

# MA'AMAR AL YISHMA'EL

RABBI SOLOMON BEN ABRAHAM IBN ADRET

WITH AN INTRODUCTION AND NOTES

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## MITSVAT HASHEM BARAH

AN ELUCIDATION OF THE SEVEN NOAHIDE COMMANDMENTS

BY

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## AVANT-PROPOS

The *Ma'amar al Yishma'el* by R. Solomon ben Abraham Ibn Adret of Barcelona [RaSHBA] (c.1235–c.1310) was first published by Joseph Perles in Breslau in 1863,<sup>1</sup> from a manuscript in the library of the Breslau Rabbinic Seminary. That manuscript, unfortunately, was lost in World War II.<sup>2</sup> Though in the past there were scholars who challenged the ascription to Ibn Adret,<sup>3</sup> today it is widely accepted that the great Rabbi of Barcelona did in fact author this extraordinary document.<sup>4</sup>

The *Ma'amar al Yishma'el* is a polemic work designed to defend the authenticity of the text of the Torah and the fidelity of rabbinic tradition against the aspersions cast on both by an anonymous Muslim writer. The cumbersome title translates: “A treatise addressed to an Ishmael[ite] who composed a work on the religions; a fool, for he spoke [disparagingly] even of our perfect religion.” In 1894 Martin Schreiner<sup>5</sup> identified the unnamed Muslim writer as

1 J. Perles, *R. Salomo b. Abraham b. Adereth: Sein Leben und seine Schriften*, Breslau 1863, Hebrew section, pp. 1–24.

2 Cod. Saraval XXVI. The *Ma'amar al Yishma'el* appeared there on 271a–282a (Perles, German section, pp. 82–83). The manuscript is what bibliographers refer to as a “unicum.” Benjamin Richler of the Microfilm Division of the Jewish National and University Library, Jerusalem informs me that no other manuscript of the *Ma'amar al Yishma'el* has surfaced.

3 Most noteworthy are the objections of Moshe Zucker in his “Berurim be-toledot ha-vikuhim ha-datiyim she-bein ha-Yahadut ve-ha-Islam (Neged mi mekhuvan ha-‘Ma'amar al Yishma'el' ha-meyuhas le-ha-RaSHBA?),” in *Festschrift Armand Kaminka zum siebzigsten Geburtstage*, Vienna 1937. See p. 43, n. 1.

I pointed out that certain halakhic positions in the *Ma'amar* are identical with those of R. David Bonafed, disciple of Nahmanides, but that is not to say that Ibn Adret could not have entertained the same halakhic notions. The parallels I observed are neither numerous nor weighty enough to impugn the ascription to Ibn Adret. Certainly, the overall tenor of the *Ma'amar*, both in terms of linguistic style and philosophic disposition, is consonant with Ibn Adret's other writings.

4 Thus, Haim Z. Dimitrovsky had no qualms about including the *Ma'amar* as an integral part of his edition of *Teshuvot ha-RaSHBA*. See *Teshuvot ha-RaSHBA*, ed. H. Z. Dimitrovsky, I, Jerusalem 1990, chap. 36, pp. 115–158.

5 M. Schreiner, “Die apologetische Schrift des Salomo b. Adret gegen einen

none other than the Spaniard Ibn Ḥazm (994–1064), whose sprawling encyclopedic work *Faṣl fīl-mīlāl wal-ahwā wal-niḥāl* (*Treatise on Religions, Sects and Creeds*)<sup>6</sup> is one of the earliest examples of the *al-mīlāl wal-niḥāl* (“religions and sects”) genre of literature, which is to say, Islamic studies of comparative religion.<sup>7</sup> As one already might have gathered, the cantankerous Ibn Ḥazm took a jaundiced view of religions other than Islam.<sup>8</sup> All this was of no great concern to the Rabbi of Barcelona. Ibn Adret did take notice, and umbrage, for that matter, when the Muslim polemicist “spoke even of *our* perfect religion.” It was then that the Jewish spokesman of his generation penned this eloquent and well-reasoned defense of the continuity of Jewish tradition. (For the sake of fairness, it must be stated that on several occasions Ibn Adret chides Ibn Ḥazm for claiming to be conversant with the world’s religions, when in reality, it is apparent that he lacks the most basic knowledge of universally acknowledged principles, such as the principle that preservation of life takes precedence over commandments, or that scripture is open to interpretation.<sup>9</sup>)

Why a rabbi living in thirteenth-century Catalonia, by then firmly under Christian control, would feel threatened by an eleventh-century Islamic polemicist, remains an enigma. If anything, Ibn Adret should have taken up the defense of Judaism against the sallies of conversionist friars. Witness his response to the Dominican Raymond Martini, author of *Pugio fidei*.<sup>10</sup>

Muhammedaner,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenlandischen Gesellschaft* 48 (1894), pp. 39–42; reprinted in *Martin Schreiner: Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Moshe Perlmann, Hildesheim 1983, pp. 271–274.

- 6 *Faṣl fīl-mīlāl wal-ahwā wal-niḥāl*, two vols., Cairo 1317–1321/1899–1903. A Spanish translation was produced by M. Asín-Palacios: *Abenházam de Córdoba y su Historia Crítica de las Ideas Religiosas*, five vols., Madrid 1927–1932.
- 7 See Steven M. Wasserstrom, *Between Muslim and Jew: The Problem of Symbiosis under Early Islam*, Princeton 1995, pp. 153–155.
- 8 See Theodore Pulcini, *Exegesis as Polemical Discourse: Ibn Hazm on Jewish and Christian Scriptures*, Atlanta 1998; Camilla Adang, *Muslim Writers on Judaism and the Hebrew Bible: From Ibn Rabban to Ibn Hazm*, Leiden 1996, pp. 237–248.
- 9 See *Ma’amar*, pp. 115–116.
- 10 See Jeremy Cohen, *The Friars and the Jews: The Evolution of Medieval Anti-Judaism*, Ithaca 1982, pp. 156–163.

Ibn Adret’s putative responses to Martini occur in the very same Breslau manuscript, Cod. Saraval XXVI, 283b–299b, and were published by Perles in

Without entering into the many minute criticisms posed by Ibn Hazm, two trenchant themes should be mentioned. First, the polemicist engages in one of the earliest known examples of Bible criticism. Recently, Hava Lazarus-Yafeh has attempted to establish linkage between the criticism of Ibn Hazm, who would have us suppose that Ezra the Scribe was guilty of tampering with the text, and the later criticisms of Spinoza, and eventually, Wellhausen.<sup>11</sup>

Where the medieval Bible exegete R. Abraham Ibn Ezra stood in this maelstrom is open to debate.<sup>12</sup> (Some subscribe to the notion that in the course of his commentary, Ibn Ezra drops a few hints to a later redactor interpolating whole verses in the Pentateuch.<sup>13</sup>) My own

the Hebrew section of his monograph immediately following the *Ma'amar*, on pp. 24–56.

11 H. Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism*, Princeton 1992.

12 Lazarus-Yafeh, pp. 73–74, 140.

13 Benedict de Spinoza, *A Theological-Political Treatise*, trans. R. H. M. Elwes, New York 1951, chap. VIII, pp. 120–123. See a partial rebuttal of Spinoza by Samuel David Luzzatto (“SHA DaL”), *Perush SHaDaL 'al Hamishah Humshei Torah*, ed. P. Schlesinger, Tel-Aviv 1965, Deuteronomy 1:1 (pp. 507–508). (R. Judah Leib Krinski in his supercommentary to Ibn Ezra, *Mehokekei Yehudah*, Piotrkow 1907, *Karnei 'Or*, Deuteronomy 1:2 [p. 3] mangled the quotation from Luzzatto.) We now know that Spinoza was preceded in this respect by R. Joseph Bonfils, who lived several centuries earlier (see below n. 19).

At the opposite extreme, R. Samuel Zarza (second half, fourteenth century) found simply inconceivable that “the master Ibn Ezra” (*ha'adon Ibn Ezra*) might have entertained the heretical notion that someone — with the exception of Joshua ben Nun (see the opinion of Rabbi Judah in TB Bava Bathra 15a) — added to the Five Books of Moses, in flagrant contradiction of the fundamental laid down in TB Sanhedrin 99a: “Whosoever holds that the Torah is not from Heaven — even if he should hold that the entire Torah is from Heaven with the exception of a single verse which was not uttered by the Holy One but rather authored by Moses — has no portion in the World to Come.” See Zarza, *Mekor Hayyim*, Mantua 1559, 109b.

Somewhere between the two poles, Rabbi H. J. D. Azulai was of the opinion that at least some of the passages in Ibn Ezra's commentary which offend rabbinic sensibilities are in fact later interpolations by students of Ibn Ezra:

Rabbi Benjamin Espinoza produced a supercommentary to Ibn Ezra on the Prophets and Writings. In his introduction, he quotes from a manuscript by Rabbi Raphael Ashkenazi and the rabbis of Italy, that it has become evident to them that the students of Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra tampered with his commentary, adding on their own cognizance things which are untrue. Any passage found in [the commentary to] the Pentateuch and Prophets that opposes the words of our Rabbis, of blessed memory, does not originate with R. Abraham Ibn Ezra, but rather with his students, who without his knowledge, after his death, tampered. But R. Abraham Ibn Ezra and his

contribution has been to expose a passage in the kabbalist R. Ezra of Gerona's commentary to Song of Songs, where he summarily excommunicates those who would entertain the thought that Ezra the Scribe later added specific verses to the Torah.

Take heed, turn not to wrongdoing,<sup>14</sup> to say that Ezra the Scribe added therein of his own invention when transcribing, such as “*And the Canaanite was then in the land,*”<sup>15</sup> or “*Behold his bedstead is a bedstead of iron,*”<sup>16</sup> for this is total heresy. In this regard the Sages said: ““*For the word of the Lord he despised,*”<sup>17</sup> refers to one who holds that Torah is not from Heaven. If one holds that the entire Torah is from Heaven except for this particular verse which is not of divine origin but rather uttered by Moses on his own, concerning such a person it is said, ‘*For the word of the Lord he despised.*’”<sup>18</sup>

Though perhaps not outright condemnation of Ibn Ezra himself, at least the kabbalist's shrill note of warning serves as an indictment

chair are pure. This is the gist of their words. If they are correct, we may set our minds at ease.

But how should we respond to the fact that at times R. Moses ben Nahman [Nahmanides] writes about him [Ibn Ezra] in the harshest terms? For example, in *Shemot* [i.e. Vayyigash, Genesis 46:15; Chavel ed., I, p. 254], “Let gold be poured, etc.” Nahmanides was close to the time of R. Abraham Ibn Ezra, yet he considered it factual that this is the comment of R. Abraham Ibn Ezra himself. On the other hand, if all those strange passages in contravention of the Law and the Rabbis, of blessed memory, emanate from R. Abraham Ibn Ezra, why didn't Nahmanides address them? Evidently, there are among them [passages] that are not the words of R. Abraham Ibn Ezra; strange hands wrote that which never occurred to him.  
(H. J. D. Azulai, *Shem ha-Gedolim*, Part I, A-89, s.v. “*Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra*”)

The introduction to R. Benjamin Espinoza's work (complete with the Italian rabbis' defenses of Ibn Ezra), which Azulai saw in manuscript, has since been published. See Naphtali Ben-Menahem, *Inyenei Ibn Ezra*, Jerusalem 1978, pp. 248–328.

14 Job 36:21. So reads the manuscript version, missing in the Chavel edition.

15 Genesis 12:6.

16 Deuteronomy 3:11.

17 Numbers 15:31.

18 TB Sanhedrin 99a; *Kitvei Rabbenu Moshe ben Nahman*, II, ed. C. B. Chavel, Jerusalem 1964, p. 548. (For a long time R. Ezra of Gerona's *Commentary to Song of Songs* was wrongly attributed to Nahmanides, a younger Geronese contemporary of R. Ezra. Despite several fundamental ideological differences between the two men, there is no denying that Nahmanides adopted certain motifs from R. Ezra's *Commentary* in his own Bible commentary. See Chavel's introduction, pp. 473–475.) An English translation of R. Ezra's commentary is available: *Rabbi Ezra Ben Solomon of Gerona: Commentary on the Song of Songs*, trans. S. Brody, Kalamazoo 1999. (See there p. 85.)

of those who would interpret Ibn Ezra's commentary to the Pentateuch as containing veiled Bible criticism.<sup>19</sup>

Second, we should mention the Islamic doctrine of *naskh al-shara'i* or abrogation of the Law, whereby it is assumed that the older Mosaic Code was displaced and superseded by Muhammad's later prophecy as revealed in the Qur'an. *Naskh* is a stock Islamic critique of Judaism. Ibn Adret was not the first Jewish thinker forced to fend off this attack. Before him, the classic defenders of the faith, Sa'adyah and Maimonides, to name the most famous, grappled with the issue.<sup>20</sup> Yet Ibn Adret certainly presents us with a laudable effort, in the course of which he poses several cogent logical arguments, while touching on fascinating halakhic issues, especially in regard to the so-called Noahide Laws. (So much material amassed in this latter regard that at a certain point it was decided to devote a separate work to the "Seven Noahide Commandments.")

Again, there elude us the exact circumstances that some seven centuries ago prompted R. Solomon ben Abraham Ibn Adret of Barcelona to pen a response to an Islamic critique of Judaism. In view of recent world events, however, renewed investigation of the *Ma'amar al Yishma'el* will not go unrewarded.

19 Such a radical interpreter of Ibn Ezra was R. Joseph Bonfils (late thirteenth century). See R. Joseph ben Eliezer ben Joseph Tov 'Elem ha-Sefardi, *Zafnat Pa'aneah*, ed. D. Herzog, Cracow 1911, Genesis 12:6 (pp. 91–93); Genesis 22:14 (p. 112); Deuteronomy 1:2 (pp. 65–66).

One can hardly chalk up to coincidence the fact that the verses singled out as examples by R. Ezra of Gerona, are precisely those verses where there occur Ibn Ezra's cryptic remarks — remarks that to some, at least, suggest Bible criticism. To be sure, none of the supercommentaries on Ibn Ezra name Ezra the Scribe in this connection. (Bonfils or Tov 'Elem assumes the work of redaction was done by unspecified "later prophets.") Not even Spinoza attributed to Ibn Ezra the opinion that responsibility for the purported interpolations lay specifically with Ezra the Scribe. (Spinoza took credit for this idea himself.) It is possible that R. Ezra of Gerona was referring to a contemporary interpreter of Ibn Ezra, whose supercommentary has not survived. There is also the possibility that R. Ezra of Gerona was familiar with an exegetical work by an author other than Ibn Ezra that has since disappeared.

20 See R. Sa'adyah ben Joseph Fayyumi, *Kitab al-Amanat w'al I'tiqadat* [= *Emunot ve-De'ot*], trans. J. Kafih, Jerusalem 1970, 3:9 (pp. 139–143); *Mishnah 'im Perush Rabbenu Moshe ben Maimon, Seder Nezikin*, trans. J. Kafih, Jerusalem 1995, Introduction to Sanhedrin, chap. 10, *ha-yesod ha-teshi'i* (p. 144, n. 77); Lazarus-Yafeh, p. 37.

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