this reason, this commentary is known as *Shitah Aheret* (a Different Method). This commentary was almost completely unknown in the Middle Ages. Abraham Weiser published it in his edition of Abraham Ibn Ezra's commentary on Genesis. For a description of this later commentary, see Uriel

commentary also survived. There he repeats the circle analogy to describe the four historical approaches to the exegesis of the Torah and their strengths and shortcomings, and the fifth one that he will adopt in his commentary. He again alludes to the Torah's secrets in discussing the fourth path, that of homiletical interpretations, but with notable differences. This time he discusses the path entirely in the context of the homilies of the Talmudic sages rather than including post-Talmudic homilists. Absent also is any critique of this path.⁵ He maintains that even the Talmudic homilies which are not at the center of the circle but around it "at times only appear to be outside, and the secret is in its midst." Ibn Ezra subsequently explains that the words of the Sages that appear to contradict reason contain secrets "by way of parables and riddles, which not all the listeners will understand, but to the men of speculation (*ba'alei ha-meqqar*) will be known." He brings as examples the homily that seven things were created before the creation of the world, among them the Temple and Israel (Pesahim 54a). Another homily states that five things God thought to create while two He actually created, namely, the Torah and the Throne of Glory (*Yalqut Shimoni*, Jeremiah 17, no. 298). He adds, "the sagacious ones (*anshei ha-tushiyah*) bring proofs that wisdom is the first world of all existents. The Torah is the wisdom of the faith, for it is the source of all hidden knowledge." While Ibn Ezra's reference to "wisdom" would certainly be obscure to most of his readers, those who are acquainted with the beginning of Genesis Rabbah will understand that he is referring to the supernal Wisdom, an apparent reference to the Logos. More important, they will understand the reference to *anshei ha-tushiyah* (as well as the previous reference to *ba'alei ha-meqqar*) as subtly signaling an agreement between the views of the Sages and that of the philosophers on this issue.⁶ Only those acquainted with medieval philosophy, however,

Simon, "R. Abraham Ibn Ezra: The Short Commentary on the Torah, The Long Commentary on Genesis and Exodus, and Fragments of the Oral Commentary on Genesis" [Hebrew], in Cohen ed., *Mikra'ot Gedolot Haketer*, Exodus, Part 1, 10–22.

5 This perhaps was due in part to his sensitivity to the fact that his immediate readers included the rabbinic scholars of Northern France.

6 His early commentary on the Torah contains only one reference to the "men of speculation" or "sagacious ones", and it is in reference to a geographical matter (Genesis 35:2). He also speaks of the "way of sagacity" (*derekh ha-tushiyah*) in his commentary on Genesis 1:1, in reference to the connection in Hebrew between language and lips (*safah*).

will understand that he is referring either to the supernal Universal Intellect (in Neoplatonic thought) or to the Separate Intellects (in Aristotelian thought). This point will be explored in more detail below.

We possess in full Ibn Ezra's revised commentary on Exodus, written in Rouen. There he reverted back to the format of a single presentation, as in his earlier Torah commentary. This commentary replaced the earlier commentary on Exodus in most of the surviving manuscripts of Ibn Ezra's Torah commentary. Almost all of the supercommentaries were written on this version of the commentary.⁷ It is this version that is to be found in the earliest printing of Ibn Ezra's commentary in *Miqra'ot Gedolot*, and in all subsequent printings to the present day.⁸ Perhaps his most important innovation in the later version of the Exodus commentary is that of the long discourses he introduces in a number of places, containing discussions of esoteric matters. At least some of the secrets dealt with in a very succinct manner in the earlier version are elaborated upon in the later commentary. As for the other books of the Torah, we know of no commentaries on them that were written in this period.

To complete the picture, we have a commentary on the last portion of Genesis that Ibn Ezra's student Joseph of Maudeville is said to have heard from him in London and written down. This has led some scholars to assume that Ibn Ezra composed yet a third commentary on Genesis, though in this case it appears that the commentary was an oral one. Further complicating matters is the fact that fragments containing comments ascribed to Ibn Ezra on other

7 The most important exception is the supercommentary of R. Joseph ben Eliezer the Spaniard (*Ẓofnat Pane'ah*), written in Jerusalem towards the end of the fourteenth century, which he based on the earlier commentary on Exodus. R. Joseph encountered this commentary only after leaving Spain. After studying it, he reached the conclusion that the later commentary on Exodus was compiled by Ibn Ezra's students. See David Herzog, *Joseph Bonfils Šophnath Paneah* (Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitätsbuchhandlung, 1911), 181. All the earliest supercommentaries written until the middle of the fourteenth century, however, are based on the later commentary on Exodus, though some on occasion make reference also to the earlier commentary. The situation in Spain in the latter half of the fourteenth century is more complex. Some of the supercommentaries belonging to this period, such as those of Samuel Ibn Ẓarza and Samuel Ibn Motot, were written on both commentaries. See Simon, "R. Abraham Ibn Ezra: The Short Commentary on the Torah," (above, note 4), 10.

8 More recent editions, such as that of Mossad Harav Kook (*Torat Ḥayyim*) and Menahem Cohen's edition of *Miqra'ot Qedolot HaKeter*, include both versions.

passages of the Torah have been found which do not correspond to what he wrote in the existent commentaries.⁹

B

A perusal of Ibn Ezra's secrets reveals that they deal with the following topics: the nature of God and the divine names, the nature of angels and their different categories, the creation and structure of the world, the human soul and its final perfection, the Garden of Eden, prophecy, miracles, reasons for the commandments, rabbinic homilies, and verses that contain information that it does not appear Moses could have written. From Ibn Ezra's hints as to what these secrets are, it appears that the keys to unraveling them are to be found in three areas of knowledge: Arabic Neoplatonic-Aristotelian philosophy, astronomy/astrology, and mathematics. The first area is critical for understanding the Deity and the divine names, the nature of the angels, the human soul and its perfection, the creation story, the Garden of Eden story, prophecy, miracles, and some of the secrets contained in the rabbinic homilies. Astronomy/astrology (as well as climatology and other occult sciences) hold the key to discerning the reasons for some of the more perplexing commandments (particularly those involving the Tabernacle), as well as some of the stories recorded in the Torah (such as the flood story). It is also important for helping one to understand some of the secrets of a more philosophical nature, such as the nature of the angels. The mathematical sciences are important for understanding the Tetragrammaton, as well as some of the secrets connected to astronomy. Additionally, the secret of the apparent anachronisms in the Torah suggests the beginning of lower biblical criticism. In short, the content of most of Ibn Ezra's secrets appears to be based on knowledge possessed by any adept in philosophy and the sciences, rather than some Jewish esoteric lore known only to select initiates. Thus, it seems that such content was treated as secret because of the religious problems that their full exposure would have caused for many of Ibn Ezra's more traditionally minded readers, as well as the attacks it would have brought upon the author. By hinting that many

9 See for example Ibn Ezra's comment on Leviticus 23:15 published by Michael Friedlander, *Essays on the Writings of Abraham Ibn Ezra* (London: Society of Hebrew Literature, 1877), 69–71.

of the commandments in the Torah are rooted in naturalistic considerations, and that nature also holds the key to understanding many of the events the Torah records (including aspects of the creation story, which he restricts to the creation of the earth), Ibn Ezra appears to be limiting God's miraculous power and immediate involvement in human affairs. Hence, there is a need to at least partially conceal this point. This is not unlike the motive ascribed to Maimonides by some of his medieval commentators, especially Joseph Kaspi and Moses Narboni, for concealing many of his views in the *Guide of the Perplexed*. Ibn Ezra, however, was far less interested than Maimonides in the esoteric level of Scripture, despite its significance.

An additional possible motivation for not revealing at least some of the secrets in detail is the amount of scientific and philosophical background information required for readers to understand them. It should be noted that when Ibn Ezra wrote his commentaries, it does not appear that even educated Jews in Italy, and certainly in Northern France, had much knowledge of science and philosophy, in contrast to their educated coreligionists in the Arabic-speaking world. Most of the scientific and philosophical literature in this period was available only in Arabic. The translation movement of Arabic treatises into Hebrew, as well as into Latin, was still in its infancy.¹⁰ Ibn Ezra certainly was aware that his potential readers did not possess the intellectual ability to apprehend the secrets to which he was alluding, and which could not be supplied within a biblical commentary.¹¹ It is thus possible that by identifying a certain matter as a secret or indicating that (only) the wise man will understand his allusions (*ve-hamaskil yavin*), Ibn Ezra was goading his readers to investigate the matter further and attain the requisite knowledge, rather than simply

10 For an overview of the translation movement of Arabic scientific and philosophical texts into Hebrew, see Mauro Zonta, "Medieval Hebrew Translations of Philosophical and Scientific Texts: A Chronological Table," in *Science in Medieval Jewish Cultures*, ed. Gad Freudenthal (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 17–73; see also in the same volume Gad Freudenthal, "Arabic and Latin Cultures as Resources for the Hebrew Translation Movement: Comparative Considerations Both Quantitative and Qualitative," 74–105. For an overview of the translation movement of Arabic scientific and philosophical texts into Latin, see Anna Akosy, "Arabic Texts: Philosophy, Latin Translations of," in *Encyclopedia of Medieval Philosophy*, ed. Henrik Lagerlund (Dordrecht: Springer, 2011), internet edition.

11 Ibn Ezra notes this point explicitly in his later commentary on Exodus 28:6. See also his commentary on Ecclesiastes 7:3.

hiding its content.¹² If true, this would help to account for Ibn Ezra's detailed astronomical/astrological treatises in Hebrew, as well as mathematical ones, which would serve as textbooks for his elite readers, insofar as so many of his secrets belong to these areas. In a crucial sense this is analogous to his treatises on grammar, which helped his readers to understand the heart of his biblical commentaries, with their focus on the plain meaning of the text.

C

In this article, I take a close look at how Ibn Ezra's approach to some of these secrets changed between his earlier, shorter commentaries on Genesis and Exodus and his later, longer commentary on Exodus, as well as the surviving section of his later commentary on Genesis. The introductions to the earlier and later commentaries on Genesis, as well as the glosses on the first two portions of this book in both commentaries, contain many of Ibn Ezra's allusions to the secrets of the Torah. Scattered throughout the two commentaries on Exodus are even more allusions to secrets. This provides us with many examples of the secrets that Ibn Ezra deals with in both his earlier and later commentaries. As already noted, he elaborates on some of these secrets in his later commentary, thus raising the question of his motivation for so doing.¹³ This is the case, for example, in his

12 In this area (as well as in many others) Ibn Ezra foreshadowed Maimonides. When the latter agreed to cooperate with his Hebrew translator of the *Guide*, Samuel Ibn Tibbon, he knew that the intended audience of the translation had almost no knowledge of the philosophy that stood at the foundation of his treatise. Instead of reconciling philosophy and Scripture for his readers acquainted with both areas of knowledge (with the resultant perplexity that this acquaintance brought about), which was the original intent of the treatise, the *Guide* became a catalyst for attaining knowledge of philosophy and science by way of Hebrew translations of the Arabic treatises in these areas. In other words, its immediate new purpose was to guide its readers to the perplexity that resulted from delving into knowledge of philosophy, prior to resolving it. Ibn Ezra's allusions to philosophical/scientific secrets underlying the text of the Torah may well have been intended for the same purpose.

13 From the Middle Ages to the present, there have been numerous interpretations of various secrets of Ibn Ezra. In contemporary scholarly literature there have also been studies devoted to presenting a broader look at Ibn Ezra's esotericism in the context of esoteric writing in Jewish thought in general; see in particular Moshe Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation*:

commentaries on the creation story (particularly Genesis 1:1), the meaning of the Tetragrammaton and other names of God (Exodus 3:13 in his earlier commentary and 3:15 in his later one), and the nature of the revelation to Moses in the cleft of the rock (Exodus 33:18 in the earlier commentary and 33:21 in the later one). Rather than analyzing and comparing the commentaries on these or other passages (such as his two different allegorical treatments of the Garden of Eden story), I here focus solely on two of his secrets that clearly allude to philosophical conceptions. The first is the secret of the angels and the second is the secret of the rational soul and its final perfection.¹⁴

The precise philosophical sources underlying Ibn Ezra's understanding of these secrets are not easy to uncover.¹⁵ The author

Esotericism in Jewish Thought and its Philosophical Implications (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 34–43. Few studies up to now have been devoted to a comparison between the early and later commentaries in regard to Ibn Ezra's secrets. Such a comparison in regard to the reasons for the commandments was made by Shaul Regev, "'Ta'amei Ha-Mitzvot' in E. Avraham Ibn Ezra's Commentary: Secrets," in *Abraham Ibn Ezra and His Age*, ed. Fernando Esteban (Madrid: Asociación Española de Orientalistas, 1990), 233–40. Regev criticizes Michael Friedlander's conclusion that the early commentary was written for philosophers, so that there was no need to expand upon these secrets, while the later commentary was written for Talmudists, hence the need for elaboration. In Regev's view, the opposite is the case. The later commentary was written for philosophers; hence, it was more explicit and detailed in its exposition. My own view is closer to that of Friedlander, at least in regard to the later commentary, as I will argue at the end of the article. Unfortunately, Ibn Ezra's most radical secret, involving verses not written by Moses, does not appear at all in either commentary on Exodus, and the fragment of the later commentary on Genesis does not reach the verse where he appears to allude to this secret in his early commentary (Genesis 12:6). Thus, we have no way of knowing how he approached this secret in his later commentary.

14 For an earlier treatment of both these topics in Ibn Ezra's philosophy, see Joseph Cohen, *The Philosophy of R. Abraham Ibn Ezra* [Hebrew] (Rishon LeZion, 1996), 94–106, 286–93.

15 For a study of Ibn Ezra's thought in light of his possible philosophical sources, see Cohen, *op. cit.* and Hermann Greive, *Studien zum jüdischen Neuplatonismus: Die religionsphilosophie des Abraham Ibn Ezra* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1973). See also Elliot Wolfson, "God, the Demiurge and the Intellect: On the Usage of the Word *Kol* in Abraham Ibn Ezra," *REJ* 149 (1990): 77–111. I am indebted to Dov Schwartz for sharing with me his forthcoming article, "R. Abraham Ibn Ezra the Philosopher: A Study of his Theory of Intellect [Hebrew]," which will be published by Bar-Ilan University Press in a collection of essays on Ibn Ezra that he is editing. In this article he not only carefully analyzes Ibn Ezra's theory of the intellect and

had some knowledge of Avicenna's thought.¹⁶ He also mentions Ibn Gabirol as an expert in the nature of the human soul.¹⁷ Moreover, he was in all probability acquainted with a popularized version of Alfarabi's worldview (together with aspects of Ibn Bajja's thought), such as the one that can be found at the beginning of the treatise *The Book of the Kuzari*, written by his contemporary and friend Judah Halevi.¹⁸ Whether Ibn Ezra was entirely consistent or precise in his philosophical thought is also not clear from his scattered references to philosophical ideas.¹⁹ Nonetheless, he clearly alludes to certain basic philosophical conceptions in his treatment of these secrets.

The Secret of the Angels

What is striking about Ibn Ezra's early commentaries on Genesis and Exodus is that only in his discussion on Exodus 23:21 does he explicitly label the nature of the angels as a 'secret.' This is significant insofar as one can read most of his comments on angels prior to this point as following the traditional view of angels as heavenly beings who occasionally are sent by God to earth on certain divine missions. Sometimes they appear to human beings and speak to them while they are awake. At other times, they appear to them in their dreams. In general, Ibn Ezra labeled angels as God's intermediaries or messengers. He notes already in his early commentary on Genesis 1:1 that all of God's actions are by means of angels, and that he will further elaborate upon this notion when he deals with the secret of the divine Name in the passage *for my Name is in him* (Exodus 23:21).

the human soul, but also the possible sources that were available to him directly or indirectly in developing his theory. In many cases, these sources were unknown to his later commentators.

16 This is clearly seen from his poetic paraphrase of Avicenna's *Hayy Ibn Yaqtan* entitled *Ḥai ben Meqiz* which he wrote while still in Spain. See Israel Levin, *Abraham Ibn Ezra Reader* (Tel Aviv: Israel Matz Hebrew Classics, 1985), 121–32.

17 *Shitah Aḥeret* on Genesis 3:21.

18 Ibn Ezra cites comments by Halevi throughout his commentary, apparently all based on oral discussions with him. Nowhere, however, does he mention the *Kuzari*, which apparently never reached him in his wanderings. Nevertheless, it is plausible to assume that the views of the philosophers presented by Halevi were known also to Ibn Ezra, given his interest in philosophy.

19 For a discussion of this issue, see Howard Kreisel, "On the Term *Kol* in Abraham Ibn Ezra: A Reappraisal," *REJ* 153 (1994): 29–39. See also the studies cited above in note 14.

Thus, while God's Name is said to allude to a secret doctrine, there is no explicit indication that a secret doctrine underlies the nature of the angels themselves, let alone that philosophy holds the key to understanding it.

That is not to say that, prior to his commentary on Exodus 23:21, Ibn Ezra offers no hints to a secret doctrine regarding angels. In the same passage on the first verse of the Torah, he polemicizes against the view of R. Saadiah Gaon that human beings are superior to the angels, and maintains that the angels are not composed of fire or air. This leaves the reader wondering what, in fact, angels are composed of. Later on in his early commentary on Genesis 32:23, which deals with the angel that wrestled with Jacob, Ibn Ezra explicitly alludes to a secret as to the identity of this particular angel, a secret that he indicates he will partially reveal in his exegesis on Exodus 23:21, in which he discusses God's Name.

Insofar as Ibn Ezra maintains that the Hebrew term for angel, *mal'akh*, refers to a messenger or an intermediary, he does not always interpret the term in the Torah as a heavenly being. For example, he notes in his commentary on Genesis 18:13 that "angels" may refer to prophets, and appears to favor the interpretation he brings in the name of "others" that the three angels that appeared to Abraham were in fact other prophets.²⁰ Ibn Ezra himself employs the term "angel" in this more general sense when he indicates in his first introduction to his commentary that "the angel between the person and his Lord is his intellect."

What, then, is the secret of the angels *qua* supernal beings that we may learn from Ibn Ezra's earlier commentaries? In his commentary on Genesis 1:2, he refers to heaven as the "World to Come," which he equates with the world of the angels, as opposed to the earth, which is a world of generation and corruption. This appears to indicate that the angels are eternal beings. In his commentary on Genesis 1:26, *The Lord said: Let us make the human being in our image (beḏalmenū) like our likeness (kidmutenū)*, he indicates that God has no likeness (*demūt*) and that the image (*zelem*) of God refers to the angel. For Ibn Ezra, this means that God created the human being with a

20 Compare, however, his early commentary on Exodus 3:7.

rational soul (*neshamah*),²¹ which does not die and is not corporeal. His remarks on this verse leave the perceptive reader wondering how to understand the various angels who are seen by humans in subsequent passages of the Torah, and which appear to have some kind of physical form. In his commentary on Genesis 3:25, he labels the cherubs (*kerūvim*), "the known angels," without further elaboration. In regard to the angel who wrestled with Jacob and wounded him, and hence appears to have possessed a body, Ibn Ezra promises an explanation in his commentary on Exodus, as indicated above.

Ibn Ezra's early commentary on Exodus sheds further light on his view of angels. In his commentary on Exodus 3:7, he ascribes the speech to Moses at the burning bush to an angel who acts by virtue of God's command, and hence is called by the name of God. In this context, he also refers to the angels that were with the patriarchs, guiding and protecting them by the command of God. He further indicates that the reference to God as "Lord of Lords" (*Elohei ha-Elohim*) is in the role of ruler of the angels. In his commentary on Exodus 3:13, Ibn Ezra reiterates the tie between the secret of the Name and the angels that appeared to Abraham and the one that wrestled with Jacob, while adding another cryptic hint as to the nature of this secret: "The power of the Name discloses signs to the receiver and produces bodies."

Slightly less cryptic is Ibn Ezra's comment on Exodus 15:11: "*BaElim*, the name of the angels who are movers; *Benei* (children of) *Elim*, they are the stars. This secret is hinted in [the portion] *VeEleh Shemot*," an apparent reference to his commentary on Exodus 3:7. To one with knowledge of Aristotelian philosophy, the "movers" would be understood as referring to the Separate Intellects who are the Movers of the spheres. These beings are incorporeal and eternal, which helps explain Ibn Ezra's previous allusions to the nature of the angels. Still not evident, however, is how such beings can appear to the patriarchs, speak to them, guide them, and protect them. It should be noted that while Ibn Ezra extolls the greatness of the angels and indicates their role as guardians, he at the same time rejects the notion that God delegated the task of governing the entire world to a

21 For a study of this term in Ibn Ezra, see Schwartz, "R. Abraham Ibn Ezra the Philosopher" (above, note 15). Ibn Ezra uses this term to refer specifically to the rational part of the soul, or to the intellect. It should be noted that he rarely employs the term "intellect" (*sekhel*) in his writings.

special angel, an apparent reference to the doctrine of the Logos. He writes in his commentary on Exodus 20:1: "Do not believe those who say that the Angel of the Glory was appointed to be in charge of the world."²²

Ibn Ezra's cryptic allusions to the nature of the angels find further elucidation when he finally explains the meaning of the phrase *for my Name is in Him* (Exodus 23:21). In his commentary on the previous verse, he reiterates many of his earlier remarks regarding the angels and adds a number of additional crucial details. He again attacks R. Saadiah for maintaining that human beings are superior to the angels, and notes that human beings are similar to the angels on high only by virtue of their rational soul (*neshamah*). He also distinguishes between the angels, on occasion referred to as *Elohim*, and the stars, which are known as *Benei Elohim*. He indicates that "the angels stand in the Throne of Glory and do not die, for they conjoin with God and are close to Him." In a previous comment on this verse, Ibn Ezra hints to the identity of the "Throne of Glory" in the context of proving the superiority of the angels to human beings. He notes that even the corporeal entities immediately beneath the angels are superior to human beings, citing Psalms 8:4: *I behold Your heaven the work of Your Fingers*. Ibn Ezra explains: "[...] For the heaven (*shamayim*) and the heaven of heaven (*shemei ha-shamayim*) with the Throne of Glory are ten." The other seven entities he omits here are clearly the moon, sun and five known planets (Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter and Saturn), leaving open the question of the identity of the "heaven," "heaven of heaven" and "Throne of Glory." To understand this reference, knowledge of medieval astronomy is necessary. I shall return to this problem below.

Ibn Ezra opens his commentary on Exodus 23:21 as follows:

Now I will explain to you the secret of the noble and awesome Name and the secret of the angels by way of a parable of the light of the soul (*nefesh*) that is emitted from the eye. Know that the eye has seven layers, the innermost one being the white speck. Light is not a body, and the light of the soul requires an

22 On this point Ibn Ezra appears to be in implicit agreement with R. Saadiah, who rejects the doctrine of the Logos as an intermediary in the governance of the entire world. For a discussion of this issue in R. Saadiah's thought, see Howard Kreisel, *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 2001), 57–90 (esp. 81–83).

additional external light. If you have the ability to comprehend how the eye sees numerous and strange forms at once, and how heaven is encompassed by a white speck, you will begin to understand. Look to the sun, for the visible light is from it. It is the agent [of light], and it itself does not lack [light]. There are also demonstrative proofs that the light of the moon is from the sun, for it does not have any light in itself. God alone is without any other, and the angels are by virtue of God (*vehamal'akhim hem ba-shem*). They are not corporeal at all, only the stars are bodies for them. For this reason the Hebrews said: *The angel of God appeared to Gideon* (Judges 6:12), and afterwards said: *God said to him go with this power* (ibid, 12). When the soul (*nefesh*) is focused on the Glory, there will be created for it pictures, forms and visions by the command of God (*be-devar HaShem*). The meaning of: *God [the Tetragrammaton] is His Name* (Exodus 15:3), is that it is the Glory that receives the Glory. This is also the meaning of *My Name is in him*.

We can see from this passage that while Ibn Ezra expands upon the secret of the angels, the secret nevertheless remains hidden. His explanation itself requires an explanation. The reader once again is told explicitly that the angels are not at all corporeal and that they partake of the power of God, without further elucidation. The relation between the angels and the stars is slightly elaborated upon, with the stars being treated as bodies to the angels, though the two remain separate entities. This relation nonetheless remains obscure. The parable of the light of the soul, the eye and the external light adds little to the understanding of one who lacks knowledge of the science of sight. The nature of the pictures, forms and visions created for the soul of the prophet is not explained at all. The "Glory" appears to refer both to God's power and to the angel that receives this power; hence the angel is at times referred to as God. Nothing else, however, is added to this enigmatic picture of the nature of angels. In short, Ibn Ezra provides his more perceptive readers with a philosophical-scientific direction to understand this secret, but little more.

The remainder of his early commentary on Exodus contains a few more opaque references to the nature of the angels. In his explanation of the Tabernacle, Ibn Ezra compares it to the *macrocosmos* (the world) and the *microcosmos* (the human being). The cherubs in the Tabernacle are likened to the angels in the *macrocosmos*

and to the thoughts of human beings in the *microcosmos* (Exodus 25:7). In his commentary on Exodus 33:12, he explains that the angel that was meant to accompany Moses is not Michael, of which it is said *My Name is in Him* and which Israel was told to obey. Hence, we are given here the name of a specific angel who is said to lead Israel, but no further information regarding this angel or the one meant to accompany Moses.

Ibn Ezra's commentary on the remaining three books of the Torah does not add anything to this subject, though it touches upon other secrets. Two other biblical commentaries written during Ibn Ezra's sojourn in Italy are pertinent to our topic, inasmuch as Ibn Ezra cites verses from these biblical books in discussing the angels — namely, his first commentary on Psalms and his first commentary on Daniel. Unfortunately, only the very beginning of the former survived, and the early commentary on Daniel, which survived in full, adds little to our understanding of this secret. Ibn Ezra deals with Michael in a number of passages of his commentary. He is the ministering angel of Israel, and is also referred to as the “great angel.” Yet the nature of this angel remains unknown, as Ibn Ezra only vaguely alludes to its tie to astronomy/astrology.²³

Ibn Ezra did offer some clarification regarding the secret of the angels when he wrote his later commentaries on Genesis and Exodus. Interestingly, in the same period he also wrote longer commentaries on both Psalms and Daniel. In his commentary on the first verse on Genesis, he expanded upon his polemic against R. Saadiah, who considered human beings as nobler than the angels. Ibn Ezra again treated the name *Elohim* as a reference to the angels and *Benei Elohim* as a reference to the stars. He then adds:

The Movers of the spheres are noble and permanent, lack nothing and do not perish. This is true based on the demonstrative proofs of the wise men of speculation (*hokhmei ha-meḥqar*).

This quote is significant not only because already at the very beginning of his commentary Ibn Ezra identifies the angels as the Movers of the spheres, but because he also explicitly indicates that

23 See Ibn Ezra, *Short Commentary on Daniel*, 10:20-21 (Daniel Mondschein ed. [Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 1977], 231).

the "wise men of speculation," an apparent reference to the philosophers, provide the proofs for the nature of these Movers. From the outset, then, readers — even those unacquainted with the notion of "Movers of the spheres" — are informed that the angels should not be understood in accordance with the popular traditional view.

In his commentary on the first verse, Ibn Ezra reiterates the view that the angels are not corporeal, and that they are intermediaries by means of which God acts in the world. He identifies them as "true forms" (*zūrot emet*), a further allusion to their incorporeality, though it is doubtful that any of his readers would understand his use of the philosophical term "form" in this context. In addition, he refers to a significant argument among the "men of speculation," in which some say that the Torah and the Throne of Glory are continuously created by God and have no beginning in time nor will they perish, while others claim that they are created at the moment that God deemed it proper to create them.²⁴ Ibn Ezra does not explain to what precisely the "Torah" and the "Throne of Glory" refer. In light of the fact that he restricts the creation story to the sublunar world, it would appear that the "Torah" refers to the incorporeal angels, and the "Throne of Glory" to the heavenly spheres.²⁵

Ibn Ezra's later commentary on Exodus provides further information on the angels. Perhaps the most important passage is the lengthy one on Exodus 3:15, which concludes with the division of the existents into three parts or "worlds." After describing the sublunar world, and then the world of the planets, which includes the five planets, the sun and moon and the sphere of the stars, Ibn Ezra continues:

The supernal world is the world of the holy angels, which are incorporeal, and are not in bodies like the human rational soul. Their ranks are beyond the intellects of their lowly counterparts [i.e., human beings]. This entire world is noble and permanent. It

24 The former position is that of the Neoplatonic and Aristotelian philosophers, while the latter position is that of the Islamic theologians, which Ibn Ezra appears to have included among the "men of speculation."

25 As noted above, in the introduction to the long commentary, Ibn Ezra brings the rabbinic *midrash* concerning the creation of the Torah and the Throne of Glory prior to the creation of the world. He already drew there a connection between the views of the philosophers and those of the rabbinic sages on this issue.

does not change at all, only its existence is not by virtue of itself but solely by virtue of God the noble. The human rational soul is of their class [variant, is from their light] and receives supernal power at the time the person is created in accordance with the order of the planets [...].²⁶

One acquainted with Aristotelian philosophy would identify the angels on the basis of this passage with the Separate Intellects.²⁷ Certainly in the following century, with the proliferation of Maimonides' works, particularly the *Book of Knowledge* and *Guide of the Perplexed*, Ibn Ezra's allusions became much more comprehensible. In speaking of the human soul, Ibn Ezra clearly adds an astrological dimension to his discussion which Maimonides rejects. This dimension is also absent in Ibn Ezra's most prominent philosophical sources. The question remains how capable Ibn Ezra's early readers were of understanding his description of the highest level of existents, lacking as they did all philosophical literature pertaining to this area. At any rate, what they could ascertain from Ibn Ezra's remarks regarding the angels is that he does not accept the popular conception of them.

The similarity between the rational soul (*neshamah*) and the angels, particularly the point that neither type of entity is visible, is reiterated in the commentary on Exodus 4:14, as is the angels' role as God's intermediaries. Moses is said to have attained a rank comparable to that of the angels. Ibn Ezra is dealing here with the strange story in which it appears that an angel is sent to kill Moses for not circumcising his son Eliezer, and, even after reading this commentary, one is left wondering about the nature of the angel.

The continuation of Ibn Ezra's commentary both illuminates and obfuscates his view on angels. In his commentary on Exodus 6:3, while explaining the divine name *El Shadai*, he writes:

26 Cf. Strickman and Silver (above, note 2), 90.

27 In his earlier commentary on Exodus 23:21, Ibn Ezra indicated that the stars are bodies to the angels. One need not, however, see these two views of the angels as contradictory. On one hand, the Separate Intellects that serve as the Movers of the spheres are completely incorporeal and independent existents; hence they are not "in bodies," unlike the souls of the spheres or the human soul. On the other hand, each stands in relation to a particular sphere; hence, in this sense, the planets are "bodies for them."

Its meaning is: the vanquisher of the supernal orders [of the heavenly bodies]. The order is not destroyed, only that one who conjoins with His Name knows that there will be created for him good that is not in accordance with the [the determination of the] heavenly order. For this reason, Jacob said: *The angel who redeems me from all evil* (Genesis 48:16) — that was destined to come upon me. This is the secret of the entire Torah as I shall later explain.

The redeeming angel is not identified in this passage. In the commentary on Exodus 14:19, Ibn Ezra identifies the angel of God which accompanies Israel as they leave Egypt as the "great prince (sar)" who travels in the cloud but is not the cloud itself. This comment, however, hardly elucidates the nature of this being, who is not visible, yet travels in a body and serves as God's messenger to lead and safeguard Israel.

Readers would certainly have expected some clarification about angels when they got to Ibn Ezra's commentary on the phrase *for my Name is in him* (Exodus 23:21). But the explanation they receive is even more bare-bones than the one Ibn Ezra provided in his earlier commentary on Exodus. After bringing a series of verses in which God sends angels, he concludes with verses from the Book of Daniel:

In the Book of Daniel: *the prince of Greece* and *the prince of Persia* (see Daniel 10:20); *except for Michael your prince* (ibid. 10:21). He is the one called the "great" for he is more glorified than many others. It is also written about him: *One of the first princes came to aid me* (ibid. 10:13), which means, in rank, like: *who occupied the first place in the kingdom* (Esther 1:14). This angel is Michael.

As to the identity of these heavenly "princes," Ibn Ezra provides a further comment in his commentary on Exodus 33:21 in discussing Moses' prophecy in the cleft of the rock:

The One has no figure (*temunah*), and He encompasses in a general manner all figures, for from Him they are derived. The supernal bodies, which are the luminaries and stars, have no front or back, as is true for the supernal human rational soul, and the supernal servants, and the most supernal One. The length of the line is between two points. The point closest to the Agent is

the prince of the countenance and the prince of the power, and the other point is the end of the power.

Again, one sees that without prior knowledge of the philosophical ontology underlying Ibn Ezra's approach, the identity of the "prince of the countenance" remains completely obscure.²⁸

Ibn Ezra's second commentary on Daniel, also written in this period, does somewhat flesh out our knowledge of his approach to angels. It appears that Ibn Ezra scattered hints to deciphering his secrets in different works, with the expectation that his elite readers would read them all and connect the pieces, so to speak. Certainly, by mentioning Michael in his commentary on Exodus 23:20 as the angel in which the Name of God is in him and that aids Israel, but saying little more, Ibn Ezra is encouraging his more astute and curious readers to turn to his commentary on Daniel for further elucidation.

His later commentary on Daniel, from the same period, sheds more light on his hints regarding the angels, but still falls far short of providing a clear explanation of the philosophical/astronomical model he has in mind. In his lengthy exegesis on Daniel 10:21, Ibn Ezra deals with some of the principal angels, as well as offering a tripartite division of all existents. His division here, however, differs from the one he provides on Exodus 3:15:

[...] The One, Who is prior to the numbers [lit., numerical calculation, *ha-ḥeshbon*], is from one perspective the cause of all numbers. From another perspective He is all numbers, without increase or diminution. He is not subject to multiplication or division, and is the cause of both. This, the One, is the first world, in opposition to the worlds following Him. This world is not corporeal and is called "the Vision of the Glory of the Supernal Name." It does not change in essence or in order, and has no time or place. The noble Name is in its midst. The second world is the middle one. It contains the rational souls (*neshamot*) of the true forms without bodies, also the rational souls in bodies, and they are for us innumerable, also bodies *qua* bodies. All of them are

28 This is not to say that even with philosophical knowledge the identity of this angel is clarified. Given both Neoplatonic and Aristotelian motifs in Ibn Ezra's thought, one can identify this angel in various ways, either as the Universal Intellect in Ibn Gabirol's philosophy, or as the first of the Separate Intellects, the Mover of the outermost sphere, in the thought of Alfarabi and Avicenna.

noble for they have no opposites, nor [are they subject to] permutation and change in their essence, only by way of accident in the order of their motions. This world is called the "Holy Sanctuary," and is the heaven of heaven [*shemei ha-shamayim*]. The Throne of Glory is there, and Michael and Gabriel are there [...].

In this passage, the second world combines the first two worlds found in the commentary on Exodus 3:15. The first world here consists of God, Who in the enumeration in Exodus is treated as more exalted than the first world. The angels here are "true forms" without bodies, a description Ibn Ezra brings in his exegesis on the first verse of Genesis in his later commentary, and which apparently refers to the Separate Intellects that serve as the Movers of the spheres. The "rational souls in bodies" refers to the souls of the spheres. The "heaven of heaven" appears here as a collective term for all the existents of this world. Why Ibn Ezra here lumped together the incorporeal existents with the spheres, in contrast to the clear demarcation he draws between them elsewhere, is far from clear. One possibility is that since the incorporeal existents stand in direct relation to each of the spheres as their Movers, he reasoned that they should be linked together as belonging to the same strata of existents. Perhaps God here is treated as one of the worlds rather than completely separate from them in order to underline the perspective of His immanence in all reality. In the continuation of Ibn Ezra's description of the second world, he identifies its subdivisions: angels (the incorporeal Movers of the spheres), armies (the heavenly spheres), servants (the planets), and the two luminaries (sun and moon). The third world is the sublunar world, culminating in the human being, whose rational soul "is tied to the supernal rational souls." Towards the end of the passage, he asserts that "the prince of Persia is the one in charge of the great conjunction or the middle one, and Daniel mentioned the one in charge by the term 'the angel'." He goes on to state that just as there are those which are in charge of nations, there are those in charge of individuals. Ibn Ezra thereby understands the angels not only in terms of the philosophical worldview positing incorporeal Movers of the heavens to explain the different movements of the spheres, but also in terms of their astrological influences on different groups and individuals. The great and middle conjunctions usually refer to the conjunctions of Saturn

and Jupiter (the great conjunction occurs every 960 years and the middle conjunction every 240 years). This helps us understand better the identity of the angels Michael and Gabriel. Michael, the Great Prince, could perhaps be identified with the highest of the planets, Saturn, who indeed, according to Ibn Ezra's *Beginning of Wisdom*, has dominion over the Jews.²⁹ In any case, Ibn Ezra clearly alludes to an astrological dimension in his view of the angels.³⁰

As we have seen, in some of his comments, Ibn Ezra connects the problem of the identity of the angels to the problem of the identity of the Throne of Glory.³¹ It would appear that on this issue, however, he was not consistent in his writings. He uses the term to designate either the angels collectively or the heavenly spheres collectively, or as a reference to the outermost sphere. For example, in his early commentary on Exodus 23:20, he indicates that "the angels stand in the Throne of Glory," which would indicate that the term refers collectively to them. He continues by placing the Throne of Glory on the tenth and highest level of existents, above the "heaven of heaven." Yet in his commentary on Deuteronomy on 32:8, written in the same period, he says: "The form of Jacob is engraved in the Throne of Glory, and this is a great secret." This remark is best understood as referring to the outermost sphere. In bringing rabbinic homilies that distinguish between the Torah and Throne of Glory in the introduction to his later commentary on Genesis, he appears to see the Throne of Glory as a reference to the heavenly spheres. This interpretation is reinforced by his later commentary on Exodus 3:15, in which he states that, "[...] so it is with the nine spheres, which are noble, permanent bodies. The tenth, which is holy, is called thus because its power is in the entire Throne of Glory. It is the strong one [or: the one that encompasses, *ha-taqif*], and all the bodies it encompasses."

29 See Shlomo Sela, *Ibn Ezra's Introductions to Astrology* (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 149. For an in-depth discussion of Ibn Ezra's astronomical and astrological views, see Sela, *Abraham Ibn Ezra and the Rise of Medieval Hebrew Science* (Leiden: Brill, 2003). For the problem of the precise identification of the angel Michael, see Kreisel, "On the Term *Kol* in Abraham Ibn Ezra" (above, note 19): 57–61.

30 See also Ibn Ezra's commentary on Daniel 7:14 (as well as 12:1). There, too, he refers to Michael and to the angels in general, and clearly alludes to astrology in understanding their activities.

31 For a discussion of this issue see Kreisel, "On the Term *Kol* in Abraham Ibn Ezra": 61–66.

Other passages in Ibn Ezra's commentaries suggest a different identification of the Throne of Glory. In his later commentary on Psalms 8:4, he writes as follows:

Know that seven abodes belong to the luminous bodies [i.e., sun and moon] and the five planets. The eighth belongs to the great army, and the ninth to the sphere of the constellations that go from East to West. The tenth is the Throne of Glory. For this reason, he wrote: *Your ten Fingers*, for they are ten.

Ibn Ezra clearly alludes here to a certain astronomical picture of the world, though his allusion is not without ambiguity. The Throne of Glory clearly is not a collective term for the spheres. However, does it refer to the level of the incorporeal existents, or to the outermost sphere which has no stars? In the Ptolemaic system, with which Ibn Ezra and his peers were familiar, the eighth sphere is the sphere of the fixed stars (including the twelve constellations of the Zodiac), and the ninth is the outermost sphere having no star at all, which moves from East to West. This picture was adopted also by the leading philosophers prior to Ibn Ezra — most notably, Alfarabi and Avicenna — and became the basis for their metaphysical systems. Moreover, this picture of the heavens underlies Ibn Ezra's own poetic paraphrase of Avicenna's *Hayy Ibn Yaqtan* — *Ḥai ben Meqiz*,³² as well as his later commentary on Exodus 20:14. Thus the Throne of Glory would appear to refer to the world of the angels. This interpretation also fits in nicely with his remark on Exodus 23:20 that the angels stand in the Throne of Glory. Yet this interpretation is not without its problems. As opposed to his later commentary on Exodus 20:14, in which the ninth sphere is a starless one moving from East to West, in his commentary on Psalms, written in the same period, Ibn Ezra appears to view the ninth sphere as one which contains the twelve constellations, as distinct from the sphere of the other stars, and rotating from East to West. He thus seems to waver between different astronomical models. That the Throne of Glory in fact refers to a celestial sphere is supported by the continuation of his commentary on Psalms 93:2, in which the earth is said to be situated in the center of the cosmos, with the Throne of Glory serving as the circumference —

32 See Levin, *Abraham Ibn Ezra Reader* (above, note 14), 121–32. This is also the model adopted by Solomon Ibn Gabirol in his poem *Keter Malkhūt*.

a clear indication that the Throne of Glory represents the uppermost sphere. Further complicating the picture is his commentary on Psalms 148:2, in which *heaven* and *heaven of heavens* refer to the levels of the earth's atmosphere rather than the uppermost spheres. In his commentary on Psalms 102:25, on the other hand, *heaven of heaven* is labeled the place of origin of the rational soul (*neshamah*), to where it returns, which would indicate that it refers to the world of the incorporeal beings and not to a celestial sphere at all. One thus finds that Ibn Ezra is not consistent in the use of his biblical imagery in depicting the heavenly spheres, or even in the astronomic model he adopts. At any rate, he could hardly have expected the Jewish readers of his Hebrew commentaries to have the requisite knowledge of these astronomic debates, and his commentary on Psalms does little to remedy this situation.

It is not the point of my study to reconstruct Ibn Ezra's precise views on the nature of the angels. Rather, it is to show that only a reader possessing basic philosophical and astronomical/astrological knowledge could be expected to appreciate his approach to this topic, whether in his early commentary or even his later one. While he provides more allusions to his philosophical and astronomical/astrological views in his later commentary, they remain just that, allusions. I find no evidence that the immediate audiences of Ibn Ezra's commentaries in this period had the basic knowledge to fully appreciate his allusions. This is not to say that one who possesses knowledge of these sciences could easily reconstruct the precise identity of the angels in accordance with the structure of the supernal world underlying Ibn Ezra's approach. Even for such an individual, Ibn Ezra's precise views remain ambiguous.³³ There are profound differences between Neoplatonic and Aristotelian ontological views. More often than not, Ibn Ezra's general allusions to the supernal world can be interpreted in accordance with either approach. In addition, his astronomical views on the structure of the heavenly spheres appear to have undergone changes, and his astrological references are not always clear. Yet one matter is evident concerning all of Ibn Ezra's allusions, those in his early commentaries as well as those in his later ones: it is only through the use of philosophy coupled with astronomy/astrology that one may understand these secrets —

33 See above, notes 14 and 15.

and he expected his more astute readers to understand this point and pursue it.

The Secret of the Rational Soul

As we have seen in the discussion above, Ibn Ezra often compares the rank of the rational soul to that of the angels, thereby closely linking the two subjects. The critical difference between them is that the rational soul is found accompanying a body, while the angels themselves are completely devoid of a body, though each has a relation to a celestial sphere. Already in his early commentary on Genesis 1:26, he interprets "the image (*zelem*) of God" as referring to the angel and to the rational soul (*neshamah*) that does not die. The capacity of the individual for immortality is repeated in his commentary on Genesis 3:24, and in a more veiled manner in his commentary on Genesis 5:24. In his early commentary on Exodus 23:20, he stresses the inferiority of human beings to the angels and stars, while noting their similarity to the angels only in regard to the rational soul. The incorporeal nature of the rational soul is indicated by Ibn Ezra in his commentary on Exodus 19:20. Finally, in a cryptic statement in his commentary on Numbers 20:8, Ibn Ezra maintains that "when the part knows everything [or: the All], it conjoins (*daveq*) with the All, and creates in everything signs and wonders." While the rational soul is not explicitly mentioned here, Ibn Ezra ties the prophet's miracle-working ability to the level of knowledge attained by the soul and its reaching the state of conjunction.³⁴

Taken together, these references hardly provide the reader with more than a glimpse of Ibn Ezra's approach to the nature of the rational soul, its conjunction with God, and the characteristics of its immortal state. In the later commentaries, the tie between the rational soul and the angels is elaborated upon, as are other characteristics of the soul. He concludes his later commentary on Genesis 3:21 by noting: "The rational soul which knows the supernal knowledge [or: knows the supernal intellect, or: knows knowledge of the Supernal – *yode'a da'at elyon*] stands with the Throne of Glory and

34 For a discussion of Ibn Ezra's approach to miracles, see Aviezer Ravitsky, "The Anthropological Theory of Miracles in Medieval Jewish Philosophy," in *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, ed. Isadore Twersky (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 231–72.

takes pleasure in the great and awesome Name." In the later commentary on Exodus 3:15, where Ibn Ezra divides the existents below the Deity into three levels or "worlds," he treats human beings as the most noble of existents in the lowest level. The highest level is that of the angels, which, unlike human beings, are neither corporeal nor attached to bodies. He then adds that:

The rational soul of the human being belongs to their [i.e., the angels'] species, and receives a supernal power in accordance with the order of the servants [i.e., the planets], each servant as against the great army [i.e., the constellations], at the time of his [i.e., the human being's] creation. If the rational soul becomes wise, it will attain the secret of the angels, and will be able to receive a great power from a supernal power that is received by way of the light of the angels. Then it will be conjoined with the noble Name. This is [the meaning of] what Jacob vowed: *And God [the Tetragrammaton] shall be my Lord* (Genesis 28:21), for he isolated himself all the days of his life in order to conjoin with the Name in accordance with his capacity [...] The "sons of the prophets" used to isolate themselves, so that perhaps they will receive power each in accordance with his capacity. With this Name signs and wonders are created.

The connection between knowledge, conjunction with God and miracles reappears in Ibn Ezra's commentary on Exodus 6:3. Here again, he remarks that the human soul is more exalted than the middle world of the stars. The wise soul "knows the acts of God — the ones without intermediary and the ones by way of an intermediary — abandons the desires of the lower world, and isolates itself to conjoin with the noble Name." At that point, God changes the influences of the order so as to aid the individual. Ibn Ezra goes on to say that the strength of the conjunction determines the magnitude of the miracles that one can perform (or that are performed on one's behalf). Moses reached a higher level of conjunction than that of the patriarchs; hence, he is said to have known God "face to face" and was able to perform miracles that the patriarchs were incapable of.³⁵

35 The conjunction of Moses with God is mentioned by Ibn Ezra also in his commentary on Exodus 19:19.

In his commentary on Exodus 33:21, Ibn Ezra expands slightly on some of these ideas in his discussion of the revelation to Moses in the cleft of the rock:

[...] Moses was able to understand and see in his mind's [lit., heart's] eye how the creatures are attached to the Creator [*Yozer Bereishit*], termed the Back (*Ahorayyim*). There is no power in a created being to know this by way of the Glory. This is the meaning of: *For no man can see Me and live* (Exodus 33:20), for the soul of a person is found with the body. After the death of the enlightened one (*ha-masqil*), his rational soul reaches a lofty level, one that it does not reach during the person's lifetime. Moses became a universal being, hence God said: *I will know you by name* (Exodus 33:12), for he alone knew the particulars and their parts in a universal way [...] Hence it is written in *Shi'ur Qomah* that God creates all bodies and all that is more noble than the body. Inferior to the body is the accident. R. Ishmael said: "Everyone who knows the measure of the Creator [*Yozer Bereishit*] is assured of attaining the next world."

Ibn Ezra continues the passage by listing the fixed astrological influences on all that happens in this world. As the stars and planets remain completely unchanging in their motions and influences, worshipping them achieves nothing. He then asserts that human beings nevertheless can escape their evil decrees — namely, by prophetic foreknowledge that enables one to take steps to avoid impending catastrophes caused by the influences of the stars. Neither the motions nor the influences of the stars change, but appropriate human action allows one to avoid their negative effects. In this manner, the observance of the Torah, too, by means of the actions it commands, enables Israel to remove themselves from negative astrological influences.³⁶

Taking into account all these comments on the soul, the question remains: what could have Ibn Ezra's early readers, apparently lacking

36 Other ideas regarding the soul mentioned by Ibn Ezra in his earlier commentaries are also reiterated in his later ones. For example, the incorporeality of the soul, similar to the angels, is mentioned by Ibn Ezra in the commentary on Exodus 25:40 (see also his commentary on Exodus 4:14). The immortality of the soul, at least of those who are in the category of the "lovers of God," is brought in his exegesis on Exodus 20:6.

all philosophical knowledge, deduce concerning the nature of the soul and its final perfection, and how much clarity regarding this subject does one attain from his later commentaries? Certainly, anyone steeped in Islamic philosophy would be familiar with the view that philosophical/scientific knowledge of all reality, culminating in apprehension of incorporeal reality and of God as cause of all the levels of existence, with this knowledge leads to some form of ontological conjunction with the higher realms, if not with God, and results in the eternal felicity of the immortal soul. Yet how many of Ibn Ezra's readers would appreciate this approach based on his scattered comments alone? The Jewish mystical traditions prior to this period know nothing of ontological conjunction with God or the higher realms, but only the glimpsing of the Deity and the heavenly hosts by some form of heavenly ascent of the soul (*Heikhalot* literature). Power is attained by knowing the secret names of the angels or the limbs of God (*Shi'ur Qomah*). A person can create by knowing the secrets of permutations of the Hebrew letters (*Book of Creation*). Ibn Ezra gives all these traditions a philosophical turn that is not easily understood by those without prior knowledge of Islamic philosophy. Only one acquainted with Avicennian thought could appreciate Ibn Ezra's view of the prophet's miraculous powers as stemming from an all-encompassing knowledge of reality and attainment of conjunction. Those not versed in the philosophical tradition might easily misread his allusions to the philosophical/scientific knowledge that determines one's eternal state, substituting more traditional forms of knowledge in its place. Even the notion of incorporeality of the rational soul (or intellect) to which Ibn Ezra constantly alludes cannot be apprehended by those not steeped in philosophical thought, as this notion is absent from rabbinic thought and earlier Jewish mystical traditions. In short, just as we have seen above regarding the angels, Ibn Ezra provides readers who had no prior knowledge of the philosophical tradition with little more than barely comprehensible allusions to this tradition. Notably, only the astrological dimension of Ibn Ezra's thought is made more explicit in the later commentaries, perhaps because in this case his readers already possessed Talmudic traditions in this area.³⁷

This is not to say that Ibn Ezra's readers in later generations who had philosophical knowledge could easily reconstruct his precise

37 See in particular B.T. Shabbat 156a-b; B.T. Mo'ed Qatan 28a.

views on this subject. As in the case of the angels, the different views found in the Islamic philosophical sources allow for alternate interpretations of his comments. Did Ibn Ezra regard the rational soul as an immortal entity, as maintained by the Neoplatonic philosophers such as Ibn Gabirol (and even Avicenna on this issue), or is it possible to achieve immortality only by attaining an actualized perfect intellect, as maintained by Alfarabi in most of his writings?³⁸ Did the soul originate on high from the World Soul to which it returns (Neoplatonic thought), or is it to be treated as a form attached to matter that in itself has no continuity when the body disintegrates (Aristotelian thought)? Can the individual conjoin with God in some manner (Neoplatonic thought), or only with one of the lower entities, such as the Active Intellect (Aristotelian thought)? While Ibn Ezra certainly appears to lean toward the Neoplatonic tradition, his views remain ambiguous.³⁹ In this case as well, I do not seek to interpret these views, but only to present the philosophical issues with which readers needed to be familiar in order to appreciate Ibn Ezra's comments, even the lengthier ones in his later commentaries.⁴⁰

38 See Herbert Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes on the Intellect* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

39 Even in his later commentary on Psalms, where Ibn Ezra offers some more hints to his position, it still remains unclear. For example, the immortality of the rational soul as such is found in his commentary on Psalms 8:5 (see also commentary on Psalms 49:1). In his commentary on Psalms 22:22, he speaks of the origin of the individual human soul in the "Soul of the All" (*Nishmat ha-Kol*), and that to the All the soul returns with its separation from the body. In his commentary on Psalms 49:16, he even speaks of the supernal human soul conjoining with the "Supernal Soul, which is the Soul of the Heavens." Yet while Ibn Ezra in both these sources may well be referring to the Neoplatonic World Soul, it is not completely clear that this in fact is the case. He appears to use the term *neshamah* as interchangeable with intellect, as when he speaks of the "souls of the angels" (commentary on Psalms 87:7; see also *ibid.* 96:5). Hence, the "Soul of All" or "Soul of Heaven" might refer to the Universal Intellect or to the Active Intellect (see also Psalms 139:18, where he speaks of conjunction with the "Supernal Soul" which results in prophetic visions). Moreover, it appears that only the perfected soul reaches the ultimate state (Psalms 73:24), leading one to wonder about the fate of the other souls.

40 For a study of the issue of the rational soul/intellect in Ibn Ezra's thought, see Schwartz, "R. Abraham Ibn Ezra the Philosopher" (above, note 15). It is interesting to note that Ibn Ezra's most comprehensive treatment of the human soul is found in one of his earliest commentaries, the one on Ecclesiastes, written in Rome in 1140. See in particular his lengthy comment on Ecclesiastes

Conclusion

A comparison between the secret of the angels and the secret of the rational soul in his early and later commentaries on Genesis and Exodus reveals that while Ibn Ezra throws more light on his approach to these topics in his later commentaries, much remains obscure, particularly for readers who lack knowledge in philosophy and science. To be sure, there are topics upon which Ibn Ezra expands much more in his later commentaries, particularly in matters of astronomy (Exodus 12:1), the names of God, especially the Tetragrammaton (Exodus 3:15; 33:21), and some of the secrets associated with the Tabernacle (e.g., Exodus 28:6). Yet in none of these cases is there anything approaching a full and clear exposition. In matters of astronomy, of course, one could hardly expect otherwise, given the vastness of the subject. Ibn Ezra himself notes in his later commentary on Exodus 28:6, while discussing the secret of the *efod* worn by the high priest: "Even if I agreed to reveal this secret [in full], the length of my commentary on this entire book would not suffice for writing it, for one cannot understand it without having studied geometry and the secret of the work of the heavens."

Still, the question remains, why did Ibn Ezra expand on some of his secrets in the later commentaries written in Northern France as opposed to his earlier commentaries written in Italy? Why did he not simply reiterate the brief expositions that characterize his earlier commentaries? This question takes on even greater significance when we consider that the Jews of Northern France showed little inclination towards scientific or philosophical learning in this period. It is thus unlikely that Ibn Ezra elaborated on his secrets because Rouen's readers were better prepared to receive them. Indeed, I would suggest that exactly the opposite is the case. Ibn Ezra expanded on his secrets precisely because his audience did not have enough knowledge to understand them, and were generally disinclined to study science and philosophy or appreciate their value.⁴¹ Hence Ibn Ezra needed to give the elite reader a clearer direction to pursue for understanding the secrets. In other words, Ibn Ezra, like Maimonides after him, understood that if he did not provide his readers with an orientation

7:3. Why Ibn Ezra did not bring a similar exposition on the soul in his later commentaries, or even allude to his commentary here, is perplexing.

41 On this point I tend to agree with Friedlander; see note 13 above.

toward the philosophical and scientific nature of the secrets of the Torah, they would remain ignorant of many profound truths of Torah. At the same time, conscious of the sensibilities of his more traditionally minded readers, Ibn Ezra refrained from revealing too much about these truths, particularly those of a philosophical nature.

What is true of the Jews of Northern France may have been true in Ibn Ezra's view of all the Jews of Western Europe who lived in Christian lands (including Italy, where he wrote his early commentaries). He may have returned to writing commentaries on the Torah precisely because he saw the need to expand upon his earlier commentaries, viewing them as too succinct and oblique, and thus not properly appreciated.⁴² Hence, Ibn Ezra's later commentaries were in part intended to encourage the study of science and philosophy in Western Europe already half a century before the Hebrew translations of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* would serve as the most important catalyst to this end. Moreover, at least when it came to matters of astronomy and astrology, Ibn Ezra himself provided his readers with many of the necessary textbooks in Hebrew for entering the portals of these sciences and better appreciating the secrets of the Torah in these areas.⁴³ Yet in none of his commentaries — in contrast to Maimonides' approach in the *Guide*, at least on some issues — does Ibn Ezra come even close to providing his readers with an explicit exposition of his philosophical views. Over the centuries, this invited numerous supercommentaries attempting to decipher his precise views, which remain elusive to this day.

42 This is true even of many of his grammatical explanations.

43 Many of these treatises have been critically edited with English translation and annotation by Shlomo Sela in the Brill Series: *Abraham Ibn Ezra's Astrological Writings*. In these texts, he certainly did not treat any of this knowledge as esoteric.