

A TWELFTH-CENTURY PROVENÇAL
AMATEUR OF NEOPLATONIC PHILOSOPHY
IN HEBREW:
R. ASHER B. MESHULLAM OF LUNEL¹

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Pour Monsieur Jean Jolivet, modeste
signe de mon respect et de mon amitié.

In the conclusion of his masterly overview of the Arabic heritage of twelfth-century Latin philosophy, Jean Jolivet asks: “Is it possible to estimate exactly the significance and historical importance of this irruption of Arabic philosophy into the Christian West? ... Was this integration to the advantage of Greco-Arabic synthesis or of the Christian ideas which had been integrated into it?” Jolivet cautiously challenges Gilson’s view that the Scholastics “christianized” the philosophical doctrines they received.² Analogous questions have naturally been raised about Judaism’s reception of medieval philosophy,

1. This paper was first presented to The Whitney Humanities Center Working Group on Arabic Philosophy at Yale University on February 13, 2006. I am grateful to Lukas Muehlethaler for the kind invitation and to the participants for their observations. The research was done during my stay at Yale University in the academic year 2005/6 as a Horace W. Goldsmith Visiting Professor in Judaic Studies. I am very grateful to the Program in Judaic Studies, and particularly to Prof. Ivan Marcus, for this invitation.

Abbreviations: Idel, “Qeṭa’”: Moshe Idel, “Qeṭa’ ‘iyyuni le-Rabbi Asher ben Meshullam mi-Lunel” (= A Rationalist Passage by R. Asher ben Meshullam of Lunel), *Kirjath Sepher* 50 (1974-1975), pp. 149-153. Idel, “Sarid”: idem, “Sarid mi-perush R. Asher b. Meshullam me-Lunel li-Berakhot” (= A Remnant of R. Asher b. Meshullam’s Commentary on Tractate Berakhot), *Qoveṣ Al-Yad* 11(1) (1985), pp. 77-88.

2. Jean Jolivet, “The Arabic Inheritance,” in P. Dronke (ed.), *A History of Twelfth-Century Western Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), pp. 113-148, on p. 147.

first and foremost with regard to the Maimonidean synthesis. Here I shall examine this problem from another and rather narrow angle ; namely, the special case of an erudite twelfth-century Provençal commentator on the Talmud, one of the very first to have had access to (the handful of then existing) philosophical texts in Hebrew. He accommodated some philosophical notions by using them creatively for his own exegetical needs, but he did not make any original contribution to philosophy and is not mentioned in any history of philosophy. Nevertheless, he illustrates how philosophical ideas enriched the distinctively traditional religious discourse of talmudic exegesis. In this admittedly atypical instance we may definitely say that the Greco-Arabic heritage was thoroughly “Judaized.” To be sure this is a far cry from the Maimonidean enterprise, which accorded philosophy a far greater weight in the encounter with the Jewish tradition. Although the text to be studied here is relatively marginal in the history of Jewish thought, it does have some significance as evidence concerning an early phase of the reception – and “Judaization” – of philosophical ideas by Jewish scholars in twelfth-century Provence.

Introduction : The First Accommodation of Greek-Arabic Learning in Hebrew

Jews’ intellectual activity has traditionally focused on the study of the canonical texts – notably the Talmud – sanctified and legitimized through its own tradition. Intellectual pursuits that originated in other cultures – notably science and philosophy – were more often than not perceived and rejected as “alien (sometimes: Greek) wisdom.” Although the Talmud itself includes some statements that legitimize the study of “alien wisdom,” pre-modern Jewish cultures tended to be self-sufficient; the most prevalent attitude toward such knowledge was one of circumspection if not downright hostility.³ The following quotation from the erudite and prestigious talmudist R. Asher ben Yehiel (Rosh), who first encountered science and philosophy when, early in the fourteenth century, he fled from Germany to Spain, reflects a long-standing mainstream attitude within Judaism :

Philosophical knowledge and Torah knowledge are not on a par. The Torah was given to Moses at Mount Sinai, ... but philosophy is a natural science. It was [therefore] inevitable that the philosophers would deny the Torah : for the Torah is not a natural science, but rather [a science] received and transmitted by

3. For an overview of Judaism’s multifarious attitudes to other cultures see Jacob J. Schacter (ed.), *Judaism’s Encounter with Other Cultures: Rejection or Integration?* (Northvale, N.J. : Jason Aronson, 1997).

tradition [qabbalah]. ... [The Torah and philosophy] are contraries, two rival wives who cannot exist in one and the same place.⁴

Judaism assumed an unbroken line of transmission and reception (*qabbalah*) linking the present to the revelation vouchsafed to Moses. It legitimized traditional knowledge while repelling competing bodies of belief. In view of this, the strikingly rapid accommodation of nontraditional and especially philosophical texts in various places during the Middle Ages seems almost to run against nature and calls for explanation.

The facts themselves are well-known. Between the early tenth and the fifteenth centuries, major segments of the Jewish communities integrated significant elements of Greco-Arabic philosophy and science into their world-views. The process took place in two stages, which overlap somewhat. It began in the Islamic lands, where Jews were acculturated to a considerable degree. They spoke, read, and wrote the language of the majority culture and thus gained direct access to it. In Baghdad, Saadia Gaon (882–942) was the first influential Rabbanite thinker to compose (in Arabic) philosophical works aimed at demonstrating that there is no incompatibility between Moses' revealed law and the results of rational philosophical investigation. Many other authors, in both East and West (notably Spain), followed suit. The process reached its peak with R. Moses ben Maimon, Maimonides (1137/8–1204), whose *Guide of the Perplexed* created a lasting and influential platform for a synthesis of Judaism and Greco-Arabic philosophy.

The second stage of the process took place in southern Europe, where, over a period of two and a half centuries beginning in the first half of the twelfth century, Arabophone Jewish scholars – encyclopedists, translators, and philosophers – transferred a sizable portion of the corpus of Greco-Arabic philosophy and science into Hebrew, making it available to their coreligionists who could not read Arabic or Latin. This process can usefully be divided into three phases. (1) The process of transmission began in the early twelfth century, when scholars in northern Spain (notably Abraham bar Ḥiyya) wrote scientific works in Hebrew for the Jews living north of the Pyrenees. (2) It gathered momentum, toward the middle of the century, when Andalusian Jewish scholars immersed in Arabic culture came to Provence and Italy, considerably enhancing the dissemination of philosophical lore in Hebrew. (3) It received a new and decisive impetus when, in the first decades of the thirteenth century, Maimonides' writings, notably the Hebrew translation of the *Guide of the Perplexed* (1204), became influential in Southern Europe. This period of intensive translation lasted until about the middle of the fourteenth century. During these two centuries scores of works were translated from Arabic into Hebrew, in an unprecedented large-scale appropriation of

4. *She'elot u-teshuvot le-ha-rav Rabbenu Asher z.l.* (Jerusalem, 1981), §55, p. 53^{va}.

“alien wisdom” by Jewish communities previously devoted entirely to traditional learning.

In recent and less recent works I have described some aspects of this process of cultural transfer and offered historical and sociological accounts thereof.⁵ Especially interesting is the very first period of the Arabic-to-Hebrew translations, executed in the Midi from the 1150s until the end of the century.⁶ It is well-known that this process was set in motion when two scholarly Jewish families, fleeing the Almohad persecutions, settled in Provence during the early 1150s – the Ibn Tibbons in Lunel and the Qimḥis in Narbonne. The culture they brought with them was altogether different from that of their coreligionists in their new communities. Whereas the latter were still all absorbed in traditional talmudic learning, the immigrants were at home in Arabic poetry, literature, grammar, philosophy, and science.⁷ The remarkable fact is that within a few decades they succeeded in acculturating a sizeable portion of the Provençal Jewish intellectual elite to their own, philosophically informed mode of thought. Unlike the situation in Islamic lands a few centuries earlier, the acculturation of Provençal Jews did not proceed by direct reception from the majority culture (whose language – Latin – was alien to almost all Jewish scholars), but rather through translations (from the Arabic).

Judah Ibn Tibbon (c. 1120-1190), who founded a dynasty of translators that persisted for about a century and a half and who came to be called “the Father of the Translators,” came to Lunel from Granada. In Lunel he found a potent patron in the person of R. Meshullam ben Jacob, the wealthy head of the local yeshiva (d. 1170), and his son R. Asher ben Meshullam, who became his close friend and is the focus of the present paper. R. Meshullam’s personality and his role as patron of the translation movement have often been described. The close collaboration between Judah Ibn Tibbon and his patrons resulted the Hebrew versions of such classic of Judeo-Arabic thought as

5. See Gad Freudenthal, “Science in the Medieval Jewish Culture of Southern France,” *History of Science* 33 (1995), 23–58 [reprinted in *idem*, *Science in the Medieval Hebrew and Arabic Traditions* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), Essay I]; *idem*, “Les sciences dans les communautés juives médiévales de Provence: Leur appropriation, leur rôle,” *Revue des études juives* 152 (1993), 29–136; “Transfert culturel à Lunel au milieu du douzième siècle: Qu’est-ce qui a motivé les premières traductions provençales de l’arabe en hébreu?” in Danielle Iancou-Agou (ed.), *Des Tibbonides à Maïmonide: Rayonnement des Juifs andalous en Pays d’Oc médiéval* (Paris: Editions du Cerf, forthcoming).

6. Gad Freudenthal, “Goremim u-meni’im be-hiwwaṣerut tenu’at ha-targumim be-Lunel ba-me’ah ha-y”b. Yehudah b. Sha’ul Ibn Tibbon u-patronaw R. Meshullam b”R. Ya’aqov we-R. Asher b”R Meshullam” (= Causes and reasons for the emergence of the 12th-century translation movement in Lunel. Judah Ibn Tibbon and his patrons R. Meshullam b. Jacob and R. Asher b. Meshullam), in: R. Reiner *et al.* (eds.) *Israel M. Ta-Shma Memorial Volume* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University Magnes Press, forthcoming).

7. See the classic account in I. Twersky, “Aspects of the Social and Cultural History of Provençal Jewry,” *Journal of World History* 11 (1-2) (1968), pp. 185-207.

Bahyah Ibn Paqudah's *Duties of the Hearts* (first part 1161), Solomon Ibn Gabirol's *The Improvement of the Qualities of the Soul* (1161), Judah ha-Levi's *Kuzari* (1167), Saadia Gaon's *Beliefs and Opinions* (1186), and some works of grammar. These are justly considered to be the foundational works of Jewish philosophy and are discussed in every history of medieval Jewish thought.

Here I wish to look at an early, very minor but (I believe) interesting instance of the reception of philosophical ideas in Provence during the second half of the twelfth century. I shall examine the mark left by philosophy in the writings of R. Asher b. Meshullam, as exemplifying an aspect that often goes unnoticed by historians of philosophy: the impact of philosophical ideas on Jewish scholars who, because they remained devoted to the exclusive study of the Jewish canonical text, the Talmud, did not compose philosophical texts and have not found a place in the annals of Jewish philosophy.

Rabbi Asher b. Meshullam

The figure of R. Asher (d. after 1193), a student of R. Zerahiah (the author of *Sefer ha-Ma'or* and one of the greatest talmudic lights in the Midi of those decades), has recently been the object of insightful studies by the late Israel M. Ta-Shma.⁸ R. Asher was described (c. 1156) by the traveler R. Benjamin of Tudela as "an ascetic" who "is aloof to the business of this world, studies the [Holy] Book day and night, fasting and not eating meat."⁹ R. Asher's asceticism redoubled a similar tendency in his father and was in fact characteristic of certain circles in southern France, especially those from which the Provençal Kabbalah would emerge somewhat later. Like all Jewish scholars of his time, R. Asher was a talmudist, and all his writings belong to the literary genre of Talmud commentary. A fragment of his commentary on Tractate Berakhot of the Babylonian Talmud, recently discovered and published by Moshe Idel, shows that R. Asher accommodated some philosophical notions.¹⁰ Although this accommodation was of limited scope, it nevertheless signals a significant intellectual change: contrary to the traditional notion that the only legitimate sources of knowledge are the corpus of Jewish

8. Israel M. Ta-Shma, *Ha-Sifrut ha-parshanit la Talmud*. Vol. 2: 1200-1400 (Jerusalem, 2000), pp. 147-150; *idem*, *Rabbi Zerahyah ha-Levi – Ba'al ha-Ma'or u-veney tugo* (Jerusalem, 1992), pp. 162-166. Some errors notwithstanding, Juda Lubetzki's Introduction to *Sefer ha-hashlamah le-seder Neziqin... le-Rabbenu Meshullam b"R. Moshe b"R. Yehudah z"l mi-Badersh*. Part I: *Baba Qama u-Baba Meš'ah* (Paris, 1885; repr. Jerusalem 1967), esp. pp. X-XII, is still very valuable.

9. A. Asher (ed.), *The Itinerary of Rabbi Benjamin of Tudela* (London, 1840), vol. 1, Hebrew part, pp. 3-4 (my translation).

10. Idel, "Qeṭa'" and Idel, "Sarid."

canonical texts and the authority of trustworthy transmission, R. Asher held that Jewish thought must also integrate the fruits of philosophical-rationalist inquiry, *i.e.*, “alien” sources of knowledge. He explicitly stated that knowledge derives from three sources: tradition (*qabbalah*), writ (*katuv*), and reason (*sekhel*),¹¹ a clear indication that he had internalized the notion that Judaism should feel committed (also) to knowledge whose fountainhead is external to Judaism, *viz.* in philosophy. It is not surprising that R. Asher was among the very first intellectuals in Provence who was acquainted with philosophical ideas. As noted above, together with his father R. Meshullam he was a patron of Judah Ibn Tibbon and his close friend as well. Moreover, he attended sessions at which the latter “read” – *i.e.* taught – his translations to a group of scholars under the direction of R. Meshullam.¹² We thus know with certainty that he picked up some philosophical knowledge through oral communication with the major translator of philosophical texts of the day. It seems natural to suppose that R. Asher had access to Judah Ibn Tibbon’s translations, too – a surmise that our analysis of his philosophical vocabulary and ideas will substantiate. We shall also see that R. Asher was selective in his attitude toward philosophy and took over only a few of the ideas he encountered in Judah Ibn Tibbon’s translations.

The passage from the commentary on Berakhot is the only extended published text by R. Asher with a bearing on philosophy.¹³ It can be dated fairly precisely and was presumably written in the decade after 1186 (see Conclusion). In what follows I present an annotated English translation of this passage, which, as will be seen, reveals a Neoplatonic tendency and is in keeping with its author’s ascetic tendencies. The philosophy has been skillfully woven into the talmudic commentary, making this text an instance of a thorough “Judaization” of philosophical ideas in which no trace of tension between the two sources of knowledge is discernable.

In fact, R. Asher integrated whatever he chose to accommodate from philosophy into his text so well that two later and rather traditionalist authors borrowed it almost to the point of plagiarism:

- Moshe Idel discovered that passages from R. Asher’s text are embedded in the homilies of R. Baḥya ben Asher’s *Kad ha-Qemaḥ* (end of the thirteenth century).¹⁴

11. Simha Assaf, *Gaonica. Gaonic Responsa and Fragments of Halachic Literature from the Geniza and other sources* (Heb.) (Jerusalem, 1933), pp. 30-31. Noted in Idel, “Qeṭa’,” pp. 151-2.

12. Freudenthal, “Goremim u-meni‘im.”

13. M. Idel, who published this text, conjectures that an anonymous text in the same manuscript may also be by R. Asher. See Idel, “Qeṭa’,” pp. 81-82. Some halakhic texts by R. Asher have been published, but they have no bearing on the issues discussed here.

14. Idel, “Qeṭa’”; *Kitvey Rabbenu Baḥyah*, ed. Hayyim Dov Chavel (Jerusalem, 1970), p. 55 ff.

- In addition, the relatively unknown scholar Jacob b. Ḥanan'el Sikily appropriated R. Asher's text and ideas, even more extensively, making them into the backbone of one of the sermons included in his voluminous *Torat ha-minḥab* (completed 1337).¹⁵

Both authors (neither mentions R. Asher by name) use our text for their own purposes, paraphrasing, amending, abridging, and interpolating freely, in accordance with their own intellectual outlooks and objectives. For our purposes their texts are valuable as additional *testimonia*, which, although they must be used with circumspection, occasionally allow us to improve R. Asher's text.¹⁶

R. Asher b. Meshullam's Commentary on Tractate Berakhot

The text to be studied here is an excerpt, preserved by a later author, of R. Asher's commentary on Tractate Berakhot of the Babylonian Talmud (=BT). To understand R. Asher's text, it is important to bear in mind that a talmudic passage generally consists of a number of superposed textual strata, corresponding to different "layers" of the Jewish canonic corpus. This corpus can be schematically described as follows:

Level 1: The 24 books of the Tanakh (= Hebrew Bible, Old Testament).

Level 2: The 66 tractates of the Mishnah (completed c. 200 CE), which is entirely in Hebrew, record some three centuries of traditions and deliberations of the Sages or *tanna'im*. Their interpretative activity proceeded on the principle that Moses received from God not only the Written Law, but also an Oral Law, which was handed down by a reliable and uninterrupted tradition. In as much as these texts often quote and comment on biblical verses, they are *two-tier texts*.

Level 3: Further discussions of the Sages are recorded in the two Talmuds: in the less influential Jerusalem Talmud, completed ca. 365 CE, in Palestine; and in the authoritative Babylonian Talmud, completed in Mesopotamia ca. 500. Each section consists of a *mishnah* (in Hebrew) and an extended discussion thereof (mostly in Aramaic), called *gemara*. These are thus *three-tier texts* (at least).

15. Jacob Sikily, *Torat ha-minḥab*, ed. Barukh Avigdor Hefes (Heifetz) (Safed, 1991; repr.: Jerusalem, 2000). 2 vols. Sermon 64, pp. 554-558.

16. R. Abba Mari of Lunel, the author of *Minḥat Qena'ot* (ca. 1305-1306), seems to have known R. Asher's text too, but draws on it very briefly and never quotes from it. See *Teshuvot ha-Rashba*, ed. H. Z. Dimitrowsky (Jerusalem 1990), vol. 1, p. 240, lines 11-16.

Levels 4→∞: A central commandment of Jewish law makes the continuous study of the canonic texts a religious obligation. This turns the study and interpretation of the Talmud, taken to be an inexhaustible treasure of divine truth, into an end in itself. Consequently, Jewish intellectual life traditionally focused on hermeneutical activity centered around the Babylonian Talmud, the Jewish canonic text par excellence. It has been an essentially autonomous and closed intellectual activity. Because these commentaries quote talmudic passages, including multi-layered passages, they are *four-tier texts* (at least).

The text by R. Asher presented here comes from his commentary on a talmudic passage that quotes and comments on several verses from Psalms 103 and 104. It therefore contains all these layers: (1) verses from Psalms; (2) two passages of the BT, Tractate Berakhot, in which rabbis discuss these verses; and (3) R. Asher's own comments on the biblical verses and on the talmudic passages. To appreciate his argument, we need to distinguish these layers: I therefore reproduce below the relevant verses of the Psalms as Text I; the two passages (separated by only a few lines) of the BT commenting on these verses as Text II (labeled II_A and II_B); and R. Asher's discussion as Text III (III_A and III_B).¹⁷ Since Text II quotes Text I, and Text III quotes both I and II, I have distinguished the three levels as follows:

- Phrases or words quoted from the Psalms that are at the center of the discussion are printed in *italics*. Other biblical passages are in roman characters and in quotation marks.
- Words or phrases quoted from the Talmud are printed in **bold**.
- R. Asher's text is printed in ordinary roman characters.
- My own occasional additions to R. Asher's text (including the page numbers in Idel's edition of the Hebrew text) are given in square brackets [], as are some Hebrew terms and the sources of biblical quotations.

Text I: Psalms¹⁸

103

- 1 *Bless the lord, O my soul, and all my inwards bless His holy name.*
- 2 *Bless the Lord O my soul, and forget not all His benefits.*
- 20 *Bless the Lord, O ye angels of His, ye mighty in strength that fulfil His word, hearkening into the voice of His word.*

17. R. Asher's discussions bears only on II_A and II_B, and not on the short text separating them. The preserved passage of his commentary goes a little beyond the end of III_B translated here, but is without philosophical import. See *infra*, n. 69.

18. Translation quoted from the English translation of the Talmud, referred to in the next note.

- 21 *Bless the Lord, O ye all His, armies His servants who serve His will.*
 22 *Bless the Lord, all created things, in every place where He hath dominion.*
Bless the Lord, O my soul.

104

- 1 *Bless the Lord, O my soul. O Lord my God, Thou art very great, Thou art clothed with glory and majesty.*
 35 *Let sinners cease out of the earth and let the wicked be no more. Bless the Lord, O my soul, Hallelujah.*

Text II: Babylonian Talmud, Tractate Berakhot 10a¹⁹

[II_A]

R. Johanan said in the name of R. Simeon b. Yohai : What is the meaning of the verse, “She openeth her mouth with wisdom, and the law of kindness is on her mouth” [Prov. 31 :26] ? To whom was Solomon²⁰ alluding in this verse ? He was alluding only to his father David who dwelt in five worlds and composed a psalm [for each of them].

[I] He abode in his mother’s womb, and broke into song, as it says, *Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all my inwards bless His holy name* [Ps. 103 :1].

[II] He came out into the open air and looked upon the stars and constellations and broke into song, as it says, *Bless the Lord, ye angels of His, ye mighty in strength that fulfil His word, hearkening into the voice of His word. Bless the Lord, all ye His hosts* etc²¹ [Ps. 103 :20-22].

[III] He sucked from his mother’s bosom and looked on her breasts and broke into song, as it says, *Bless the Lord O my soul, and forget not all His benefits* [Ps. 103 :2]. What means *all His benefits* ? – R. Abbahu said : That He placed her breasts at the source of understanding. For what reason is this ? – Rab Judah said : So that he should not look upon the place of shame ; R. Mattena said : So that he should not suck from a place of filth.

19. Translation quoted from *Hebrew-English Edition of the Babylonian Talmud. Berakhoth*. Translated into English with Notes, Glossary and Indices by Maurice Simon, under the Editorship of I. Epstein (London : The Soncino Press, 1990). This translation has been modified occasionally to reflect R. Asher’s understanding of the text. The two passages are separated by only a few lines, which are however unrelated to them.

20. The Book of Proverbs is traditionally ascribed to King Salomon.

21. The continuation is : *His servants who serve His will. Bless the Lord, all created things, in every place where He hath dominion. Bless the Lord, O my soul.*

[IV] He saw the downfall of the wicked and broke into song, as it says, *Let sinners cease out of the earth and let the wicked be no more. Bless the Lord, O my soul, Hallelujah* [Ps. 104 :35].

[V] He looked upon the day of death and broke into song, as it says, *Bless the Lord, O my soul. O Lord my God, Thou art great indeed, Thou art clothed with glory and majesty* [Ps. 104 :1].

[II_B]

[R. Shimi b. ‘Uqba said :] To whom did David²² refer in these five verses beginning with *Bless the Lord, O my soul* ? He was referring only to the Holy One, blessed be He, and to the soul [*nesbamah*]. (i) Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, fills the whole world, so the soul fills the body. (ii) Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, sees, but is not seen, so the soul sees but is not itself seen. (iii) Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, nourishes the whole world, so too the soul nourishes the whole body. (iv) Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, is pure, so the soul is pure. (v) Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, abides in the innermost chambers, so the soul abides in the innermost chambers. Let that which has these five qualities come and praise Him who has these qualities.

Text III : R. Asher ben Meshullam, Extant Passage
from his Commentary on, Tractate Berakhot²³

[III_A]

[p. 83] R. Johanan said in the name of R. Simeon b. Yohai : What is the meaning of the verse : “She openeth her mouth with wisdom, and the law of kindness is on her mouth” [Prov. 31:26] ? To whom was Solomon alluding in this verse ? He was alluding only to his father David who dwelt in five worlds and composed a psalm [for each of them].

[i] He abode in his mother’s womb, and broke into song. In his mother’s womb means that it [the womb] is a small world [*‘olam qatan*]²⁴ and that [rational] investigation [*haqirah*]²⁵ begins with the beginning of coming-to-be

22. The Psalms are traditionally ascribed to King David.

23. Translated from Idel, “Sarid,” 83-88. Of R. Asher’s Talmud commentary only this passage, bearing on Berakhot 10a, is extant. Although R. Asher may have written his commentary on the margins of the talmudic text, in the preserved text his explanatory glosses are inserted in the talmudic text itself. To distinguish the two texts, the talmudic quotations are printed in **bold** in what follows.

24. On the translation of this term see n. 26 below.

25. On the characteristically philosophical notion of “rationalist inquiry” see below in the Conclusion.

[*tehillat ha-hawayab*]. *Bless the lord, O my soul, and all my inwards bless His holy name.* When is he [man] in the inwards? When he is in his mother's womb.

[ii] **He came out into the open air and looked upon the stars and constellations.** This means that he [man] emerged from a small world into a great world [*'olam gadol*]²⁶ and he perceived the power [*koah*] that man receives at the moment of his nativity from the planets [lit. the stars] – which are the servants [*mesharetim*] – and from the constellations, of which there are twelve, and this is the world of the spheres [*'olam ha-galgalim*].²⁷ **And broke into song, Bless the Lord ye all His hosts his servants ministers [*mesharetav*] who serve His will. All His:** This refers to the sphere of the constellations, where the vast host is [*i.e.* the fixed stars]. **His servants:** this refers to the seven planets. **Who serve His will:** this means that they govern the lower realm [*ba-'olam ha-shafel*] by order of the Lord.²⁸ He then said: *Bless the Lord, all created things.* This means that those [existents] which bring forth things and those [existents] which have been brought forth [by God] all praise the Lord and bless Him, for they are all His handiwork and He has dominion over them all.²⁹ This is

26. In the Hebrew philosophical literature, the terms “small world” and “great world” usually refer to the notions of “microcosm” and “macrocosm” in the philosophical sense, implying notably the idea that the microcosm, man, mirrors the macrocosm, *i.e.* the entire universe. R. Asher's terminological usage clearly betrays familiarity with this notion (see Conclusion), but he does not espouse it and uses the terms to express his own thought. I therefore chose to avoid the usage of the terms “microcosm” and “macrocosm.”

27. This sentence, including the terminology, reflects R. Asher's familiarity with the basic principles of astrology. Jewish scholars in the Midi were introduced to this discipline through Abraham Ibn Ezra who, during his sojourn there (ca. 1148-1153), composed a Hebrew astrological “encyclopedia” based on Arabic sources. Ibn Ezra diffused his astrological ideas also via his numerous and very influential biblical commentaries. See Shlomo Sela, *Abraham Ibn Ezra and the Rise of Medieval Hebrew Science* (Leiden: Brill, 2003). A passage from a text by R. Asher on the powers of the planets has been discovered and published by the late I. Ta-Shma; see his “Qışsur Sefer ‘Hovot ha-levavot’ le-R. Asher b. R. Shelamya mi-Lunel,” *Aley sefer* 10 (1982), 13-24, on pp. 23-24. Jewish intellectuals were much preoccupied with the theological consequences of astrology, especially with respect to the freedom of will, reward and punishment, and the value of prayer.

28. To “neutralize” the potential dangerous theological implications of astrology, the argument was often adduced that the power of the planets derived from God and that the planets act by His “command.” See, *e.g.*, Abraham Ibn Ezra on Deut. 8:3 and Dan. 7:4 (both refer to a “force emanating from the upper bodies by order of the Lord”). Similarly, in Solomon Ibn Gabirol's poem *Crown of Royalty*, the description of each planet's actions on the sublunar world is repeatedly followed by a remark to the effect that it acts “by the Will of its Creator.” On the term *'olam shafel* see the Conclusion.

29. The existents that bring forth things are the planets, which in turn have themselves been brought forth by God. Thus all existents, even those that may seem to have been produced by the planets, “are all His handiwork and He governs them all.”

the meaning of *in every place where He has dominion. Bless the Lord, O my soul* – this is the song.

[iii] **He sucked from his mother's bosom... and broke into song, as it says, *Bless the Lord O my soul, ... [for] He placed her breasts at the source of understanding, i.e. facing the heart.*** This is the only difference between the anatomy [p. 84] of the human body and the anatomy of the animal body. The reason for this is that animals were created solely for man's needs and to perpetuate [their] seed. But man was created in order to know his Creator, worship Him, and learn wisdom [*ḥokhmah*] that will lead him to all this.³⁰ This is why he sucks from a place created for his benefit, namely wisdom and understanding [*ha-ḥokhmah we-ha-binah*]. Hence [man nurses] from a place [of wisdom] created for his benefit; but [animals] only perpetuate their seed. This is what is meant by “**So that he should not look upon the place of shame**”: so that he should not come to think that he was created for this purpose. Another interpretation: **so that he should not suck from a place of filth**, but rather from the place of understanding [*binah*], so that he be prepared to receive wisdom [*ḥokhmah*], for whose sake he was created.³¹ This is what is called ‘the World of Wisdom’ [*‘olam ha-ḥokhmah*].³²

[iv] **He saw the downfall³³ of the wicked and broke into song.** The [meaning of] this is obvious. This is what is called ‘the World of Judgment and Justice’ [*‘olam ha-mishpat we-ha-sedeq*],³⁴ [referring to] when He judges the wicked in this world, so as to make known that “God shall bring every creature to judgment” (Eccles. 12:14).

[v] **He looked upon the day of death.** This means that “the souls of the righteous are preserved under the Throne of Glory” (BT Shabbat 152b), so that for them death is life.³⁵ This is why [David] placed his song in immediate

30. The notions that man's finality is to know God and that knowing God presupposes studying “wisdom” – *i.e.* philosophy – is distinctively philosophical and new to talmudic thought. It is of course paramount in later Jewish philosophical literature – notably in Maimonides' *Guide* (whence, beginning in the thirteenth century, it diffused also to some traditional literature) – but it is exceptional in a talmudic commentary of the twelfth century. R. Asher was probably inspired by Sa'adyah's *Beliefs and Opinions* 10:11, but may have come across the idea elsewhere, too (*e.g.*, Ibn Ezra's Commentary on Hos. 6:3).

31. R. Asher understands the talmudic phrase as confirming his own view of the prime importance of “wisdom” whose finality is the knowledge of God. Even human anatomy is subordinated to this end.

32. For an explication of this notion see the Conclusion.

33. As printed, R. Asher's text has *ma'alatan* [= dignity] instead of *mapaltan* [= downfall] as it (logically) reads in the Talmud, a fairly amusing (Freudian?) lapsus by R. Asher, a scribe, or the modern editor.

34. I will try to explicate this notion in the Conclusion.

35. *Cf.* BT Berakhot 18a. This is an allusion to the doctrine of the immortality of the soul of the righteous, elaborated in some detail below.

proximity to *Thou art great indeed* (Ps 104:1) rather than to *Thou hidest Thy face, and they are restless and troubled* (Ps 104:29). He meant that at their death the Lord extends great kindness (*hesed*) to those who revere Him. He said [Thou art] *indeed* [great], because a man cannot recount them [*i.e.* the acts of kindness]. This is what is called “the World of the Souls [*‘olam ha-neshamot*]” and “the World of Repose [*‘olam ha-menuḥaha*].”³⁶ This *tanna* [R. Simeon b. Yohai] followed the order of the worlds, and not the order of the biblical passages, for he placed *Let sinners cease out of the earth* (Ps. 104:34), which is at the end of the psalm, before [*Thou art great*, Ps. 104:1].

He thus followed the order of the five worlds, which are: [i] [the small world, *i.e.* the world] of all the beings in the lower world [*ha-‘olam ha-shafel*]³⁷; [ii] the great world – the heavens with the spheres; [iii] the world of Wisdom [*ḥokhmah*] which is above them all;³⁸ [iv] the World of Judgment and Justice, which is the first fruit of wisdom; [v] and the World of Repose, which is the ultimate [*takhlit*] delight of wisdom.³⁹

[III_B]

To whom [did David] refer in these five verses [beginning with] *Bless [the Lord, O my soul]*? Explanation: Why did he say each time: *bless, O my soul* and did not say “I will bless the Lord,” as it is written “I will bless the Lord who has given me counsel” [Ps. 16:7]? **He was referring to the Holy One blessed be He** [in five ways, as follows].

[i] **Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, fills the whole world** etc. Explanation: although there are places where the Lord’s power and His wonders are more apparent than elsewhere, like Mount Sinai, Mount Moriah, and Bethel, [p. 85] and similar places, nevertheless He fills the entire world.⁴⁰ [This statement follows] from the intellect [*ha-sekheh*] and from Scripture [*ha-katuv*].⁴¹

36. In the Conclusion I will try to identify these “worlds.”

37. The text here adds two unconnected words (*mi-meqom ma’amadam*) which seem to indicate that several words have dropped out.

38. *I.e.*, above (i) and (ii), which are both material “worlds.”

39. R. Asher here enumerates the five worlds introduced previously. On their identification, see the Conclusion.

40. This statement is a partly verbatim quotation from Abraham Ibn Ezra’s Long Commentary on Exodus 25:40. Ibn Ezra says that although God’s Glory fills the entire world, we yet know that “there are places in which the Lord’s power is more apparent than elsewhere;” but he does not mention the places listed by R. Asher. See also n. 44 below.

41. As pointed out before, this statement signals the recognition of the rationalist-philosophic mode of inquiry as a legitimate source of knowledge. The triad of “intellect,” “Scripture,” and “Tradition” (the latter is not mentioned here) is paramount in the Judeo-Arabic literature translated by Judah Ibn Tibbon and appears, *e.g.*, in the Introduction to Bahyah Ibn Paqudah’s *Duties of the Heart* (Idel, “Qeṭa’,” 152, n. 22).

Thus it is written [Jer. 23:21]: “I fill the heavens and the earth.” And from the intellect: there are [rational] proofs⁴² that God’s greatness is immeasurable; and whatever is immeasurable is unlimited. Therefore, everything is full of Him but does not contain him.⁴³ As is written: “the heavens and the highest heavens do not contain Thee” [1 Kings 8:27]. Similarly, the soul [*neshamah*] fills the entire body, although there are places in the body where the soul’s power is more evident than in others, such as the brain, and the heart, and the tongue.⁴⁴ Nevertheless, [the soul] fills the entire body, for we see that the hands as well as the feet have a permanent art [*i.e.* well-defined function; *melakhah qayemet*], and the permanent arts originate only from the power of the wise soul [*neshamah hakhamah*], for among all irrational animals [*ba’aley hayyim she-eynan medabberim*]⁴⁵ you do not find any that possess an art. Do not answer me with the bee’s hive and the spider’s web and the worm’s silk and the sparrow’s nest: for when you look at all of them you see that their art is permanent only in man’s works⁴⁶ and art. This is what *Bless the Lord, O my soul, my innermost organs, bless His Holy Name* (Ps. 103:1) corresponds to: just as His Holy Name⁴⁷ fills the entire world, so every internal organ is filled with the power of the soul. This is the praise and blessing [proclaimed by] the inner organs.

[ii] **Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, sees, but is not seen, so the soul sees but is not itself seen.** Explanation: Sees here means [the same as in the verse] “my heart saw much wisdom and knowledge” (Eccl. 1:16), and both refer to knowing.⁴⁸ That is, the Holy One Blessed Be He [p. 86]

42. I follow reading A as indicated in Idel, “Sarid,” p. 85, n. 46.

43. Or: [He] fills the All, but the All does not contain Him.

44. Like the analogous argument above (see n. 40), this reasoning too derives from Abraham Ibn Ezra’s Long Commentary on Exodus 25:40 (see Idel, “Qeṭa’,” p. 150, n. 12), but with telling differences. Ibn Ezra mentions the eyes and the ears, explaining that they are sensitive because they contain nerves (“strings issuing from the brain”), unlike, *e.g.*, the bones. R. Asher presumably did not understand this biological information and instead named the brain, the tongue, and the heart, *i.e.*, the body parts that, from his ascetic-religious perspective, he took to be involved in the manifestations of soul.

45. The use of the concept “irrational animals” and of the corresponding Hebrew term clearly reflects familiarity with the recent Hebrew philosophic corpus translated by Judah Ibn Tibbon. See below in the Conclusion.

46. Read *be-ma’asey* instead of *ke-ma’asey*.

47. Following the variant reading in Idel, “Sarid,” p. 85, n. 58.

48. The verb ר.ה (= to see) is here interpreted as having a metaphorical rather than literal meaning, referring to intellectual rather than sensory apprehension. The question arises whether R. Asher devised it himself or derived it from some earlier writing. To be sure, much the same the argument adduced here was employed by Maimonides to avert anthropomorphism: Maimonides in fact cites the same verse as R. Asher and comments that it refers to “intellectual apprehension” (*Guide* 1:4). Despite this similarity in their

knows all things inasmuch as they are all His handiwork, but is not known in and of Himself, although He fills the entire world,⁴⁹ but only through His actions [*raq mi-šad pe'ulotaw*]⁵⁰: this is so because, being incorporeal, He cannot be perceived by the senses but can only be apprehended by the intellect. Just so, the soul [*neshamah*] knows all things, lower and upper, nearby and far away, until its knowledge reaches the First Cause [*ha-sibbah ha-ri'shonah*]⁵¹; and although it fills the entire body, yet, being incorporeal, it is not known in and of itself, but only through its actions. The spirit [*nefesh*] of the animal, by contrast, does not truly know anything, and comes close to being known in and of itself, because it is a body, subtle like the body of the air, and accordingly descends down to the earth

respective hermeneutical strategies, the fact that R. Asher does not employ any of the terms used in Maimonides' works (both the *Book of Knowledge* and the Hebrew translation of the *Guide*) seems to exclude the possibility that he was familiar with any of them when he wrote this text (see Conclusion). Is then the idea that "to see" refers to "knowing" and its grounding in Eccl. 1:16 R. Asher's own innovation? While this is not impossible, it seems more likely that the talmudic scholar adopted it from some Hebrew source that originated in Judeo-Arabic culture. One such source could be a gaonic responsum variously ascribed to R. Ḥay Gaon and R. Ḥanan'el, whose point is to avert anthropomorphism. Referring to prophetic visions of God, the author writes: "Since we know that He appears to the prophets in such a way [that they perceive an image], it transpires that the said vision is a vision of the heart, not a vision of the eye, for it is impossible to say that God's image is seen, when 'seeing' is understood as referring to the vision of the eye. ... Rather it is a vision in the heart... as in the verse 'my heart saw much wisdom and knowledge' (Eccl. 1:16)." See David Metzger (ed.), *Perushey Rabbenu Ḥanan'el bar Ḥushi'el la-Talmud: Masekhet Berakhot* (Jerusalem: Makhon Lev Same'aḥ, 1990), pp. 10-11. Now R. Asher's view is not identical with that of the Gaon: the latter refers to a sort of "interior vision" in the heart during which the prophet is under the impression that he indeed "sees" God, whereas R. Asher is closer to Maimonides in identifying "seeing" with knowledge. Still, it seems possible that his use of the verse from Ecclesiastes was inspired by the gaonic text. Indeed, the latter is included in an important collection of responsa that was known in Provence in R. Asher's time and that, according to some scholars, may even have been edited by none other than R. Asher himself. See the text in Simḥa Immanuel (ed.), *Teshuvot ha-ge'onim ha-ḥadashot* (Jerusalem: Makhon Ofeq, 1995), §155, p. 219-221 and, on R. Asher's possible editorship of this collection, the editor's "Introduction," pp. 30-33. This responsum was also included in Yehudah b. Barzilai ha-Baršeloni, *Perush Sefer Yeširah*, which may also have been available to R. Asher; see *Commentar zum Sepher Jezira von R. Jehuda b. Barsilai aus Barcelona*, ed. S. J. Halberstram, annot. D. Kaufmann (Berlin: Mekize Nirdamim, 1885), pp. 32-33. For an overview of hermeneutical methods in Jewish philosophical writings see Isaak Heinemann, "Die wissenschaftliche Allegoristik des jüdischen Mittelalters," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 3(1) (1950-1951), pp. 611-643.

49. After Ps. 72:19 (Idel, "Sarid," p. 86, n. 64).

50. The idea and the phrasing are borrowed directly from *Duties of the Hearts* 1:10.

51. On this distinctively philosophical concept see below in the Conclusion.

[after death].⁵² This corresponds to *and forget not all His benefits* [*O my soul*] (Ps. 103:2): the great kindness that God bestowed [on man] is the wise soul [*neshamah hakhamah*] through which it knows [or: you know] all things.

[iii] **Just as the Holy One, blessed be He, nourishes the whole world, so too the soul nourishes the whole body.** Explanation: because He sustains upper and lower beings and nourishes them. **So too the soul nourishes the body.** Explanation: it sustains [the body], and this is why [man] walks upright, so as always to look and gaze upward, toward the soul's abode [*maqom*] where it longs to return.⁵³ But all the irrational and mortal⁵⁴ animals walk with their faces turned toward the earth, for their spirit [*nafsham*] was taken from it and there it returns.

It should be added that the soul really [can] nourish the body and can sustain the body with very little or no food for many days. This happens when the soul's power [*koah*] exerts itself until it receives the supernal power [*koah ha-'elyon*]. Moses and Elijah provide proof thereof. For our Master Moses (blessed be his memory) stood without food or drink for a number of days equal to the number of his years,⁵⁵ but nevertheless increased in great power and awesome light, because of the power he received from the World of Wisdom and because he benefited from the Splendor of the Shekhinah. The same applies to Elijah on earth, who walked a long distance during

52. R. Asher's phrasing follows Eccles. 3:21. This distinction between man's soul and the beast's spirit goes back to a tradition expounding the difference between the biological animal spirit, which, however subtle, is yet material, and the rational soul, which is immaterial. This is why I have rendered the animal's *nefesh* and human *neshamah* as "spirit" and "soul," respectively. R. Asher may have come across this idea in Abraham Ibn Ezra's commentary on Ecclesiastes (3:20-21; 7:3). R. Asher follows Ibn Ezra also in his use of *neshamah* exclusively for the human rational soul and *nefesh* for the vital souls of animals; see, in addition to the above, Ibn Ezra's commentary on Gen. 7:19, and the "Other Commentary" on Gen. 2:7.

53. The reference to the soul's abode, to which it longs to return, is a clear indication of R. Asher's Neoplatonic leanings and is close to the views of Abraham Ibn Ezra, as expressed in his biblical commentaries and other writings (e.g. commentary on Prov. 15:24). See Hermann Greive, *Studien zum jüdischen Neuplatonismus* (Berlin, 1973), pp. 63-73. Whether or not R. Asher could piece together this theory from the scattered remarks in Ibn Ezra's writings is another question. Man's upright posture and its relationship to his intellectual capacities are an old topos, discussed in depth in R. Brague, *Aristote et la question du monde* (Paris, 1988). It is not clear where R. Asher learned of this idea, but it is interesting to note that in his commentary on Gen. 3:1, Abraham Ibn Ezra connects the rational faculty possessed by the snake prior to Eve's sin with the fact that it stood erect.

54. The three words translated as 'mortal' seem to be a corruption of the expression used in Ps. 115:17-18. Abraham Ibn Ezra ad loc. interprets *dumah* as *meqom keritut* (place of non-being).

55. On this tradition see Idel, "Sarid," pp. 82-83; see also note 57.

forty days without any food or drink (*cf.* I Kings 19:8).⁵⁶ From all this it is clear that the soul truly [*be'emet*] nourishes the body.⁵⁷

This corresponds to [the verses]: *bless the Lord O ye [all] His angels* [Ps. 103:20]; and *bless the Lord O ye all His armies* etc. [Ps. 103:21]; and *bless the Lord O ye all His created things* [Ps. 103:22]. [p. 87] For these are the three worlds, namely: [A] the World of Intellect [*'olam ha-sekheh*]; [B] the world of the spheres [*'olam ha-galgalim*]; and [C] the world of turmoil and change [*'olam ha-mahapekhab we-ha-temurah*].⁵⁸ The Lord sustains them through [His] Spirit [*be-ruah*] and maintains them through His Power.⁵⁹

[iv] **Just as the Holy One Blessed be He is pure:** Although He fills the entire world and maintains it and even though there are places in the world that are vile, yet He is pure everywhere, just like the light of the sun (one of His powerful servants), which even when [shining] on trash is pure and unsoiled, just as it is pure and lucid when [shining] on water.⁶⁰ So too⁶¹ the soul is pure: even though there are vile places in the body and the soul fills the entire body, it is nevertheless pure, because filth adheres to [material] bodies only; not being a body, the soul is pure.⁶² But the spirit [*nefesh*] of beasts is impure, because it is a body. This corresponds to [the verse] *O Lord*

56. The sentence is slightly corrupt.

57. This passage is significant in that it provides the philosophic and scientific grounding for R. Asher's ascetic practices: when he was "aloof of the business of this world," and "fasting and not eating meat" (above, p. 159), R. Asher assumed that his soul would "really" sustain his body and he was trying to receive power from the World of Wisdom. R. Asher may have got the idea from Sa'adyah Gaon, who, in his *Beliefs and Opinions* (Treatise 8), adduced a very similar argument. To make plausible the idea that after the Resurrection of the dead human beings will be able to subsist without food, he says that Moses lived thrice 40 days without nourishment, namely by virtue of a light that God created for him and which illuminated his face.

58. The place of the last world in the sequence of the three worlds shows that R. Asher must refer to some notion of what is usually known as the world of generation and corruption. I discuss the specific ideas he associates with this notion in the Conclusion.

59. See n. 62 below.

60. The translation integrates the omission indicated in Idel, "Sarid," p. 87, n. 81. It is confirmed by the text in Sikily, *Torat ha-minḥab*, p. 558.

61. Read *kakh* instead of *'akh*.

62. The notion that God "sustains" the world was at the core of immanentist conceptions of the deity, many versions of which were maintained by medieval Jewish thinkers in both the rationalist and the mystical traditions; they were all confronted with the issue of the deity's contact with vile matter. See Joseph Dan, *The Esoteric Theology of Ashkenazi Hasidism* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1968). In Jewish writings this tradition goes back essentially to Sa'adyah Gaon, whose thought integrates Stoic ideas; see Gad Freudenthal, "Stoic Physics in the Writings of R. Sa'adia Ga'on al-Fayyumi and Its Aftermath in Medieval Jewish Mysticism," *Arabic Sciences and Philosophy* 6 (1996), 113-136 [repr. in *Science in the Medieval Hebrew and Arabic Traditions*, Essay XIII]. R. Asher seems to have borrowed the image of the sun's

my God, Thou art great indeed, clothed in majesty and splendor (Ps. 104:1) : *i.e.*, [Thou art] not [clothed] in anything that is not pure, for such things have neither majesty nor splendor.

[v] **Just as the Holy One Blessed be He abides in the innermost chambers.** Explanation: whoever wishes to inquire [*la-ḥaqor*] into His knowledge [*yedi'ato*] and seeks to apprehend [*hakarato*] Him will not be able to find Him [p. 88] until he searches the chambers of Wisdom and Philosophy (*ha-ḥokhmah we-ha-tushiyyah*),⁶³ chamber within a chamber.⁶⁴ Consider the following analogy: If we investigate the cause of man, we find that his cause is the father, the mother, and the four elements [*yeshodot*]. The cause of the four elements is the spheres [*ha-galgalim*]. And the cause of the spheres is the Sphere of the Intellect [*galgal ha-sekhel*], which is not a body [*guf*]. And its cause is the First Cause [*ha-sibbah ha-rishonah*].⁶⁵ Similarly, the soul resides in the innermost chambers.⁶⁶ For when we investigate the soul we say that it is not composed of the four elements, as is the human body; nor is it one of the four elements, nor a sphere or a heavenly body. Rather, it is a simple spiritual substance [*ešem ruḥani pashuʔ*],⁶⁷ emanated [*ne'ešal*] by the power of the Sphere of Intellect.⁶⁸ This corresponds to *Let sinners cease* (Ps. 104:35). This means that they [the wicked] will perish, but the souls of the just will be preserved under the Sphere of Intellect, which is the Throne of Glory.⁶⁹

light that is not affected by filth from Sa'adyah Ga'on's *Beliefs and Opinions* (Treatise 2), with which he was well acquainted (see Conclusion). See also Idel, "Sarid," p. 87, n. 81, and the literature cited there.

63. Some medieval authors use *tushiyyah* to denote philosophy; see Jacob Klatzkin, *Thesaurus philosophicus linguae Hebraicae et veteris et recentioris*, 4 vols. (1926-1933; repr. Hildesheim: G. Olms, 2004), 4:188-189. It is not certain that R. Asher meant it in this specific sense, however, and he may have taken it as a synonym of *ḥokhmah* (cf. Job 26:3), just as he treats *ḥokhmah* and *binah*.

64. Following the variant readings in Idel, "Sarid," p. 88, nn. 89 and 90.

65. As Idel pointed out ("Qeṭa'," p. 150, n. 8), this idea is found also Solomon Ibn Gabirol's philosophical poem *Crown of Royalty*.

66. *I.e.*, the soul cannot be known without searching "through the chambers of Wisdom."

67. On the origin of this terminology see the Conclusion.

68. The notion of the "Sphere of Intellect" is also to be found in Ibn Gabirol's poem and elsewhere; see Idel, "Qeṭa'," pp. 152-153. The notion of the soul as consisting of a spiritual substance originating from its "abode" and longing to return there (above, p. 170) is distinctively Neoplatonic.

69. The extant fragment of R. Asher's commentary continues for a few further lines, but they are unrelated to the previous discussions (see n. 17) and hence not germane to the present study.

Conclusion : R. Asher b. Meshullam and Philosophy

1. *R. Asher's Terminology and Concepts : The Imprint of Judah Ibn Tibbon's Translations*

Moshe Idel has already noted that R. Asher derived a number of his ideas from Abraham Ibn Ezra. Some further points of contact have been pointed out above in the notes and need not be repeated here, where I limit myself to noting the following pair of terminological borrowings :

- *Mesharetim*, literally “servants,” denotes the five planets, excluding the two great luminaries. The term is ubiquitous in Ibn Ezra’s writings, both exegetical and scientific, but is not used by Judah Ibn Tibbon, which allows us to infer that R. Asher learned it from Ibn Ezra.
- ‘*Olam shafel* ‘lower world’ also occurs in Abraham Ibn Ezra’s writings (e.g., long commentary on Exodus 6:3, 19:20, 20:1, 23:25, comm. on Daniel 10:21), but does not appear in Judah Ibn Tibbon’s translations.

It is not surprising that R. Asher’s short text clearly bespeaks a familiarity with terms newly introduced into Hebrew by his friend Judah Ibn Tibbon. Here are several examples :

- *ḥaqirah*, for philosophic-rational investigation : Judah Ibn Tibbon introduced this term into Hebrew to denote specifically rationalist philosophical and scientific inquiry.⁷⁰
- *sekhel* (=intellect) : This term, too, was introduced into philosophical Hebrew by Judah Ibn Tibbon, namely to denote the distinctively philosophical notion of ‘intellect.’⁷¹
- *Sibbah ri’shonah* (=First Cause) is also a term denoting a distinctively philosophical concept used by Judah Ibn Tibbon in his translations (e.g. *Kuzari* 1:1, 1:4, 2:80, 4:3, 5:20 etc.).⁷²
- *Ba’alei ḥayyim she-einam medabberim* (=irrational animals) is also a new distinctively philosophical term coined by Judah Ibn Tibbon and used in his translations (e.g. *Duties of the Hearts* 2:4, 5:5, 6:2).
- *Teḥillat ha-hawayah* (=the beginning of coming-to-be) is a rare term used by Judah Ibn Tibbon (in the plural form *teḥillat ha-hawayot*) in his translation of Ibn Gabirol’s *Improvement of the Qualities of the Soul* (1:1), executed at R. Asher’s request (below, p. 179).
- *Eṣem ruḥani pashuṭ* (=simple spiritual substance) is a term found in the Hebrew version of *Duties of the Hearts* (10:1), where Baḥya Ibn Paqudah

70. See Klatzkin, *Thesaurus*, 1:326-327.

71. Klatzkin, *Thesaurus*, 4:93-94.

72. See, in addition, Klatzkin, *Thesaurus*, 3:82.

expresses an idea similar to that presented by R. Asher here: “soul [*nefesh*] is a simple spiritual substance which seeks what resembles it – viz. the spiritual beings – and avoids what by its nature is opposite to it, viz. the gross bodies.” Similar ideas and terms appear also in *Duties of the Hearts* 2:5 and 3:2.

R. Asher used all these terms roughly in their philosophical signification, although he avoids philosophical discussions. No less interesting, however, are the terms that R. Asher either modified or coined himself. In some cases it can be shown how he fashioned them from Ibn Tibbon’s philosophical lexicon in accordance with his own specific views and aims. Consider the following :

- ‘*Olam qatan* and ‘*olam gadol* (=‘small world’ and ‘great world’). These terms are found in a number of Judah Ibn Tibbon’s translations (e.g. *Kuzari* [4:3, 4:25], *Duties of the Hearts* [2:4], and *Improvement of the Qualities of the Soul* [Introduction]), where they denote the well-known notions of “microcosm” and “macrocosm,” respectively. All these texts express the idea of a correspondence between the microcosm and the macrocosm, an idea very different from that stated by R. Asher. Apparently he deliberately chose to use the philosophical terms for his own purposes: the identification of the womb as a “small world” is not otherwise known.⁷³
- ‘*Olam ha-mahapekhab we-ha-temurah* (=the world of turmoil [lit. reversal] and change). As already noted, R. Asher intended an idea related to the notion of the world of generation and corruption. But the usual expression for this, introduced by Judah Ibn Tibbon, is *hawayah we-hefsed* (e.g., *Duties of the Hearts* 1:8; *Improvement of the Qualities of the Soul* 3:2 and 4:2; *Kuzari* 4:1 and 4:9). Why didn’t R. Asher use it? And what is the origin of his own idiosyncratic term? The answer seems to have two parts. Although there seems to have been no precedent for ‘*olam ha-mahapekhab*, Judah Ibn Tibbon used related expressions, which refer to the “reversal” of circumstances in one’s life on earth: e.g. “[this world] is one of destruction [*kelayah*], one in which the [destinies of] men are reversed [*mithappekhet*]” (*Beliefs and Opinions* 10:1; see also *hithappekhet* in *Duties of the Hearts* 3:3). Although the term ‘*olam ha-temurah* was used by R. Abraham bar Ḥiyya in his *Meditation of the Sad Soul* (chap. 5),⁷⁴ it

73. See Idel, “Sarid,” p. 80. On the idea of microcosm in twelfth-century philosophy see H. Schipperges, “Einfluss arabischer Medizin auf die Mikrokosmosliteratur des 12. J.h.,” in *Antike und Orient im Mittelalter* (Berlin 1962), 129-153; Samuel S. Kottke, “Microcosm and Macrocosm According to Some Jewish Medieval Works up to the 12th Century,” *Janus* 64 (1977), 205-215.

74. See *Hegyon ha-nefesh ha-’asuvah*, ed. Geoffrey Wigoder (Jerusalem, 1971), p. 49. Interestingly, this rare term appears also in Qalonymos b. Qalonymos, *Even Boḥan*, ed. Haberman (Tel Aviv, 1956), p. 20.

seems unlikely that R. Asher borrowed the term from him.⁷⁵ The peculiar and apparently unprecedented term *'olam ha-mahapekhab we-ha-temurah* seems to reflect R. Asher's predilection for the "human side" of existence – notably justice – over cosmology: he decided (I submit) to replace "world of generation and corruption" with a term that alludes not to the regular and balanced changes of natural phenomena, but rather to the turmoil and inconstancy of human destiny in the "lower world." Inspired by Judah Ibn Tibbon's works he used a substantive that he believed would better reflect his meaning.⁷⁶

- *'Olam ha-mishpaṭ we-ha-ṣedeq* (= the World of Judgment and Justice). This term, too, is not known from elsewhere. It seems to me that R. Asher coined it from the term *'olam ha-gemul*, which appears in Judah Ibn Tibbon's translation of Sa'adyah Gaon's *Beliefs and Opinions* as a synonym for what Sa'adyah calls "the World to Come," in which God will repay (*g.m.l.*) each person according to his or her deeds.⁷⁷ R. Asher may have replaced *ha-gemul* with the equivalent *ha-mishpaṭ we-ha-ṣedeq* because the verb *g.m.l.* 'repay' can connote both reward and punishment;⁷⁸ in a context where it was important to convey only the positive meaning he deemed it better to use the unequivocal and better-known *mishpaṭ wa-ṣedeq*, found in the Bible (Ps. 119:121; Eccles. 5:7; see also Ps. 89:15 and 97:2; Prov. 1:3 and 2:9).⁷⁹ Another consideration may have been that the hendiadys made this expression more rhetorically effective. We will see that, unlike Sa'adyah's *'olam ha-gemul*, R. Asher's fourth "world" is an eschatological inner-worldly (rather than transcendent) notion, referring to a state of the world to be brought about by God in the future, although R. Asher puts the emphasis on man's spiritual progress, not on the future state of the world as such (see below).
- *'Olam ha-menuḥah* (= the World of Repose). Although not strictly philosophical, this term too was adapted from Judah Ibn Tibbon. It is found in his translations of *Duties of the Hearts* (3:3), where it is identified with the World to Come (see also 8:3 [25]: *meqom ha-menuḥah* [= the place of repose]), and of the *Kuzari* (5:10), where it is identified with the

75. R. Asher seems not to use any other term of Bar Ḥiyya and evinces no familiarity with any of his ideas.

76. Similarly and out of similar considerations, Baḥyah ben Asher refers to "this world" as *'olam ha-ṣa'ar we-ha-mebumah* (= the world of sorrow and tumult). See *Kitvey Rabbenu Baḥyah*, p. 57.

77. *Beliefs and Opinions*, Treatises 5 and 7; also in Abraham Ibn Ezra's Commentary on Eccl. 9:8.

78. See, e.g., the contemporary (1161) lexicon by Solomon Parḥon, *Maḥberet he-'arukh*, ed. Salomon Gottlieb Stern (Pressburg, 1844), f. 13a.

79. See Idel, "Qeṭa'," p. 80.

world of the angels (*i.e.*, of the separate intellects), in which the soul attains repose.⁸⁰ R. Asher's lexical choice may have been inspired by the rabbinic saying that the souls of the Righteous are under the Throne of Glory, whereas the soul of the wicked "wanders in the world and finds no repose [*we-ein lah menuḥab*]," which is quoted by Sa'adyah Gaon (*Beliefs and Opinions*, Treatise 6, in fine).⁸¹ It is clearly intended as the counterpoise of the world of turmoil and change.

R. Asher, we see, borrowed a number of terms from the new non-talmudic Hebrew literature of his time. He clearly was familiar with at least some of it: most if not all of Judah Ibn Tibbon's Hebrew translations of Judeo-Arabic works, and works by Abraham Ibn Ezra. The certainty that he was acquainted with these writings allows us to continue another step forward and conclude that where he uses terms that parallel established terms but are distinct from them he did so deliberately: this is clearest with "World of turmoil and change," but applies equally to "World of Judgment and Justice" and "World of Repose." Far from being a passive recipient of philosophical knowledge, R. Asher adopted what he found in the philosophical writings and adapted it to suit his own needs and purposes.

2. R. Asher's Five Worlds

The most intriguing idea in R. Asher's text is that of the different "worlds." In text III_A R. Asher lists five worlds, for which, as M. Idel noted,⁸² there is no earlier known source:

1. The "small world," identified with the womb, with the rationale that investigation begins at the beginning of coming-to-be.
2. The "great world," identified with the world of the spheres; it is associated with the perception that human beings receive power from the stars when they are born.
3. The World of Wisdom, associated with man's unique capacity to acquire knowledge allowing him to know God. It is also the world from which

80. See also Idel, "Sarid," pp. 80, 84 n. 37. Another of Judah Ibn Tibbon's translations, that of Sa'adyah Gaon's *Beliefs and Opinions* (Treatise 10), has a section entitled *Sha'ar ha-menuḥab* (= Gate of Repose), but the repose seems to be inner-worldly, unlike the meaning it is given in R. Asher's text.

81. The source of this saying is BT Shabbat 152b, with a few parallels. See also R. David Qimḥi's commentary on 1 Samuel 25:29; Qimḥi was a young contemporary of R. Asher and lived in Narbonne.

82. Idel, "Sarid," pp. 79-80. R. Asher's list of five worlds was embraced by Jacob Sikily, who, in his description of "the secret of man's formation, body and soul," uses their names as section titles, quoting R. Asher's characterization of each; see *Torat ha-minḥab*, pp. 554-557.

man's soul (if it exerts itself) receives supernal power that permits him to live without material nourishment.

4. The World of Judgment and Justice, associated with reward and punishment.
5. The World of the Souls and the World of Repose, associated with the eternal existence of the souls of the just after death.

A second enumeration is found in text III_B :

- a. The World of Intellect, identified with the Throne of Glory.
- b. The world of the spheres.
- c. The world of turmoil and change.

It seems quite clear that the three worlds of III_B correspond (in reverse order) to the first three of III_A : 1=c ; 2=b ; and 3=a. These are (roughly) the classic "worlds" of medieval cosmology, although their designations here are somewhat different from those usual in philosophical literature. This identification must be qualified, however. The subject of III_A is man's spiritual development, and R. Asher mentions the three first worlds only because and inasmuch they are the first three objects of man's knowledge (more on this below). By contrast, in III_B R. Asher is dealing not with intellectual development, but with cosmology ; hence his list includes only the three cosmological worlds. This should be borne in mind when we now consider the various "worlds" in turn.

According to R. Asher, the first step in acquiring wisdom is the inquiry into the three cosmological worlds : the sublunar material world, the supralunar material world, and the world of the separate intellects.⁸³ The topological arrangement, from lowest to highest, is at the same time an ontological ordering (by nobility) : the celestial realm rules over the mundane realm and the World of Wisdom (= Intellect) is "above" them all (III_A in fine). This is also the temporal order of man's apprenticeship as construed by R. Asher. This would seem to be the original core of R. Asher's doctrine : he creatively identified the three first "worlds" of talmudic passage II_A – the womb, the celestial realm ("constellations"), and "wisdom" – with the three worlds of philosophy. The philosophical notion that the World of Intellect (=Wisdom) is the abode of the human soul, to which it returns after death, felicitously allowed him to identify it with the Throne of Glory, "under" which (according to the aggadic passage in BT Shabbat 152b) the souls of the Righteous are preserved.⁸⁴

To complete his exegesis, R. Asher now had to account for the two remaining "worlds" alluded to in the talmudic passage, which have no obvious parallel in philosophy. To pursue his interpretation consistently, he needed to construe them as the last two steps in man's spiritual development,

83. R. Asher does not use the terms "sublunar," "supralunar," and "separate," however.

84. On the identification of the Throne of Glory with the Sphere of Intellect see Idel, "Qeṭa'," p. 150, n. 10.

which (according to the talmudic passage) are related to the fate of the wicked and to death. R. Asher thus identified the next (fourth) step in man's spiritual progress with witnessing the eventual downfall of the wicked, when God brings it about. Note that this refers explicitly to a future occurrence that will take place "in *this* world"; *i.e.*, it is not related to the fate of the soul after death. (As noted, this is at variance with Sa'adyah's notion, which presumably was R. Asher's point of departure.) R. Asher refers to this fourth step in man's spiritual development as "the World of Judgment and Justice." The fifth and last step in the acquisition of wisdom consists in looking at what happens after death: man discovers that the souls of the righteous are not extinguished; rather, they are preserved eternally, "under the Throne of Glory," *i.e.*, in the Sphere of Intellect. This entails the consequence that, for the righteous, "death is [eternal] life." R. Asher refers to this as the "World of the Souls and the World of Repose."

The names of the last two "worlds" are misleading, however, and, moreover, the statements concerning the World of the Souls and the World of Repose seem to be at variance with the idea that the souls emanate from, and (after death) return to, the Sphere of Intellect or the Throne of Glory (= the third world). In fact, there is no inconsistency between the two notions. R. Asher's fifth "world" is the fifth and ultimate level of cognition and has nothing to do with where the souls of the righteous are before and after their sojourn in the lower world. The seeming contradiction results from the imprecise use of language. When R. Asher discussed the three first worlds, he used their names to refer equivocally both to the worlds themselves as posited in philosophy *and* to the knowledge man acquired of them, and this ambiguity worked nicely. When he now extends this scheme to the last two worlds of the talmudic passage, he introduces the appellations "World of Judgment and Justice" and "World of the Souls and the World of Repose," a terminology that is misleading inasmuch as it suggests two worlds that "exist" in the same sense as the cosmological ones, whereas they designate two steps in man's intellectual progress.⁸⁵

The central thread of the entire interpretation is thus the desire to identify the five steps of man's intellectual-spiritual progress, described in the talmudic passage, with the "ascent" from one "world" to the next. This comes to the fore in particular in R. Asher's statement that the *tanna* "followed the order of the [five] worlds, and not the order of the biblical passages." The description of the fourth "world" as "the *first* fruit of wisdom" and of the fifth as "the *ultimate* luxury of wisdom" confirms that in R. Asher's view these last two steps are the outcome of the first three stages.⁸⁶ The notions that he associates

85. For a different view of R. Asher's five- and three-fold lists of worlds see Idel, "Qeṭa'," pp. 79-81.

86. See similarly Idel, "Qeṭa'," p. 80.

with the three cosmological “worlds” have their roots in Neoplatonic philosophy and correspond roughly to our understanding of a “world” in medieval thought. By contrast, his notions of the last two “worlds” have no basis in philosophy and the term “world” is used only very loosely, introduced only in order to fit the talmudic text. Borrowing an imaginative expression from R. Baḥya ben Asher, we may formulate the gist of the notion of “world” here by saying that R. Asher viewed the soul as “going through” the five worlds.⁸⁷

R. Asher’s concepts are indeed fuzzy and should not be pressed too hard. The talmudic scholar accommodated some philosophical ideas, notions, and terms, but without interiorizing the philosophical-rationalist mode of argument. He used as he saw fit whatever bits and pieces he absorbed from philosophy, creating a sort of midrash that integrated new materials. Consequently, his handling of these ideas does not display the conceptual rigor we expect from trained philosophers. Now this is in keeping with what we know of R. Asher as an ambivalent student of philosophy. As mentioned briefly before, when Judah Ibn Tibbon was in the process of preparing his first translation, that of Baḥya Ibn Paqudah’s *Duties of the Hearts*, he “read” it with (*i.e.*, taught it to) a group of scholars including his patrons, R. Meshullam and his son R. Asher. But (as it so often happens) father and son had different preferences and agendas. From a letter that Judah Ibn Tibbon wrote to R. Asher in 1161, we know that the latter quickly became weary of Ibn Paqudah’s difficult book: he complained that it was too longwinded and asked Judah Ibn Tibbon to interrupt the translation (commissioned by his father), and translate instead a shorter, more facile and more popular book, bearing on ethics, that Judah Ibn Tibbon had mentioned to him (namely Solomon Ibn Gabirol’s *Improvement of the Qualities of the Soul*).⁸⁸ Contrary to his father, the ascetic R. Asher had a very limited interest in theoretical philosophy and attached greater importance to studying the “[Holy] Book [*i.e.*, the Talmud] day and night.”⁸⁹ It is therefore understandable that he did not assimilate philosophical notions in any depth, although he was among the first in Provence to recognize that knowledge derives not only from Tradition and Scripture, but also from reason. R. Asher can thus be described as an amateur of Neoplatonic philosophy in both senses of the word: he was fond of some ideas he gleaned from it and which he found useful, but he did not make its study into an important concern and did not master any of it. It is noteworthy that although R. Asher followed his father in the recognition that the Judeo-Arabic texts were valuable, he apparently

87. *Shalosh 'olamot holefot 'al ha-neshamah*. See *Kitvey Rabbenu Baḥyah*, p. 57. In this passage Baḥyah does not quote R. Asher’s commentary, but he is clearly inspired by it. Out of his own considerations, Baḥyah refers to only three “worlds.”

88. Freudenthal, “Transfert culturel” and “Goremim u-meni'im.”

89. See above, p. 159.

attached lesser importance to them. His brother, R. Aaron b. Meshullam, incidentally, also differed from their father, albeit in the opposite direction. Whereas R. Meshullam was interested in pietistic-ascetic thought, R. Aaron became a fierce defender of Maimonides when the latter's supposed views (on resurrection) were attacked for the first time in Europe.⁹⁰

The above probe into R. Asher's very partial accommodation of philosophical ideas and their re-use for his own purposes, and especially our findings concerning his vocabulary, make it quite clear, it seems to me, that the commentary on Tractate Berakhot does not betray the slightest contact with Maimonides' philosophical writings (*Book of Knowledge*, let alone *The Guide of the Perplexed*). This question, upon which the dating of R. Asher's commentary hinges, has been a matter of debate. Our text was excerpted by R. Samuel b. Mordecai in a letter he wrote in the second quarter of the thirteenth century: his purpose was to prove to his correspondent (R. Yequti'el ha-Kohen) that R. Asher acknowledged the need to interpret some biblical verses allegorically, *i.e.*, that he held the same ideas as Maimonides, although he "had not seen the Master's books and it is his own thinking that led him to interpret [Scripture] rationalistically, rather than literally."⁹¹ The reliability of this statement has been called into question by I. Ta-Shma, who discovered that a halakhic text ascribed to R. Asher contains a quotation from Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah*: he concluded that R. Asher, having lived to see that Maimonidean work (including the philosophical *Book of Knowledge*), was familiar with it when he wrote his commentary on Berakhot.⁹² Ta-Shma's claim seems to me unfounded, however: there is no trace of a familiarity with Maimonides' philosophical ideas or vocabulary in this commentary.⁹³ We must conclude that the latter was written earlier than R. Asher's halakhic text containing the quotation from Maimonides. This seems perfectly plausible. It must be conceded that R. Asher's commentary on Berakhot is late, because, as we saw, it evinces familiarity with Judah Ibn Tibbon's Hebrew translations, including the last of them, namely, Sa'adyah Ga'on's *Beliefs and Opinions*, completed in 1186. Maimonides' *Mishneh Torah* reached the Midi in 1193, but it certainly was not available to all scholars immediately. R. Asher would thus seem to have written the commentary on Berakhot after 1186,

90. See, *e.g.*, Bernard Septimus, *Hispano-Jewish Culture in Transition. The Career and Controversies of Ramah* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982), pp. 43-48.

91. Idel, "Sarid," 149 (see also pp. 151-152). The crucial sentence in R. Asher's text is the one explaining that when Scripture applies the verb "see" to God it has the same meaning as in the verse "my heart saw much wisdom and knowledge" (Eccl. 1:16), both referring to knowing. The same verse from the Ecclesiastes is quoted by Maimonides, too, to argue similarly that "see" denotes "intellectual perception" (*Guide* 1:4). See also n. 48 above.

92. Ta-Shma, *Rabbi Zerachyah ha-Levi*, pp.164-165; *idem*, *Ha-Sifrut ha-parshanit la Talmud*, 2:147, 149.

93. See again n. 48 above.

but before he saw the *Mishneh Torah*, some time after 1193.⁹⁴ Although R. Asher's intellectual career had begun by the late 1150s, there is no reason why he should not have been active some 35 or 40 years later. I conclude that R. Samuel b. Mordecai was essentially right when he wrote that R. Asher "had not seen the Master's [= Maimonides'] books," although we should now add the proviso "when writing his commentary on Berakhot."

3. R. Asher's Philosophical Ideas

Finally, we may take note of the following specific points in R. Asher's belief system :

A. Cosmology and Psychology

1. R. Asher formulates a crude version of the theory of emanation : The cause of the four elements is the spheres ; the cause of the spheres is the Sphere of the Intellect (= World of Wisdom) ; the cause of the Sphere of the Intellect is the First Cause.
2. At his birth man receives powers from the stars and the spheres.
3. Man's soul is immaterial : it is a "spiritual simple substance, emanated from the power of the Sphere of Intellect," identified with the Throne of Glory. This is a "wise soul," through which man can know all things.
4. The spirit of beasts, by contrast, is material : it is composed of the four elements and returns to the earth after death. R. Asher is consistent in using different terms to denote the human soul [*neshamah*] and the spirit [*nefesh*] of beasts.
5. The Sphere of Intellect is therefore the divine abode of the human soul, to which it longs to return.
6. The godhead fills the entire world. Similarly, the soul fills the entire body. Man's soul and the godhead both remain pure although they are in contact with vile matter. This is so because they are not body, and filth adheres to body only.
7. Man's soul can exert itself so as to receive supernal power, which allows it to sustain the body without material nourishment. The source of this power is the World of Wisdom, *i.e.* the World of Intellect, the soul's original abode.
8. Because man is sustained by his soul, he stands upright and can look upward, to the soul's abode where it longs to return. The contrary holds of beasts, whose spirit is derived from "earth," *i.e.* from the four elements.
9. The souls of the Just are preserved under the Sphere of Intellect, which is the Throne of Glory.

⁹⁴. It is also possible that when the *Mishneh Torah* finally reached R. Asher he did not see the *Book of Knowledge*.

B. *Epistemology*

1. Man was created in order to know His Creator and to worship Him. To this end he received a wise soul, which allows him to “receive wisdom.” His goal on earth is thus to acquire wisdom so as to know God. Even the anatomy of the female human body (with the breasts in the chest) is determined by this end.
2. Not being a body, the godhead cannot be perceived by the senses. The deity can be apprehended only by the intellect, namely through His actions, and therefore not as He truly is.
3. Applied to God, verbs such as “He saw” must be understood as referring not to eyesight, but, metaphorically, to intellectual perception.
4. The acquisition of knowledge is gradual, “chamber within a chamber.” First, man successively acquires knowledge of the three cosmological realms: the lower world “of turmoil and change” (of human destiny); the celestial world; and the World of Intellect (= of Wisdom). Subsequently he recognizes also God’s Justice, as manifested in the fact that He judges the wicked, and finally His kindness, as manifested in the fact that the souls of the Just do not perish and are preserved eternally under the Throne of Glory. The two last steps are the “fruit” and the “delight” of wisdom. They are (maladroitly) referred to as “the World of Judgment and Justice” and “the World of the Souls and the World of Repose.”
5. Man’s wise soul thus progresses to acquire knowledge of “all things, lower and upper, nearby and far away, until its knowledge reaches the First Cause.”

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The classic and most influential attempt by a medieval Jewish thinker to bring together the Greco-Arabic philosophical tradition with the Jewish tradition is doubtless that of Maimonides. Ever since the publication of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, in the closing years of the twelfth century, readers have debated whether and to what extent it sought to “philosophize” Judaism. An analogous doubt cannot arise with respect to R. Asher. He belonged to the first generation of Provençal talmudists, who, while recognizing reason as a legitimate source of knowledge, completely subordinated philosophy to their exegetical needs. R. Asher used the Hebrew philosophical texts he knew as a sort of reservoir of notions, ideas and metaphors that he quarried unsystematically for hermeneutic purposes, twisting and modifying them according to the interpretive purpose at hand. In this very specific case, then, the question from which we set out, parallel to that raised by Jean Jolivet with respect to Christianity, receives an unequivocal answer: R. Asher certainly “Judaized” the philosophical notions that he embedded in this commentary on the Talmud.