CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

CREATION, TIME, AND BIBLICAL HERMENEUTICS IN EARLY MODERN JEWISH PHILOSOPHY

T.M. Rudavsky

Introduction

Tension between religion and science characterizes the very essence of Jewish philosophy. At every stage in Jewish thought, Jews have tried to accommodate non-Jewish theories and paradigms to a Scriptural based theology; these theories have included, for example, the philosophical cosmologies of Plato, of Aristotle, of Ptolemy, of Averroes, of Copernicus, or of contemporary astrophysics. This struggle between Athens and Jerusalem, between rational speculation and Torah based study, has been replayed in every generation. Situated always within the larger context of a majority culture, be it the Hellenistic world, the Islamic world, the world of Enlightened Europe, or most recent examples of modernity (and postmodernity), Jews have both rejected and adopted various aspects of these majority civilizations. For the People of the Book, it is the word of God, as reflected in Scripture, that has enjoyed canonical preeminence.

But if it is above all the content of Jewish texts that matters, where do these non-Judaic studies in general, and the study of science, in particular, fit into Jewish thought? And what do we do when the contents of secular study contravene those texts of traditional learning? These questions have reappeared throughout Jewish history and thought, from the works of Philo, to Rosenzweig, culminating with attempts in modern Jewish thought to accommodate Judaism and contemporary sciences.

This tension is poignantly described by Maimonides (1135–1204) in the introduction to his major philosophical work Moreh Nevukhim (Guide of the Perplexed). In this work, Maimonides applies Aristotelian principles of mathematics and logic to religious doctrines in such a way that his intended audience, those devout religious individuals who admire both science and law, could potentially assuage their intellectual “perplexities.” Maimonides clearly articulates his twofold purpose in writing this
comprehensive philosophical treatise: first, to explain the meanings of certain obscure, equivocal, or allegorical terms occurring in books of prophecy; and second, to allay the perplexities encountered by a religious person who has discovered “the sciences of the philosophers.” More specifically, Maimonides tells us that the purpose of the Guide is to guide such a “religious man for whom the validity of our Law has become established in his soul and has become actual in his belief” and at the same time has studied “the sciences of the philosophers and come to know what they signify.” Such an individual stands in a state of perplexity, not knowing whether to follow his intellect and “renounce the foundations of the Law,” or hold fast to his understanding of Scripture while “turning his back on it [intellect] and moving away from it.”¹ Maimonides places the Guide at the center of intellectual attempts to harmonize Jewish texts and beliefs with those “sciences of the philosophers” as reflected in the works of Plato, Aristotle, the Neoplatonists, and the Islamic Kalam writers.

Maimonides thus engages in extensive biblical hermeneutics, interpreting Scripture in light of Neoplatonist and Aristotelian cosmologies, in an attempt to reconcile disparate elements in Jewish belief and philosophy. The importance of the creation account found in Gen. 1–2 to Jewish belief is reiterated by subsequent thinkers, culminating with Franz Rosenzweig’s Star of Redemption, a work in which creation articulates a foundational element of Jewish belief. But like their Christian and Moslem counterparts, Jewish thinkers did not always agree upon what qualifies as an acceptable model of creation. Take, for example, the first word in Genesis—be-reishit, “in the beginning.” The very term be-reishit designates the fact that there was a beginning, i.e., temporality has been introduced if only in the weakest sense that this creative act occupies an instant of time.² And so any discussion of creation, of beginnings, already presupposes a temporal ontology. How to interpret Gen. 1:1, and what importance to place upon the terms “beginning,” “creation” and “God,” are issues addressed by Maimonides, and bequeathed to subsequent Jewish philosophers. In fact, we shall see that most Jewish philosophical discussions of

¹ See Maimonides 1963, 5ff for his introductory comments on how to read the Guide. Maimonides situates the work clearly within the context of hermeneutic interpretation of Scripture in light of the contemporary sciences of the day.

² Cf. Neher 1976, 50: “The primordial element is ‘time’ itself. Creation was manifested in the appearance of time. This time is entirely new. That is the significance of the verb bara.”