Green on Rudavsky, 'Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages: Science, Rationalism, and Religion'

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Tamar Rudavsky’s new book, *Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages: Science, Rationalism and Religion,* is an important contribution to the ongoing debate about how to define medieval Jewish philosophy. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, there have been multiple and varying works that have attempted to understand Jewish thinkers and debates ranging from the time of Saadia Gaon in the ninth century to Baruch Spinoza in the seventeenth century. One of the major elements unifying Jewish philosophers living in Baghdad, Egypt, Spain, Provence, and Italy in the medieval world was the question of how to synthesize Greco-Arabic thought with that of the biblical and rabbincic tradition on issues such as the origin of the universe, the nature of God and the cosmos, the structure of the human soul, and the right way to live and to organize political communities. Most histories of medieval Jewish philosophy in the twentieth century have organized their studies chronologically and according to thinker or school of thought, while some of the more recent works present a more diverse account of the players in the field rather than just the famous names.[1] There is a strength to this model as it allows the reader to understand how every medieval Jewish philosopher and their schools of thought each developed their own approach to discerning the nature of God, providence, prophecy, creation, et cetera.

Rudavsky’s book differs in that it is constructed thematically around the central issues that Jewish thinkers debated in the medieval period rather than being organized chronologically or individually. While there is some precedent for this model in Rudavsky’s own *The Cambridge History of Jewish Philosophy: From Antiquity through the Seventeenth Century* (2009), edited with Steven Nadler, and Daniel Rynhold’s *An Introduction to Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (2009), her new work presents her own comprehensive approach to the field. The advantages of this model over the previous paradigm is that it shows the commonalities of the issues and questions with which medieval Jewish philosophers dealt during this time period, while also drawing out the debates and differences between their answers, and thus, creating a sort of transhistorical dialogue between them. While later thinkers read and critiqued earlier ones, like Crescas’s critique of Maimonides and Gersonides in *Light of the Lord,* Maimonides and Gersonides were unfortunately not there to defend themselves and respond to the critique. Reading Rudavsky’s book allows one to imagine this virtual dialogue and debate taking place.

The book is divided into ten chapters, centered around the key issues and debates, though beginning
with some introductory chapters first. Chapter 1, “What is Jewish Philosophy?,” presents Jewish philosophy as the tension between science and religion, sometimes referred to through the symbols of the cities of Athens and Jerusalem. This chapter looks at how the two came into contact historically and presents different models for reconciliation: conflict, independence, or integration. The chapter ends with the conclusion that there is such a thing as Jewish philosophy, even though there has been a trend denying it. Rudavsky defines it as “philosophizing with and about the Jewish tradition, asking questions about Judaism as well as using Jewish texts and doctrines to engage in general philosophical speculation about classic problems” (p. 7). Chapter 2, “Athens, Jerusalem and Beyond: The Formative Schools and Personalities within Medieval Jewish Philosophy,” is a short introduction to the major philosophical thinkers and schools of ancient Greece and Islam (e.g., Heraclitus, Plato, Aristotle, Ptolemy, Plotinus, Kalam) and then of the biblical, rabbinic, mystical, and philosophical traditions. Here she also provides useful short biographies of Saadya Gaon, Isaac Israeli, Solomon ibn Gabirol, Abraham Ibn Ezra, Bahya ibn Paquda, Judah Halevi, Abraham Ibn Daud, Moses Maimonides, Levi Gersonides, Hasdai Crescas, Isaac Abarbanel, Judah Abarbanel, Joseph Solomon Delmedigo, and Baruch Spinoza. These are the main players with whose arguments the volume will engage. Chapter 3, “On Achieving Truth: Science, Philosophy and Faith,” examines the meaning of science for different medieval Jewish philosophers and how they integrate it with some concept of religion. Chapter 4, “Divine Science: The Existence and Nature of God,” studies the problem of describing God anthropomorphically, the proof of God’s existence such as the cosmological, metaphysical, and teleological, and the question of whether we can speak about God at all. Chapter 5, “God, Suffering and Omniscience,” deals with the problem of theodicy, of why a good, all-powerful and all-knowing God would allow evil to exist. In the Jewish and Christian traditions, this usually requires discerning the meaning of the book of Job. Rudavsky focuses on the debate that revolves around whether God’s foreknowledge of future contingents is compatible or incompatible with the contingency of these events or states of affairs. Chapter 6, “Creation, Time and Eternity,” investigates the different theories about the origin of the universe in medieval Jewish philosophy: comparing creation as emanation in neoplatonic cosmology, kalam arguments for creation ex nihilo, and Aristotelian models of creation in the writings of Maimonides, Gersonides, and Crescas. A special focus is also placed here on the question of what is time. Chapter 7, “Philosophical Cosmology: The Nature of the Universe,” addresses the relationship of the heavenly bodies to the sublunar world, including the study of astrology and explanation of miracles. Chapter 8, “On Immortality and the Nature of the Soul,” delves into the nature of the human soul, the question of individual immortality, and how to understand the traditional Jewish belief in the physical resurrection of the dead. Chapter 9, “Happiness, Virtue and Political Society: Living the Good Life,” looks into the meaning of happiness as the goal of human life, the relationship between moral virtues and rational virtues, and the question of whether the Bible has a political teaching.

Let me focus on three important points that emerge from the book which I found helpful for confirming the relevance of medieval Jewish philosophy, especially regarding its importance as a field of academic study today. First, medieval Jewish philosophy can be an independent field of study without being purely historicist in nature. It is able to recognize the historical and philosophical roots of its ideas without reducing these ideas to their sources alone. Consequently, the questions and arguments raised by Jewish philosophers in the medieval period can still transcend their origin and continue to speak to readers today, notwithstanding the fact that as moderns we cannot accept much of medieval science. Indeed, Rudavsky’s book demonstrates that although medieval Jewish philosophy
is rooted in a historical period, it addresses fundamental questions that are greater than their historical context.

Second, medieval Jewish philosophy is not dogmatic, and is more akin to a (at times heated) debate. As much as certain medieval Jewish thinkers strongly and polemically defend their position, and may assert it as the absolute truth, this is part of their ongoing quest for truth and knowledge. Of course, as a modern reader one can step outside of the debate and see the limitations of each position. There is no absolute claim to truth in any one position. There may be better and weaker arguments, but that requires the reader to think through the plurality of different positions. Rudavsky skillfully guides the reader through the intricacies of medieval arguments and exegesis without leading the reader to a simple conclusion. No one philosopher wins the debate in any complete way and none can claim the title of being right in some absolute sense.

Finally, medieval Jewish philosophy is not a completed field of scholarly research. When I first entered graduate work in medieval Jewish philosophy, and mentioned it to a local community member, he cynically replied: “Another book on Maimonides? Hasn’t everything been said already?” Upon reading Rudavsky’s book, you quickly realize that the answer is no. This is another strength of Rudavsky’s book: she frequently mentions new scholarship by contemporary scholars and weaves their new insights into the discussion.

At times, Rudavsky has to limit the extent to which she can pursue these issues due to the scope of the book, which is intended to be a short introduction and not an encyclopedia. Aware of these constraints, the author expresses her hope that her readers will feel the need to delve into the generous footnotes and scholarly literature cited in order to further investigate the academic debate to which Rudavsky introduces readers. While medieval Jewish philosophy has been shrinking as a field in North American academia over the last few decades, Rudavsky’s book demonstrates that there was a need for a fresh approach to the field. It may yet give scholars hope for a resurgence of interest in medieval Jewish philosophy among new students and veteran scholars alike.

Note


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