INTERPRETING “THE RESTING OF THE SHEKHINAH”: EXEGETICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THE THEOLOGICAL DEBATE AMONG MAIMONIDES, NAHMANIDES, AND SEFER HA-HINNUKH

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Few subjects in Judaism are as central as the notion of God’s presence (shekhinah) dwelling in the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, a subject that has both captured the religious imagination and sparked rancorous theological debate. What does it mean to say that God “dwells” in the Temple? Judaism is famous for its assertion of divine incorporeality—or at least its refusal to limit God’s presence spatially. While this dilemma emerged acutely during the medieval period in which systematic theology reached its peak, it can be traced to biblical times in the words of King Solomon himself upon completion of the Holy Temple:

But will God really dwell on earth? Even the heavens to their utmost reaches cannot contain You, how much less this house that I have built? (I Kgs 8:27)

As common with many other issues of theological import, this dilemma became a dividing line between philosophically and kabbalistically oriented thinkers, a matter to which a good deal of recent scholarship has been devoted. In this paper I would like to open a new aspect of this fertile division within Jewish learning by exploring its exegetical

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1 This essay is based on a paper delivered at the conference on the Temple in Jerusalem (New York, May 2008) sponsored by the Yeshiva University Center for Israel Studies and organized by the Center’s director, Prof. Steven Fine. Biblical citations in this essay are from Tanakh: The Holy Scriptures: New Jewish Publication Society Translation (Philadelphia 1985). Unless otherwise indicated, translations from post-biblical Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic literature in this paper are my own. I am most grateful to my colleagues Prof. David Berger, Prof. Jonathan Dauber and Prof. Daniel Rynhold for their helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.

manifestations, i.e., how the opposing theological positions generated opposing interpretations of the biblical depictions of the “descent” of the shekhinah into the Tabernacle in the desert and its ultimate “resting place” in the Temple in Jerusalem. Their divergent theological conceptions and vocabularies notwithstanding, when speaking the language of textual analysis these two schools meet on common ground and engage in the sort of meaningful dialogue that characterizes the multi-faceted Jewish tradition of Bible interpretation.

We have chosen to focus primarily on two authors for this purpose: the Andalusian talmudist-philosopher Maimonides (1138–1204) and the Catalan talmudist-kabbalist Nahmanides (1194–1270). Our ability to make this comparison is facilitated by the fact that Nahmanides quite clearly responds in his Pentateuch commentary to positions taken by Maimonides. In order to construct the rejoinder that Maimonides might have formulated to respond to Nahmanides’ view, we will examine the position articulated in Sefer ha-Hinnukh, an anonymous work written in Barcelona soon after the time of Nahmanides, but still within his zone of influence.

Simply including Maimonides in a study of this sort makes an important statement that requires some elaboration, since we are treating him as an interpreter of Scripture alongside Nahmanides, who has long been known as a great Bible commentator. Maimonides, by contrast, is conventionally regarded as a talmudist and philosopher, but is usually excluded from the roster of great Bible exegetes such as Rashi (1040–1105), Abraham Ibn Ezra (1089–1164), David Kimhi (“Radak”; 1160–1235)—and Nahmanides. This exclusion can be attributed only partially to the fact that Maimonides did not pen Bible commentaries per se, since the interpretation of Scripture does play a central role in his philosophical work, The Guide of the Perplexed. Moreover, in all three of his major halakhic writings—the Mishnah Commentary, the Book of the Commandments and his comprehensive Code of Jewish Law, Mishneh Torah—Maimonides makes the text of the Bible a focus of his religious legal system. The fundamental distinction is often made,

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3 Leo Strauss, the highly influential—if controversial—scholar of Maimonidean thought, remarked that The Guide of the Perplexed “is...devoted above all to biblical exegesis”; see Leo Strauss, “How to Begin to Study the Guide of the Perplexed,” introduction to Moses Maimonides: The Guide of the Perplexed, trans. S. Pines (Chicago 1963), xiv.