FROM MAIMONIDES TO SAMUEL IBN TIBBON:
INTERPRETING JUDAISM AS A
PHILOSOPHICAL RELIGION

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In several respects, *The Guide of the Perplexed* stood at the center of Samuel ibn Tibbon’s philosophical work. Although he is best known as the *Guide’s* translator, the translation was only one aspect of his comprehensive effort to disseminate Maimonides’ thought. Ibn Tibbon’s role in this process is best described as that of a mediator between cultures who paved the way for the reception of Maimonides’ writings in the Jewish communities of Christian Europe, that is, in a cultural setting very different from the Judeo-Arabic context in which they had been composed. We can perhaps better appreciate the scope of Ibn Tibbon’s contribution if we imagine a contemporary Israeli thinker who sets out to introduce the work of Emanuel Levinas to yeshiva students in Jerusalem’s ultra-orthodox neighborhood, *Me’ah She’arim*. Were he merely to translate Levinas into Hebrew or Yiddish, he would most certainly fail to achieve his objective. In addition to the translation, he would have to clarify Levinas’ philosophical terminology, explain what phenomenology means in the work of Husserl and Heidegger which

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served as the point of departure for Levinas’ thought, and interpret
his ideas in light of the intellectual debates in France in which he took
part. In other words, the mediator must create the conditions allowing
for Levinas’ work to be understood in a cultural context that has few
things in common with the one in which it took shape. In a similar way
one can describe Ibn Tibbon’s task at the beginning of the thirteenth
century. The challenge he faced was to render intelligible a book, deeply
rooted in the tradition of Greco-Arabic philosophy, to the sages of
southern France, who represented an audience by and large unfamiliar
with the notions and sources of this tradition. Ibn Tibbon alludes to
this situation in the preface to his translation of the Guide, describing it
as a work that “encompasses many sublime sciences, hidden from the
eyes of most, if not all, of our people in this part of the world, for they
do not devote themselves [to their study], and [these sciences] are not
found amongst them” (118). Similar comments appear in the preface
to Perush ha-Millim ha-Ẓarot [Explanation of Unusual Terms], where Ibn
Tibbon explains that he composed the philosophical-scientific glossary
for the Guide because of “the shortcomings of our language and the
absence of works on the demonstrative sciences among our people, ”
a situation in which he fears “most readers […] will not understand”
his translation. It is not surprising, therefore, that Ibn Tibbon, in addi-
tion to translating the Guide, also explained its technical terminology,
interpreted it, and became its first teacher. In doing so, he laid the
basis for the reception of the Guide as the foundational work of Jewish
philosophy from the beginning of the thirteenth century to Spinoza,
who in important ways was indebted to the medieval Maimonidean
tradition, but also criticized some of its fundamental presuppositions.5

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3 See the account of Maimonides’ sources in S. Pines’ introduction to his English
4 Ed. by Y. Even Shmuel in his edition of the Guide mentioned above (no. 1), p. 11
[henceforth: PM]. Compare already the comments of Ibn Tibbon’s father, Judah,
in his “Preface” to the Heb. trans. of Bahya ibn Paquda’s Duties of the Heart, ed.
A. Zifroni, Jerusalem, 1927–28, p. 2. Ibn Tibbon’s situation was similar to that of other
translators who found themselves in between two cultures, such as Cicero, Ishāq b.
Ḥunayn, or Gerard of Cremona. See, for example, the remarks of Cicero, like Ibn
Tibbon a philosopher, translator, and cultural mediator, in De Natura Deorum I, 4 and
De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum I, 2–4.
5 Spinoza studied the Guide in the Venice edition (1551) of Ibn Tibbon’s translation
that included the traditional medieval commentaries. See the description of that edi-
and Translations,” in R. Dan ed., Occident and Orient, Budapest and Leiden, 1988,