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Jewish Philosophy A–Z

Aaron W. Hughes

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Series Editor's Preface

Religious philosophy has always been something of an enigma. In so far as it is philosophy how can it be religious, and in so far as it is religious how can it be philosophical? Our series is not the place to resolve these issues, but Aaron W. Hughes' book does bring out the interest for philosophers in Jewish philosophy. This potential conflict between reason and religion was deeply felt by many Jewish thinkers, and it gave their work an apologetic flavour, as though they had to justify what they were doing to both the religious and the philosophical communities. But of course these are very modern distinctions and at the time during which many of these thinkers were working the intellectuals in the community were expected to encompass a variety of disciplines, and they certainly did. So they brought to their philosophical analysis a deep relationship with Judaism, and this gives their work an interesting orientation. This is an area of philosophy where terminology is often difficult to understand since it is unfamiliar, and this book is designed to make access to Jewish philosophy easier. Those familiar with philosophy will find useful explanations of the religious terminology, while those acquainted with Judaism will become aware of how it can be applied to philosophical issues. In fact, it is a mistake to separate religions from philosophy, since as religions develop over time philosophical issues become very much part and parcel of the religious discourse itself, and so inseparable

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from the religion. With its description of leading thinkers and concepts in Jewish philosophy this book illustrates that nicely.

Oliver Leaman

Introduction

What is 'Jewish Philosophy'? At first glance, this term might seem easy to define. Jewish philosophy is simply philosophy done by Jews. Although on one level this is certainly correct, such a definition still leaves undefined two crucial terms: 'Jews' and 'philosophy'. The term 'Jew' (or 'Jewish' or 'Judaism') implies a commitment to a particular set of texts and a specific way of life. As far as texts are concerned, the central written record of the Jewish religious tradition is found in the Hebrew Bible (as opposed to the Old Testament) and other literature associated with the rabbis (e.g. midrash, Talmud). Moreover, the specific 'way of life' is one that revolves around the centrality of Jewish peoplehood and one that is sanctified by the knowledge and observance (realising that there are a number of different degrees of observance) of the divine commandments. Any form of 'Jewish philosophy', therefore, is going to have to take seriously these two trajectories.

Philosophy, in contrast, is both similar and dissimilar to Judaism. It is similar in that it also implies a commitment to a particular way of life and, therefore, is based on a specific orientation to the world. However, it is dissimilar in that this orientation is based neither on revelation nor on the particularity of a specific group of people. Rather, philosophy is usually regarded as synonymous with the rational investigation of the universe based on well-established logical and scientific principles.

Once we join together the particularism that is associated with the adjective ‘Jewish’ and the universalism inherent to the noun ‘philosophy’, we would seem to be left with some sort of oxymoron. This perplexity is compounded by the fact that virtually none of the individuals to whom we refer as ‘Jewish philosophers’ would have used this term to designate themselves. Philo (c. 15 BCE–c. 50 CE), for example, was born a Jew and lived a Jewish life, but when he wrote philosophy he did not consciously write something we would today recognise as ‘Jewish philosophy’. Rather, he read the particular texts of Judaism in light of the universal truth claims supplied by the philosophical system of his day (i.e. that of Plato and Aristotle). Based on this, he sought to connect the Bible to these broader claims, for what was true in Judaism’s sacred scripture had to adhere to what other sources of knowledge deemed true. The same could be said for virtually all of the Jewish philosophers from Philo until the nineteenth century. Thus, thinkers as diverse as Maimonides, Crescas, Mendelssohn and Krochmal – all of whom are today regarded as canonical in a discipline known as ‘Jewish philosophy’ – did not perceive themselves to be ‘Jewish philosophers’ engaged in the practice of writing ‘Jewish philosophy’.

Yet, even though such thinkers did not regard themselves to be Jewish philosophers, they are today referred to by this term. So, whether they would have liked it or not, we must attempt to define ‘Jewish philosophy’. To venture a definition, I would have to say something like *Jewish philosophy is the reading of the authoritative sources of Judaism (esp. the Bible) in light of the vocabulary and categories imported from philosophy*. So although the particular datum of Jewish philosophy, namely, the Bible, has not changed, the particular form of philosophy used to interpret it has. Since philosophy is not a Jewish invention, but tended to be imported from the larger cultural contexts in which Jews lived, the particular philosophical systems used to elucidate Judaism and Jewish sources were (and

still are) dependent upon larger intellectual currents found in various temporal, spatial and geographic contexts.

Historically, Jews lived in diverse areas, many of which were important centres of philosophy. In antiquity this included Rome and Alexandria; in the medieval period these centres included Spain, Provence and the Eastern Islamic world; the Renaissance witnessed a sizeable community in Italy; and in the modern period Jews have lived and continue to live in places such as Germany, France and North America. In all of these diverse times and places Jews adopted and adapted to meet their own needs the philosophical schools of, for example, Platonism, Aristotelianism, Neoplatonism, Humanism, Idealism, Existentialism and Post-Modernism. Moreover, a glance at these diverse geographic and temporal locations, not to mention the various philosophical schools associated with them, reveals that Jewish philosophers served as important conduits between non-Jewish and Jewish cultures.

In order to test the above definition of Jewish philosophy, let us compare Bob Dylan, Augustine and Maimonides. Is Bob Dylan a Jewish philosopher? On the one hand, he is Jewish by birth and, for parts of his career at least, he has identified with being Jewish. Moreover a song such as 'The Times They Are A Changin'' is obviously part of a larger cultural movement of protest and civic disobedience associated with the United States in the 1960s. On the other hand, just because Dylan is a Jew and composes lyrics influenced by the broader *Zeitgeist* does not automatically make him a 'Jewish philosopher'. Why? Because he does not interpret traditional Jewish sources, nor do his lyrics have any real interest in or sustained engagement with the biblical narrative.

Unlike Dylan, Augustine (354–430 CE) was not born Jewish, yet he has a real interest in the Bible, which he interprets in light of the philosophical culture of late antiquity. Does this make him a 'Jewish philosopher'? No, because Augustine interprets the Old Testament as opposed to the Hebrew Bible. (The Old

Testament includes all of the same books as the Hebrew Bible, but arranges them in a different order and interprets them in the light of the 'New' Testament.) As a result Augustine interprets the Bible in ways (e.g. the figure of Jesus and the new covenant) that would be completely foreign to a Jewish reading of the Hebrew Bible.

Maimonides (1138–1204), however, would fit our criteria for being a 'Jewish philosopher'. He was born Jewish, lived an observant Jewish life, and interpreted the Bible (in addition to rabbinic literature) according to the broader claims of medieval Aristotelianism. Like those Jewish philosophers before and after him, Maimonides was engaged in a project of translating the vocabulary, themes and categories of the Hebrew Bible into the rationalist discourse that philosophy provided.

Although they would often come under severe criticism for reading the universal and scientific terms of the day into Judaism, those who engaged in Jewish philosophy did not see it this way at all. For them, it was, and indeed still is, a religious obligation to engage in philosophy. The scientific investigation of the world is tantamount to knowledge of God, which Jewish philosophy through its many diverse incarnations has equated and, for the most part, continues to equate with the love of God.

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I would like to thank Oliver Leaman for encouraging me to write this little volume. He read over the manuscript, making various suggestions and emendations, on numerous occasions. I would also like to acknowledge Daniel Rynhold, Shai Cherry and Lisa A. Hughes for reading and commenting on various drafts of what would eventually become the present volume. I take full responsibility for all remaining mistakes and lacunae.

When writing this book I had a particular audience in mind. The day that Oliver asked me if I was interested in writing this book was, coincidentally, the same day that my wife informed me of the impending arrival of our first child. Rebecca Sophia has accordingly been involved in every part of this project. Since my goal was to present Jewish philosophy to someone who had very little familiarity with the topic, I began to conceive of her as this theoretical 'someone'. May she grow up to the delights of the Jewish tradition, including its strong commitment to matters of the intellect.

Using This Book

This proved to be a very difficult and, at times frustrating, book to write. Although obviously I think a brief introduction to the major individuals, terms and themes of Jewish philosophy is necessary, the distillation of a thinker's *oeuvre* or the mapping of a term's often diverse use over a thousand years is an impossible task. In order to negotiate the brevity of the entries, I have tried a number of different approaches to facilitate broader discussions that are meant to run through a number of entries. For example, under 'creation' I have put a number of terms (creation; creation a parte ante; creation a parte post; creation, eternal) in order to (1) convey the centrality of the problem creation poses for Jewish philosophy, and (2) to provide a larger discussion of this topic than only the one entry would afford. In other places I make a somewhat artificial distinction between medieval and modern Jewish philosophy in the service of space. For example, under 'prophecy' I primarily focus on the medieval discussion, whereas under 'revelation' I examine the modern discussion. Furthermore, I have found it useful to include some non-Jewish thinkers (e.g. Mutazilites, Alfarabi, Heidegger) for further contextualisation. Within this context, it is necessary to remember that Jewish philosophy does not exist in a vacuum, but always develops in counterpoint to larger cultural and intellectual trends.

As I envisage it, this volume has three purposes, in ascending order of importance. The first is that of an alphabetical glossary, which will be of use to the general reader wanting

to look up a particular term or individual that she finds in another work, either primary or secondary. This volume will, I trust, be helpful because, in a relatively short space, such a reader will see the breadth of the term in question, including the various ways it has been employed in the Jewish philosophical tradition.

Secondly, this volume works as an introduction to Jewish philosophy. The intricate set of cross-references following each entry is meant to reveal the internal consistency of Jewish philosophy. For example, under Maimonides there exists a set of related entries – for example, Abravanel, Isaac; Ibn Daud, Abraham; Maimonidean controversies; Spinoza, Baruch – that are meant to give a much broader overview of Maimonides than only the one entry would provide. From this example, one can see that the related entries refer to Maimonides' predecessors, his successors and the broader cultural context of the role and place of Maimonides in Jewish civilisation. At the same time, however, I try not to make every term either lead to or depart from Maimonides. Ibn Daud, for example, is an important precursor of Maimonides, but he is also much more than this: he is an important philosopher in his own right, not to mention one who never would have heard of Maimonides. My entry tries to convey both perspectives; thus, it is part historical and part philosophical.

Finally, and in my opinion the most important task of this volume, is to entice readers into discovering for themselves the breadth, dynamics and beauty of Jewish philosophy. Jewish philosophy is extremely creative in its treatment of Jewish texts, and this creativity is what enabled and continues to enable Jewish philosophers to manoeuvre around the differences between Jewish and non-Jewish cultures. In so doing, Jewish philosophy is one of many processes that has led to Judaism's continuing vitality.

Before ending, I would like to supply a caveat to all that follows. No book, whether this one or any other, can ever

be a substitute for reading the original sources (either in the original or in translation) of Jewish philosophy. In all of the entries devoted to individuals, I give the names (in both English translation and the original Hebrew or Arabic or German) of that individual's main works. This will, I hope, encourage the interested reader to find them at her local library. Many of these texts are not easy to read; however, I would encourage the reader to persevere and talk through some of the difficult issues with other interested readers. (The reading of both philosophy and Jewish texts is ideally a group activity.) If a reader picks up an original work of Jewish philosophy to read, this little volume will have achieved its purpose.