Divine Immanence in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*

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I. Introduction

To the extent that one can speak of a uniform concept of the divine in the Bible, the biblical God is almost never presented as immanent in Creation. Although no place on earth is beyond the reach of God's will and might, He Himself is considered to be apart, supreme. In six days He created each and every detail of the universe and laid the foundations for the laws of nature, and He Himself may violate those laws by performing miracles — but He does so in a heteronomous manner, separate and distant. That same God who "keep[s] them all alive" (Nehemiah 9: 6) does not sustain beings as an innate cause or mover, but as the ruler of Creation, capable of annihilating it at will. In this respect the biblical concept of the divine is quite distinct from the Near Eastern nature gods, which are immanent in the natural world. The midrashic-aggadic tradition of the Talmud, while not presenting a systematic theology, introduces no essential changes: God still operates in a heavenly context, served by a host of angels and emissaries; He Himself, however, remains transcendent. Even the God of the early exponents of Merkabah mysticism, seated on the Throne of Glory among His angels in the supernal Hekhal, or the God of the Shi'ur Qomah, is deemed to be entirely apart from existence in general. Of the immanent conception of divinity1 one finds, therefore, no real, systematic trace in biblical, tannaitic or talmudic literature.

* I am indebted to Professor Herbert A. Davidson, who offered several important and profound comments on this article.

1 The notion of divine immanence has many meanings. For our present purpose, I define immanence as the involvement of a divine element in the world and in each and every being; this divine element is present in every existent, bringing it into being or moving it. This divine involvement is not an isolated event in time, like creatio ex nihilo, or like the cause-effect relationship, which is sev-
A change set in with the advent of systematic Jewish philosophy. Jewish philosophising began in the tenth century, under the influence of Muslim theology (kalam) in general and Mu'tazilism in particular, in the thought of R. Sa'adya Gaon. Sa'adya's teachings, however, do not essentially depart from their twofold sources: like the Muslim theologians, who derived their transcendent God-idea from the Qur'an, and like the talmudic sources, Sa'adya too adheres to the principle of divine transcendence. Nevertheless, within Sa'adya's own lifetime a certain shift was discernible: the absolute quality of divine otherness was shaken as Neoplatonic ideas began to infiltrate Jewish philosophical literature, under the influence of Muslim philosophers such as al-Kindi, al-Farabi and al-Sijistani. The shift is clearly evident in the work of Isaac Israeli, Sa'adya's elder contemporary. Neoplatonism teaches that the world came into being through a process of emanation from the Divine: every being was emanated from God, whether directly (the Intellect, nous) or by hypostases. Divine supremacy receives an added dimension, that of emanation, which links it firmly to the emerging world. This nexus may well have been one of the reasons for the Neoplatonists' efforts to posit an absolute distance between the “One” and the world, a radical difference between God and Creation. However, divine transcendence cannot obscure the fact that the One is the basis for all existence, through the process of emanation. In addition, the Neoplatonists viewed the world as a uniform entity, in mutual sympathy with all its parts. Such concepts could not but impart a distinctly immanent tinge to the concept of the divine. From then on, Neoplatonism was to play a central role in Jewish philosophy, up to and including the twelfth century (Abraham bar Hiya, Solomon ibn Gabirol, Abraham ibn Ezra, etc.).

Two developments in Muslim philosophy were instrumental in shaping the idea of divine immanence in Jewish thought:

(1) Avicenna's restriction of immanence. As we have pointed out, Neoplatonism considerably narrows the gap between God and the world. The most extreme and clearly defined notions of divine immanence appear in pantheism and panentheism. See, e.g., Ch. Hartshorne, *The Divine Reality* (New Haven and London, 1948), pp. 89-90; R. Inge, *Christian Mysticism* (New York, 1956), pp. 117-121. Some interpretations view immanence also as God's nearness to the world and His presence within it (like the midrashic concept of shekhinah). This interpretation is less extreme than my definition, as it does not presume an innate divine involvement in the existence of every being, but rather takes the concept of divine providence to its logical extreme. Such an interpretation of immanence may be traced in the Bible and the midrashic literature. See E.E. Urbach, *The Sages — Their Concepts and Beliefs*, translated by I. Abrahams (Jerusalem, 1975), pp. 37-65. Cf. G. Scholem, *Basic Chapters in Understanding the Kabbalah and its Symbols* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem, 1981), pp. 259-274.