

HASDAI CRESCAS'S PHILOSOPHICAL BIBLICAL EXEGESIS

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Medieval Jewish thinkers typically deploy biblical exegesis for two reasons: to find (or compel) corroborating prooftexts for their philosophic speculations, or to explain away difficulties in the biblical text that threaten these speculations. Even if Crescas is no exception to this general rule, what is striking about him is his championing of Torah—just as it is—as the fount of truth. The ingenuity of his biblical hermeneutics enables him to celebrate the Torah text rather than push it aside in search of a presumed deeper meaning concealed within. Crescas does not find the Torah on its surface embarrassing or misleading, as Maimonides arguably does.¹ He does not rely on metaphors, as Maimonides does in his introduction to the *Guide* to portray the literal sense of the Torah as ultimately obstructive, a screen that only the wise can penetrate.² The

¹ Maimonides on many occasions seems to fault the Torah for causing belief in an anthropomorphic God. See *Guide for the Perplexed*, 1.31, 1.36, 1.51, 1.52, 1.53.

² See my “Four Parables about Peshat as Parable,” *Journal of the Central Conference of American Rabbis* (2008): 3-19 (first published in *The Legacy of Maimonides: Religion, Reason and Community*, ed. S. Carmy and Y. Levy (New York: Yashar Books, 2006): 111-26), where I argue that in the sequence of parables that Maimonides uses to capture the relationship between

Torah for Crescas is our teacher: it teaches what is true about God and the world. Moreover, Crescas has less respect than at least some other Jewish philosophers for what speculation can accomplish on its own. He spends Part II of Book I of *Light of the Lord*³ showing not only the extent to which speculation is infected—indeed infested—with unproven assumptions and how it is repeatedly guilty of begging the question, but concludes that speculative reasoning—unlike the Torah—frequently goes awry.

In what follows I shall present examples of Crescas's biblical exegesis that illustrate his reliance on Torah as the ultimate guide to truth. Although it may well be that his philosophical/theological notions precede some particular instances of exegesis, it remains true that his overarching approach to the nature of God and of God's relationship to the world is shaped by Torah and the rabbinic tradition. He is repelled no less by the Greek *flavor* of the approach of his predecessors Maimonides and Gersonides than by what he considers the flaws in their views. We recall here the cautionary note concerning Maimonides which Crescas sounds in his introduction to *Light of the Lord*, a warning which echoes Plato's attitude toward Homer⁴ and Aristotle's to "those who introduced the Forms":⁵ "The words of the Rabbi are dear to us and beloved by us, but the truth is more beloved."⁶ Crescas follows this remark with one even more prickly, citing *Berakhot* 19b of the Talmud: "Wherever there is

the literal sense of the text and its deeper or secret meaning, the literal sense shifts from being an aid to the truth (it is compared, first, to the cords that help draw water from a well, and, second, to the valueless-in-itself taper that helps to find a lost pearl), to being obstructive (in the third metaphor, the literal text is compared to the furniture that fills a dark room in which a pearl is lost), to being not only obstructive but actually misleading to those lacking philosophic discernment (in the final metaphor, the literal text is compared to the silver filigree that encases the golden apple). Whereas no one would confuse the furniture with the pearl being sought (in the third metaphor), in the final metaphor the golden apple *is* mistaken for a silver one by the untrained eye.

³ All references to *Light of the Lord* are from Ḥasdai Crescas, *Light of the Lord*, tr. Roslyn Weiss (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018).

⁴ *Rep.* 10.595b-c; cf. 10.607c-d.

⁵ *Metaph.* 987a.

⁶ Intro:24.

desecration of the holy name, one may not accord deference to the Rabbi.”⁷ To Crescas's Jewishly attuned ear, the things Maimonides says in the *Guide* are indeed, as he calls them, “astonishing” (*devarim matmihin*). The Torah may not raise the philosophical issues that Crescas addresses, but it nevertheless supplies the answers, which come to light when it is interpreted correctly.

The following five sections provide (1) a case in which Crescas resists philosophic pressure that would have him fly in the face of the plain and persistent meaning of scripture; (2) two cases in which the Torah steps in where philosophy falls short of demonstration; (3) two cases in which Crescas's commitment to a philosophical position guides his interpretation of a biblical passage which seems, on the surface, not to support it; (4) three cases in which Crescas uses exegesis to hew to a biblically faithful description of God as a loving God—as opposed to the intellectual God of the philosophers; (5) a case in which biblical exegesis is used to support Crescas's resolution of a philosophical problem.

I. Our example in this first section concerns God's knowledge of particulars. In this instance, Crescas refuses to allow the Torah's literal sense to yield to philosophical speculation. For Crescas, the Torah when read straightforwardly leaves no doubt that God knows particulars—that is, he knows the specific events and things in the world. In Crescas's view, all medieval Jewish philosophers are wrongheaded who hermeneutically contort the Torah's clear stance on this matter in order to reconcile it with the supposed philosophic truth that God does not know particulars or does not know particulars *as* particulars. Indeed, as Crescas notes with dismay, in their determination to free God of multiplicity and change and to preserve his utter transcendence, these scholars unwittingly impute to God what Crescas dubs “the greatest of all defects”—namely, ignorance.⁸

II. Our first example of a truth which philosophical speculation falls short of proving, in Crescas's view, concerns one of the most fundamental

⁷ Intro:24.

⁸ II.i.3:131; II.i.5:141.

metaphysical propositions: that God is one. This truth is known definitively for Crescas not via philosophical argument, but via the Torah's affirmation of it. The way we philosophically arrive at the notion that God is simple—that is, not composite—is, as Crescas argues, by recognizing that the totality of existence is like a single individual with all its parts connected to one another. It requires a necessarily existent mover, and that necessarily existent mover cannot be composite. But can we be certain that there is not more than one such God? If there were more than one, we may assume that one of them would be occupied with either the governance of all of existence or with the governance of only a part of it. The latter is impossible because existence as a whole is connected end-to-end, and like a single individual, its governance indivisible. But perhaps there is a second God who governs a different world? No; that cannot be, because if God's power is infinite in strength, it is evident that one God is sufficient for all. Is it not still possible that one God governs and another not? Here, says Crescas, the doors to investigation are locked. It therefore takes the Torah to "open our eyes" and set the record straight by proclaiming the *shema*: "Hear O Israel the Lord is our God, the Lord is one" (Deut. 6:4). It is this proclamation that is our only completely reliable source. As Crescas interprets it, the seemingly superfluous repetition of the term "the Lord" in this verse (which might well have said simply "The Lord our God is one") signals that God is one both internally—that is, he is not composite—and externally—that is, there is no second God.⁹

The second example of a case in which philosophic speculation falls short of demonstration, so that one must rely on the Torah, concerns (1) that God exists; and (2) that God is a necessary existent. Crescas interprets Ex. 3:14, "I shall be what I shall be," as the biblical source for both of these ideas. In this verse God's existence is quite openly revealed, for Moses is instructed to say to the people, "'I shall be' sent me to you."¹⁰ Moreover,

⁹ I.iii.4:114-15.

¹⁰ This verse also establishes the hiddenness of the divine essence through God's cryptic reply, "I shall be what I shall be," to Moses's asking what he should say to the Israelites should they demand to know God's name.

"I shall be what I shall be" indicates that God's existence is necessary. Crescas maintains that the word **אשר** (*asher*, here translated "what") takes the place of a cause, for God requires no cause. "I shall be because I shall be" is something that applies only to a necessary existent, for anything that in itself has merely possible existence exists because its cause exists. Of it one can only say, "I shall be because of something other than myself—namely, my cause—that will be."¹¹ Philosophers have indeed embraced the existence of God as a necessary existent, yet Crescas relies on the Torah for proof.¹²

To bolster his case Crescas concludes Book I of *Light of the Lord* (I.iii.6:119) with a famous midrash from *Gen. Rabbah*, 39:1. This midrash presents a parable to help understand God's command to Abram in Gen. 12:1: "Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father's house, unto the land that I will show thee." It reads as follows:

A parable of someone who was walking on the way from place to place, and saw a *birah doleqet* [a castle "illuminated" or "aflame"]. He said, "Could you say this castle has no governor [*manhig*]?" The master of the castle looked down upon him, and said to him, "I am the master of the castle!" So Abraham our father would say, "Could you say this world has no Governor?!" The Holy One, blessed be He, looked down upon him, and said to him, "I am the Master of the world!"

Before considering how Crescas understands this parable, it will be instructive to see how Maimonides explains it in *Mishneh Torah*, *Hilkhot 'Avodah Zarah* 1:3. According to Maimonides, Abraham was led to the conclusion that there is a God by his own speculative reasoning:

¹¹ I.iii.5:115.

¹² On my reading of Crescas, he does not think the existence of God can be demonstrated philosophically. Others think Crescas believes that there is one such argument, the argument from necessity and contingency. See Warren Zev Harvey, *Physics and Metaphysics in Hasdai Crescas* (Amsterdam: J. C. Gieben, 1998), 84-92; and Symcha Bunem Urbach, *The Philosophical Teachings of Rabbi Hasdai Crescas: Pillars of Jewish Thought*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1961), 116, 140, 147. For a defense of my view, see my Translator's Introduction to *Light of the Lord*, 8, n. 5. It would seem that the midrash discussed next corroborates my view.

As soon as this mighty one [Abraham] was weaned, he began to wander about in his mind, though he was young, and he began to think day and night, and wondered: How is it possible that this [celestial] sphere revolves [*noheg*] perpetually, if it does not have a Governor [*manhig*]? Who causes it to revolve, for it is impossible that it causes itself to revolve?¹³

We may now contrast Maimonides's understanding of the midrash with Crescas's quite different take on it. Crescas says that what the Rabbis meant by their parable is that, "even though Abraham was inclined to the truth, he was not free of all doubt until God caused His light to flow onto him. And this is prophecy." In other words, Crescas thinks that without explicit prophetic confirmation, Abraham would not have known of God's existence with certainty; he would have been no more than inclined in that direction. For Crescas, then, prophecy — whether in the form of the revealed Torah or in that of direct communication to the prophet by God — is the only definitive proof of metaphysical propositions.

III. Our first example of Crescas's allegiance to a philosophical position which the Torah does not initially seem to support is the matter of trials in general and the *'aqeidah*, the Binding of Isaac, in particular. In this case, Crescas offers an interpretation of a biblical text that pointedly and explicitly departs from Maimonides's interpretation. According to Crescas, there is no question that God knew the outcome of Abraham's trial in advance.¹⁴ In fact, included among the things God knew in advance is the well-known principle of political philosophy (the reference is probably to Aristotelian political philosophy) that "deeds inculcate permanent traits or qualities in the soul, especially if they are strengthening ones that have already taken root."¹⁵ Crescas therefore interprets God's saying, "for now I know that you are God-fearing" (Gen. 22:12) as follows. Abraham was imbued with fear of God even before the incident of the Binding. However, the God-fearingness already in his soul

¹³ The use of the word מנהיג (*manhig*) makes it clear that Maimonides is alluding to this midrash.

¹⁴ II.i.1:122 and II.ii.4:156; cf. II.i.3:130.

¹⁵ II.i.1:122.

was strengthened and increased further after—and as a result of—his performing the *deed* of the Binding. Since the expression “God-fearing” as it appears in this verse refers to the higher level that Abraham would ultimately reach after the Binding, it was not until the Binding that God could truthfully say that he knows now that Abraham *is* God-fearing. God could not know something unless it were so.

Crescas confirms his approach by citing another scriptural verse, Deut. 13:4. Here it is said with respect to the Israelite nation: “for the Lord your God tests you, to know whether you love the Lord your God.”¹⁶ The verse does not say, Crescas observes, “whether you *will* love,” for God knows in advance that they will love. He knows this because the commandments were issued for the very purpose of perfecting the nation in their love of God. Yet, since the people were not lovers of God until after their trial, God would know only after the test that the people *do now* love him. Interestingly, in both these cases, God knows what will happen at least in part because He is aware that there are causes in place that will in due course bring about their effects.¹⁷ We shall return to the importance to Crescas of causation toward the end of this paper.

Crescas notes explicitly his departure from Maimonides in this matter. Maimonides, he contends, contorts the meaning of “now I know,” reading it as “now I make known”—*hoda’ti* instead of *yada’ti*. For Maimonides, the trial is designed to show others the lengths to which all human beings ought to go—and can go—in love and fear of God.¹⁸

¹⁶ God knows in advance that the people *will* love him in the future, but he does not know that they love him at the present time because they do not.

¹⁷ II.ii.4:156-57.

¹⁸ Maimonides’s interpretation is based on a midrash *Gen. Rabbah* 56:7. According to the midrash, Abraham was prevented by God’s angel from carrying out God’s command. Abraham was prepared to slaughter his son, and if that couldn’t be done, to strangle him. Yet, in Gen. 22:12 the angel instructed him “not to lay a hand upon the lad,” so he was not permitted to strangle his son. He then wished at least to extract a drop of blood from Isaac, perhaps to demonstrate his fealty to God, yet the angel forbade him to “do anything to the boy.” It is at this point that God assured Abraham that he has *made known* to all Abraham’s love for God. Although the midrash reads “Now I know” as “Now I make known,” its

Although according to *both* Maimonides and Crescas, God does not test in order to learn that which He did not know before, there is nevertheless a profound difference between them. For Maimonides God makes an example of Abraham for others. Crescas, however, offers an interpretation which, he thinks, renders Maimonides's solution wholly unnecessary. For Crescas, the purpose of the trial is to increase Abraham's love for God, since, on Crescas's understanding, the purpose of doing deeds is to enable people to draw closer to God—whether in the course of specific trials or in fulfilling commandments more generally. God wants our love above all. For Maimonides, by contrast, the only way one draws near to God is by perfecting one's intellectual apprehension of him.

Our second example of a case in which Crescas interprets the Torah to make a philosophical point that is not obviously intended by the Torah concerns reward. Arguing that true reward is spiritual and not material, Crescas must face the fact that there is nothing in scripture that explicitly supports this view. He finds what he needs in the verse Gen. 21:12. When God tells Abraham to send Hagar and Ishmael away, he says *ki beyitzhaq yiqarei lekha zara'*—"for through Isaac will your seed be called." Crescas contends that this can only be a spiritual promise and not a corporeal one, for if it were corporeal, the trial of the binding of Isaac, soon to follow, could not be taken seriously by Abraham; he would know that Isaac could not die.¹⁹ Crescas finds then in this verse a clear indication that divine reward is not a matter of bestowing illusory good—that is, material good—but is the experience of genuine good—that is, spiritual good.

IV. On the matter of prayer, Crescas remains faithful to the biblical conception of God as loving and responsive to prayer, as opposed to the "philosophic" conception of God as remote and unengaged with human beings. Here we have, again, a deliberate departure from Maimonides. In *Guide* 1.59, Maimonides recommends silence as the preferred way to praise God, quoting Ps. 65:2 ("Silence is praise to thee" [*lekha dumiyah*])

concern does not appear to be that the former implies that God is learning something he previously did not know.

¹⁹ III-A.iii.3:291-92.

tehillah]) and Ps. 4:5 ("Commune with your heart upon your bed and be silent, Selah" [*imru bilvavkhem al mishkavkhem vedomu selah*]). Indeed, just a few chapters earlier (1.54) Maimonides had said that those capable of drawing near to God are those who know him and not those who "merely fast and pray." In other words, only the few, the intellectual elite, can draw near to God. There is, moreover, an unmistakable association between the "upon your bed" in Ps. 4:5 quoted in *Guide* 1.59 and the counsel Maimonides gives in 3.51 to the select individuals who, after having reached apprehension of the divine, wish to strengthen the bond between themselves and God. He advises, "When you are alone with yourself and no one else is there and while you lie awake *upon your bed*, you should take great care during these precious times not to set your thought to work on anything other than intellectual worship consisting in nearness to God and being in His presence."

In commenting on the verse Ps. 65:2, which contains the words "Silence is praise to thee," Crescas focuses his attention on what follows immediately in the same verse, namely, "O God of Zion."²⁰ Crescas says that it is in Zion, in the city in which God chose to dwell and in which he chose to set his sanctuary, that silence is praise to God "because of the trepidation that eminent men experience [there] with respect to praising God." And indeed, Crescas notes, the Psalmist continues in the very next verse: "O You who hear prayer, unto You does *all* flesh come." As Crescas explains, the term "all" is intended to include both those who are perfect and those who are not. Crescas notes the resemblance between this verse, Ps. 65:3, and the concluding verse, Ps. 145:21: "My mouth shall speak the praise of the Lord; And let *all* flesh bless his holy name for ever and ever." In saying "My mouth shall speak," Crescas asserts, the Psalmist refers to himself, the measure of whose perfection is undeniable; but when the Psalmist continues, "And let *all* flesh bless His holy name for ever and ever," his intention is to include those who are imperfect.²¹ It seems

²⁰ I.iii.3:103; III-B.i.1:322.

²¹ III-B.i.1:322.

evident that Crescas's choice of a verse in which the Psalmist tells of his own *speaking* is meant to counter Ps. 4:5, cited by Maimonides, in which one is to commune (lit. speak: אָמַר) silently in one's heart. Similarly, Crescas's choice of a verse beginning with the word *tehillat* ("praise of [tehillat] God my mouth shall *speak*") perfectly counters the verse selected by Maimonides ("*Silence* is praise [*tehillah*] to thee." Furthermore, Crescas singles out just a bit earlier Ps. 145:18: "The Lord is nigh to all who *call* upon him, to all who call upon him in truth." For Crescas, then, God in fact welcomes all prayer, so long as the prayer of those who call upon him is sincere.²²

The following is a second example in which Crescas uses biblical exegesis to ground the central claim of *Light of the Lord*—namely, that God is essentially goodness and love (rather than intellect), with each of these attributes existing in God infinitely. Crescas relies on the contrast between Isaiah 41:8 and Deuteronomy 10:15 to argue that, as counterintuitive as it may seem, God loves people more than people love him. In discussing God's pleasure, Crescas entertains the possibility that the recipient of pleasure experiences greater pleasure than its agent because, as it is thought, there is greater joy in receiving good than in bestowing it. Nevertheless, Crescas contends, there is no comparison between God's pleasure in conferring good and human pleasure in receiving it. God's pleasure is something essential to him, and it is therefore necessarily a virtue and a perfection. Since there is no comparison between God's perfection and the perfection of another, it follows necessarily that there is no comparison between God's pleasure and the pleasure of another. Since pleasure is a manifestation of love, if God loves humanity more than it does him, it follows that God experiences greater pleasure than humanity does. As Crescas observes, there is only one biblical figure about whom scripture says that he loves God, and that is Abraham. In Isaiah 41:8 we find the expression "Abraham who loves Me," and the word for

²² That Crescas disagrees sharply with Maimonides on the matter of "Silence is praise to Thee" is clear from his analysis of the episode (recounted in BT *Berakhot* 33b) of R. Ḥanina's rebuke of the prayer leader who multiplied epithets in praise of God beyond those sanctioned by the Rabbis. See *Guide* I.59.140-43; *Light of the Lord* I.iii.3; III-b.i.1.322-23.

love is אהבה (*ahavah*). Yet, with respect to the love God has for the patriarchs, the term חשק (*hesheq*) is used, a term signifying a more ardent love. And so we find in Deut. 10:15, "It was your forefathers that God passionately loved."²³

Philosophers are, of course, reluctant to attribute to God any passions, and so they seek to divest God of any experience of joy. Since passions are bodily, they reason, passions must necessarily be denied with respect to God. How, then, is joy attributed to God in scripture, where the Psalmist says, "Let the Lord rejoice in his works" (Ps. 104:31)? Moreover, the Torah attributes sadness to God ("He was saddened in his heart" [Gen. 6:6]; "They saddened his holy spirit" [Isa. 63:10]). Crescas is willing to concede to those he calls "the early thinkers," that sadness perhaps ought not to be attributed to God in any way. He is therefore not averse to interpreting scripture metaphorically and figuratively when it speaks of God's sadness. Crescas thus takes references to God's sadness to mean only that a person has failed to act in accord with God's purpose for him. Nevertheless, Crescas believes it appropriate to attribute joy to God.²⁴ We might explain the discrepancy in Crescas's attitude toward sadness and joy by pointing out the deficiency that sadness represents but joy does not. His objection to figurative reading is not, then, a blanket one,²⁵ and he is only rarely hyper-literal in his own readings. Two conditions apparently need to be met in order for Crescas to allow himself a figurative reading: first, the literal meaning must be clearly objectionable; and second, the case must be amenable to the principle that the Torah speaks in the

²³ I.iii.5:118-19; II.vi.1:218-19.

²⁴ I.iii.5:116-18.

²⁵ Another instance of figurative reading concerns when God says with regard to Sodom and Gomorrah, "I will go down now and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it which has come to Me; and if not, I will know" (Gen. 18:21). This is one example, according to Crescas, of things about which the Rabbis say, "The Torah speaks in the language of human beings"—especially when the event has already happened (II.i.1:122).

language of man.²⁶ When it is doubtful that the literal meaning is objectionable (as in the case of God's joy), there is no justification for resorting to figurative interpretation.

Our third example is the matter of divine punishment. Crescas marshals biblical exegesis to teach a more philosophically satisfying view of the purpose of divine punishment as well. Crescas cites Deut. 8:5, "As a man chastens his son, so the Lord your God chastens you," to show that punishment is a manifestation of God's simple goodness and kindness. It is known that a father does not chasten his son with the intent of taking revenge, and not even for the sake of doing justice, but only to benefit his son. And so, when God chastens man, his intent is not to take revenge on him, and not even to achieve political (tit-for-tat) justice. All punishment is for the good of those who are punished.²⁷

In the following extended example, which ranges over several texts, Crescas marshals biblical stories to support his own resolution of the philosophical problem of free will. Crescas insists, on the one hand, that human beings are free agents—indeed, choice counts for him as one of the six cornerstones of the Torah—yet, on the other, he seems to acknowledge an ineluctable causal nexus and to recognize the difficulty a foreknowing God poses for human freedom.

In Crescas's view, foremost among the ways in which God extends his providence to our world is through his gift of the Torah. The Torah is the means by which God accomplishes his supreme end—namely, the binding of people to Him—yet God cannot accomplish his end unless there is reliable causal necessity. If it seems puzzling that Crescas, whose views are, in the final analysis, fairly traditional, would embrace causal necessity to the extent that he does, the explanation surely lies in his view that everything God does is purposeful. The only way God's issuing of the Torah can be purposeful is if its commandments are effective in establishing the divine-human bond; the only way the commandments

²⁶ The *'atah yada'ti* ("now I know") connected with the Binding of Isaac does not occur in a dream/vision but when Abraham was completely awake.

²⁷ III-A.iii.1:283.

can be effective in establishing the divine-human bond is if there is fully operative causal necessity.

Yet, if the world is governed by strict causation, is not the individual's freedom to choose necessarily curtailed? Is it not the case that there is, in Crescas's view, no choice after all? On the one hand, it seems indeed that there is not. People act in response to the causes operating on them, the Torah's commandments being one such cause. On the other hand, however, since choice counts for Crescas as a cornerstone—that is, as something without which there can be no Torah—it cannot be right simply to conclude, as many scholars have, that Crescas is a determinist.

Crescas aims to carve out a space for choice in his discussion of the category of the possible. To that end he distinguishes between necessity in respect of itself and necessity in respect of causes: two alternatives may both be possible in themselves, but once causes are factored in, only one alternative will, of necessity, be the one chosen. For Crescas this latter necessity is not the same as the necessity of a thing necessitated in itself, for necessitation in itself contains the element of no-matter-whatness. If one is *causally* necessitated to choose a particular alternative, it is the causes that lead to the effect. But if something is necessitated in itself, causes are irrelevant. Just as there is no cause that will change the sum of $2 + 2$, so too there is no cause that will make a person poor if it is necessary in itself that he be wealthy. Put another way, to be necessitated in respect of causes is to be responsive to causes; to be necessitated in respect of itself is to be impervious to them. Phenomenologically as well, the two forms of necessitation may be distinguished. When one is causally necessitated, one experiences oneself as free; when one experiences oneself as unfree, when there is a sense of helplessness, a sense of no-matter-whatness, the necessity is experienced as coercive.

Scholars have tended to see the distinction between necessity in itself and causal necessity as a distinction without a difference: if, given the causes, a person will—must—choose one and only one of the possible alternatives, what difference could it make that the choice was not necessary in itself?

Crescas's biblical exegesis may shed some light on his thinking in this matter. Gen. 32 describes an agitated Jacob fearful in the face of his imminent encounter with Esau. The question Crescas considers is why Jacob is afraid; after all, God has promised to protect him. Crescas's explanation is that Jacob knew that everything that occurs is the result of a causal sequence, but he did not know in his own case which cause would produce the promised effect. He therefore saw to it that all possible causes were put in place: he prayed, prepared for war, and assembled gifts. Jacob thus regarded his being protected by God as something possible in respect of itself though necessitated in respect of its causes. It is not that Jacob thought there was a chance that God's promise would not come to pass. Rather, the fact that it would come to pass but only as a result of causes gave Jacob the opportunity to participate in the process. What causation does is open a space for personal engagement. Jacob took the opportunity to facilitate the very effect of which he had been informed—and therefore knew—would occur.²⁸ We see here how Crescas thinks the distinction between “in respect of itself” and “in respect to causes” operates. Were God's protection of Jacob necessary in respect of itself, such that it would occur no matter what, Jacob would have had no reason to act. Freedom is located not in escaping causal necessity, but in embracing it by exerting effort to participate in it or to resist it.²⁹

Whereas Crescas's discussion of Gen. 32 focuses on the difficulty that arises for free will from the perspective of causation, it does not address the additional putative obstacle to free will—namely, divine foreknowledge. Here, too, turning to Crescas's analysis of a biblical text may be of use. In Ps. 139, a text pivotal to the argument of *Light of the Lord*,³⁰ David turns to God—as the one who knows his innermost thoughts and

²⁸ II.iv.2:172-78.

²⁹ I do not mean to imply that Crescas's view is unproblematic. What does it mean for Jacob to embrace the causal nexus as opposed to resisting it? Is not his embrace or resistance itself caused by further causes over which Jacob has no control? Crescas seems to think, however, that Jacob's desire to work with the causal chain, rather than fight it, is a matter of his exerting effort, which in turn reflects a particular attitude and so is within his control.

³⁰ Discussed at length in II.i.1:123-24, and also in I.iii.3:107-108 and II.vi.2:229-30.

desires—seeking to excuse his bad behavior. “O God,” he says, “if only you would slay the wicked, then murderous men would depart from me.” But God does not slay, and David’s associations continue. Crescas derives three lessons from David’s words in this psalm. First, God knows particulars—he knows David’s thoughts and desires; second, God knows the future—he knows that David will sin; and third, God’s knowledge does not make the possible necessary. Despite God’s knowledge of David’s future sin, David’s sinning was nevertheless not necessitated: somehow God knows what will occur without making the possible necessary. If it were the case that God’s foreknowledge makes the possible necessary, David would need no excuse; he would not be responsible for his sin. But the reason David believes he has an excuse is that he has good intentions, intentions of which God is without doubt aware. In other words, David appeals to God’s recognition of his unwillingness to sin, of his regret and displeasure with respect to his sin. David can be forgiven because God knows he is not obstinate but weak.

For Crescas, then, what will be will surely be. In cases in which the necessitation is causal and not in itself, however, what will be is dependent on causes. Although Crescas’s distinction between these two kinds of necessitation is critical to his view, it is not the whole of it. In the two biblical sources considered, Jacob and David exhibit some measure of freedom even though they cannot change what will be. Jacob exerts effort, and David adopts an attitude of disapproval toward his inevitable sin. Even though both causal necessity and divine foreknowledge entail that what will be will be, how people relate to what will be is up to them.

Thus far we have considered choice in the realm of human action. The matter of belief, however, brings with it a further complication. In the case of belief, resolution in terms of the distinction between the two kinds of necessitation is precluded. Belief, unlike action, is always and necessarily involuntary according to Crescas. Will plays no part in it: the self-evidence or incontrovertible proof of a proposition has *coercive* power. Nevertheless, here, too, a person’s effort or lack thereof and his joy or displeasure are deciding factors in his closeness to or remoteness from God.

Let us look then to another instance of Crescas's biblical exegesis, as he draws together two seemingly unrelated biblical texts. The first text is Ex. 19:17, which describes the scene as the Israelites prepare for the revelation at Sinai. The verse reads, "And they stood at the bottom (בתחתית; *betaḥtit*) of the mountain," which can also be rendered, "And they stood beneath the mountain." According to the Rabbis, this verse implies that the people were constrained to accept the Torah under threat of death; will played no part in their acceptance of it. The second text is Esther 9:27: "The Jews affirmed, and took upon themselves." As the Rabbis understand this verse, the Jews in the time of Ahasuerus affirmed, after the fact, through the joy they experienced as they witnessed the miracles and deliverance that were enacted for them then, what they had already taken upon themselves at Sinai. Crescas explains that what the Jewish people accepted at first under constraint, they later willingly embraced. Even with regard to involuntary belief, then, it is possible to be free—free to embrace the belief with enthusiasm, or to resist it, even as one cannot deny it.³¹ One exercises freedom, then, according to Crescas, either in exerting effort or in feeling pleasure and joy with respect to acting or believing. It is for how actively one is engaged in the process of causation or investigation, or for how one feels about one's acts and beliefs—how happy or unhappy one is in one's decisions and convictions—that one is rewarded or punished.

In conclusion, let us return to Psalm 139, on which Crescas relies so heavily.³² First, this psalm establishes that God apprehends particulars. It opens with, "O Lord, you have searched me and known me," and it continues in verses 2-3, "You know my sitting down and my rising up; you understand my thought³³ afar off. You have measured my going out and my lying down; and you are acquainted with all my ways." Verse 4 indicates divine foreknowledge (or what Crescas calls knowledge of the "nonexistent," meaning that which does not yet exist): "For there is not a

³¹ II.v.6:204-205.

³² I.iii.3:107-108; cf. II.i.1:123-24.

³³ רע (*re'a*) in Psalms often means thought.

word in my tongue, but, lo, O Lord, you know it altogether." The remaining verses that follow in this psalm indicate God's apprehension of particulars in minute detail. Once it is established that God knows particulars, says Crescas, then it follows necessarily that God's knowledge encompasses the infinite since it is evident that particulars are infinite. This establishes the first of the cornerstones—namely, God's knowledge of particulars.

After having extensively recounted the praise of God and his knowledge of particulars, the Psalmist concludes, "but to him, he is one through them [בהם]." ³⁴ That is, from the perspective of God himself, he is one in all the things he knows. It is here that Crescas finds his solution to the problem raised by philosophers concerning God's knowledge of particulars. They contend that knowledge of particulars renders God plural because of the many things he knows. Yet, based on Psalm 139, Crescas argues that, even if from the perspective of the Psalmist there is multiplicity in God because of the many things he knows, there is no multiplicity in God's essence from God's perspective. Moreover, it is from this psalm as well that Crescas derives—or bolsters—his view of divine attributes. Crescas maintains that in saying, "How precious are your friends [or thoughts – רעיד] to me, O God," the Psalmist intends the essential virtues that are not separate from God, as if they were God's friends. By saying "how precious," David indicates the necessary existence of each attribute, and by saying "how mighty are the chief among them," he signals their being infinite in power of existence. He also indicates their vast number by saying, "If I count them, they will exceed the sand." By saying, "When I wake, I am still with you," David means

³⁴ Ps. 139:16. The clause, ולא אחד בהם (*velo ehad bahem*), has been variously translated. Its most likely meaning, retaining the reading form with a vav, rather than the written form with an aleph, is, "but to Him they [the days] are as one." Crescas takes the clause to mean that *for God*, God's absolute, uncompromised unity persists—is one— "through them," that is, through the plurality of details he knows. Crescas later interprets the version with an aleph, also in a nonstandard way (II.i.1:123).

that when he is roused and awakens from having sunk deeply into that recounting, he finds himself still with God.

Through his extensive and distinctive biblical exegesis in *Light of the Lord*, Crescas restores Jewish thought to its roots in Jewish texts. He finds his answers, better answers, to philosophical questions in these texts—not in the works of Aristotle.