

Introduction

Joseph Ibn Kaspi (1280–1345) was one of the most enigmatic Jewish thinkers of the Medieval period.¹ He was a philosopher, biblical commentator, and grammarian, who wrote commentaries on Moses Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*, wrote commentaries on almost the entire Hebrew Bible, constructed a dictionary of Hebrew roots, wrote summaries of Aristotelian logic and even some of his own theological works. He considered himself a philosophic follower of Maimonides and exegetic follower of Abraham Ibn Ezra, though he was willing to criticize the conclusions of both.² Ultimately, the two primary works that he looked to for wisdom are the Hebrew Bible and Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* saying that the "*Guide* is the most perfect work written after the Bible that revealed in hints all the secrets of the Bible."³ On a personal level, we know that Ibn Kaspi was married and had two sons and perhaps a daughter⁴ and that his oldest grandson converted to Christianity. Ibn Kaspi was a man with strong opinions, far from politically correct. He was cynical and openly critical of other individuals and groups: he describes the masses as "horses and mules,"⁵ derides the appearance and ways of speaking of local Rabbis⁶ and blames women for having lower intelligence.⁷ Ibn Kaspi was also a frequent traveler, seemingly never staying too long in one place, traveling to Egypt to meet the great-grandson of Maimonides and later traveling around to many cities in Southern France and Northern Spain. It is not fully certain what Ibn Kaspi's true motivation was for moving around so much. Scholars have proposed multiple reasons, which all may be true and that arise from varying statements in his writings, including marriage troubles, escaping Christian persecution, visiting his children, disputes with fellow Jewish scholars, and meeting likeminded philosophical colleagues.⁸

Writings

Ibn Kaspi's diverse writings are mostly unified through the adjective "silver" (*keseḥ*) in the title of each book, using different biblical items made of silver to serve in each title. He lists these all collectively in a work describing all of his other writings entitled *Qevuṣat Keseḥ (Collection of Silver)*. The list of his works is as following (not in the order present there):⁹

- 'Adnei Keseḥ (Sockets of Silver) or *Sefer ha-Mashal*, Commentary on the prophetic books of the Bible
- 'Amudei Keseḥ (Posts of Silver), Exoteric commentary on the *Guide of the Perplexed*
- Gelilei Keseḥ (Rods of Silver), Commentary on the Book of Esther
- Gevia Keseḥ (Goblet of Silver), Discussion of esoteric topics in the Bible
- Ḥagurat Keseḥ (Girdle of Silver), Commentary on the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Chronicles
- Ḥaṣoṣrot Keseḥ (Trumpets of Silver), Commentary on the Book of Ecclesiastes
- Kapot Keseḥ (Ladles of Silver), Commentaries on the books of Ruth and Lamentations
- Keforei Keseḥ (Bowls of Silver), Critique of earlier Bible commentaries, lost
- Maskiyot Keseḥ (Settings of Silver), Esoteric commentary on the *Guide of the Perplexed*
- Maṣref la-Keseḥ (Refining the Silver), Systematic commentary on the Pentateuch
- Mazmerot Keseḥ (Snuffers of Silver), Commentary on the Book of Psalms, lost
- Menorat Keseḥ (Candlestick of Silver), Explanation of the Account of the Chariot in the Pentateuch, and in the books of Ezekiel, Isaiah, and Zechariah
- Miṭot Keseḥ (Beds of Silver), Intentions of each biblical book from Genesis to Chronicles, lost
- Mizraq/Mizraḳei Keseḥ¹⁰ (Basin/Basins of Silver), Explanation of the Account of the Beginning, lost

- Nequdot Kesef* (Studs of Silver), Explanation of blessings and curses in Bible, lost
- Parashat Kesef* (Sum of Silver), Supercommentary on Ibn Ezra's *Commentary on the Pentateuch*
- Qe'arot Kesef* (Bowls of Silver), Commentary on the Book of Daniel, lost
- Retuqot Kesef* (Chains of Silver), Principles of the Hebrew language
- Sharshot Kesef* (Silver Roots), Dictionary of Hebrew roots
- Shulḥan Kesef* (Table of Silver), Five exegetical and theological essays
- Tam ha-Kesef* (Silver is Finished), Eight theological essays
- Terumat Kesef* (Gift of Silver), Summary of Averroes' *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* and Plato's *Republic*
- Tirat Kesef* (Turrets of Silver) or *Sefer ha-Sod*, Brief commentary on the Pentateuch
- Ṣeror ha-Kesef* (Bag of Silver), Brief treatise on logic

Assigning every work a title with the noun *kesef*, Hebrew for silver, appears at first to merely add a personal signature to each title since the name Kaspi seemingly refers to the place from which his family originated, Argentière, in which *argent* is French for silver.¹¹ But the connection between the works is stronger than that as the specific items he chooses all thematically hint to his larger project.

One metaphor that Ibn Kaspi employs, through his choice of silver objects in his titles, is to portray himself as the new biblical Joseph who, like his predecessor, was sold into slavery for twenty pieces of silver.¹² Not literally, but metaphorically, in Ibn Kaspi's case. The twenty pieces of silver represent, for Ibn Kaspi, his twenty different writings. Perhaps Ibn Kaspi wants the reader to imagine that just as the brothers received a gift as a result of forcefully removing Joseph from his home and land, Ibn Kaspi's own (possibly forced) departure from his home and land forced him to compose writings that are an intellectual gift to his fellow Jewish brethren. One can extend the analogy to specific titles of works. The silver goblet (*gevia ha-kesef*) that Joseph placed in Benjamin's sack to test his brothers, is the title of the work that engages with the secrets in the Bible that are often missed.¹³ The brothers did

not notice that Joseph secretly placed the valuable goblet inside the sack and they required Joseph to reveal its presence, so similarly, the philosophic student did not notice the secrets there and require Ibn Kaspi to reveal the valuable secrets hidden inside the Bible that his “brethren” have missed. Ibn Kaspi continues this analogy by naming his summary on logic, the bag of silver (*şeror ha-kesef*), referring to the bag of silver that Joseph secretly gives to his brothers after accusing them of being spies and demanding they return to Egypt with their youngest brother to prove their innocence.¹⁴ Like Joseph who gave his brothers a secret gift for their own benefit leading them to wonder about the source of this reward, Ibn Kaspi’s summary on logic is a gift to his own people in order to give them the tool for inquiry. Another example is in Joseph’s wise prediction that there will be a famine and, as a solution, he collects all the money in Egypt, so that he can purchase enough food to store and redistribute slowly and equally over the years of the famine. This future period of the famine is a time when the money is spent (*va-yitom ha-kesef* from Genesis 47:15) and thus Ibn Kaspi refers to his work *Tam ha-Kesef* as dealing with the vicissitudes of the world and predicting the future. He discusses there the cause of the destruction of the First and Second Temple and the ability to predict the building of a future Third Temple according to his theory about the vicissitudes of history.¹⁵

Another metaphor employed by Ibn Kaspi in titling his works objects of silver is to portray them all as the lost pieces of silver from the tabernacle and the temple. Ibn Kaspi follows Maimonides here in that one of the goals of the Bible is to liberate the Jewish people from the sacrificial worship in order to achieve true knowledge of God, where the sacrificial laws in the Bible are merely a temporary concession to the Israelite immersion in Egyptian religion.¹⁶ Ibn Kaspi imagines his Maimonidean project not as simply rejecting the physical tabernacle or the temple that was destroyed, but instead to construct a “tabernacle or temple of the mind” following the structure laid out in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁷ He employs the biblical phrases that are used to describe their construction in referring to his project of writing different works. The purpose of these silver objects is to “minister in the holy place”¹⁸ using the language of the priests’ duty in the tabernacle and the temple¹⁹ and afterwards says that “I have surely built a house”²⁰ quoting Solomon upon completing the temple.²¹ The external pieces of the tabernacle, the silver sockets²² and silver posts,²³ are the titles of the commentary on the

prophets, 'Adnei Kesef, and exoteric commentary on the *Guide*, 'Amudei Kesef, while the internal objects inside the tabernacle, the silver table²⁴ and the silver menorah,²⁵ represent the a deeper explanation of the earlier works dealing with the meaning of the Hebrew language, prophecy, and miracles in *Shulḥan Kesef* and the divine chariot in *Menorat Kesef*. These vessels are described by Ibn Kaspi to be “vessels of different kinds,”²⁶ which according to the rabbinic tradition refers to the vessels of the temple that were taken into exile by the Babylonians and located at Ahasuerus' palace (and thus when the Book of Esther is chanted in synagogue, for those few words in Esther 1:7, the notes of mourning are used unlike the upbeat cantillation of Esther).²⁷ In employing this image, Ibn Kaspi boldly sees his own writings as symbolically reconstructing the vessels of the temple that were lost in exile!

Modern Scholarship on Ibn Kaspi's Philosophy of History

The modern scholarship on Ibn Kaspi has mostly rejected the possibility that he is an independent thinker, portraying him instead as a popularizer of the ideas of Maimonides and medieval Aristotelian thought.²⁸ Nineteenth-century *Wissenschaft* scholars, such as Heinrich Gross, Ernest Renan, and Moritz Steinschneider, gave short historical bibliographies of his life and works, but did not delve deeply into his thought.²⁹ Early twentieth-century histories of medieval Jewish philosophy, such as Isaac Husik's *A History of Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (1916) and Julius Guttmann's *Philosophies of Judaism* (1933), mention Ibn Kaspi only in passing.³⁰ More recent histories, such as Colette Sirat's *A History of Jewish Philosophy in the Middle Ages* (1985) and Eliezer Schweid's *The Classic Jewish Philosophers* (2004) have made efforts to expand the canon, though they, in the end, come to the same conclusion as the earlier historians.³¹ Hannah Kasher proposes that the reason Ibn Kaspi's thought has not received the attention of other medieval Jewish thinkers is a result of the genre of his writings. He wrote mostly philosophic biblical commentaries and was too philosophic compared to other exegetes and too exegetical compared to other philosophers. She suggests that he was a “philosopher among commentators and a commentator among philosophers.” Furthermore, he did not write an independent philosophical work and did not engage in halakhic writing, which differentiated him from both Levi

Gersonides and Hasdai Crescas who did both and thus achieved greater prominence and, as a result, had a larger historical impact.³²

This book will explore the originality of Ibn Kaspi's thought within medieval Jewish thought in the realm of the philosophy of history.³³ The philosophy of history asks questions such as: are there patterns through the study of the human past such as progress or cycles? Or is the past inherently irregular and beyond models? What roles do the individual or groups have in larger trends in history and what type of individual or group can have an effect? Is history shaped by the most powerful agents? What does it mean to know and write history? For Ibn Kaspi, there is a unique philosophy of history in the Hebrew Bible and his explication of it is a central focus of his philosophical and exegetical thought. He does not engage with these questions in a single work. His comments are scattered in hints throughout his different writings, in some places more explicitly than in others.

In reconstructing this argument across Ibn Kaspi's many writings, I am indebted to the two articles to investigate his approach to the philosophy of history: Shlomo Pines' "On the Probability of the Re-Establishment of a Jewish State According to Ibn Kaspi and Spinoza" (1963) and Isadore Twersky's "Joseph Ibn Kaspi: Portrait of a Medieval Jewish Intellectual" (1979).³⁴ Both argue that Ibn Kaspi engages with history in reading the biblical text in a way that is almost unprecedented in medieval Jewish thought and exegesis. Pines analyzes Ibn Kaspi's view in *Tam ha-Kesef* that Jews will return to the Land of Israel at some point in the future. While many German scholars read this as a proto-Zionist statement, Pines clearly differentiates Ibn Kaspi from early-Zionist writers. He argues that, according to Ibn Kaspi, the return of the Jews to their ancestral land is not part of a deterministic plan of history, but merely an historical possibility that should not be ruled out. Sooner or later it may happen, just as all reasonable things may happen at some point in the future.³⁵ Twersky argues that Ibn Kaspi is an historicist who attempts to understand the meaning of many ambiguous statements in the Bible according to their place, time, and context. He does this through taking the Talmudic expression, "the Torah speaks in the language of the sons of man" which was employed by Maimonides to argue that the Bible has a non-anthropomorphic conception of God, but speaks of God in human terms as a concession to human weakness.³⁶ Ibn Kaspi expands its usage to explain the Bible's concession to errors, superstitions, popular conceptions, local mores, folk beliefs, and customs. Both Pines and

Twersky discovered important facets of Ibn Kaspi's historical thinking, but, I will argue, did not fully explore the depth and complexity of his philosophy of history.

Maimonides on History

There has been much discussion in the scholarly literature over whether Maimonides is concerned with history.³⁷ One could easily leap to the assumption that Maimonides has no interest in history from a dismissive comment he makes near the beginning of the *Guide* where he says

O you who engage in theoretical speculation using the first notions that may occur to you and come to your mind and who consider withal that you understand a book that is the guide of the first and last men while glancing through it as you would glance through a historical work or a piece of poetry.³⁸

Salo Baron famously concludes from this that Maimonides was consciously “unhistorical” in the sense of having a theory of how history operates, though unconsciously he referred to historical events throughout his writings.³⁹ I would argue, instead, that what Maimonides, like Aristotle, means by “history” here, is a collection of accidents where any meaning in it is purely *accidental*, as opposed to literature, which may describe a historical process and teach important lessons, if as Aristotle would say, the author is wise.⁴⁰ Like the Rabbis, who had no interest in history except when it could be turned into midrash (i.e., literature), Maimonides was interested in rewriting history in a mythopoetic or literary manner in order to turn it into a pedagogic medium, i.e., in order to turn it into a story with a moral.

Notwithstanding Maimonides' single disparaging comment on historical writing, he engages in a great deal of it, delineating throughout his writings the historical process of educating the Jews into understanding and accepting monotheism and eradicating idolatry through the introduction and development of Jewish law. An example of Maimonides' historical narrative is in the first chapter of his *Laws of Idolatry* where he describes monotheism as the basic human condition and Adam at the first monotheist. This knowledge that Adam obtained was

lost among Adam's descendants as they began to worship the stars as intermediaries to God, eventually transforming the intermediary into an end-in-itself and thus worshiped the stars as gods.⁴¹ This was challenged by the next great figure in history, Abraham, who Maimonides says rediscovered monotheism through his own philosophic reflection and was a charismatic teacher who went around teaching and debating others. He clashed with the dominant theology of Ur and thus became a wandering preacher building up tens of thousands of followers. But even Abraham's attempt to educate his progeny and followers was not enough to prevent the next generation from regressing back into idolatry during their period of captivity in Egypt. Moses' introduction and revelation of law represents the next and superior step for Maimonides in the process of educating monotheism and eradicating idolatry, as law has the ability to achieve goals for which knowledge is not sufficient. This is because most people are more interested in the bodily desires than in knowledge, but law can educate by forming habits and good opinions.⁴² Moses' law was able to prevent regression to idolatry and stimulate progress toward proper knowledge of God. Moses' law has enforced stability of religious practice over centuries whereas Abraham's educational community was not successfully transmitted between generations. Maimonides goes on to explain in the *Guide* that the purpose of many of the laws of the Torah are to eradicate idolatrous practices.⁴³ Maimonides' own project in the *Guide* is to take the next step in this historical progress toward a proper knowledge of God by eradicating anthropomorphism: the tendency to think of God of having a corporeal body, which Maimonides thinks is worse than idol worship.⁴⁴

Jewish law after Moses has its own internal logic and history of development, so central to Maimonides' project that he begins his *Mishneh Torah* with an introduction describing the historical development of Jewish law. He argues that Jewish law is built on the recognition of changing historical circumstances and the need to adapt it to new historical challenges.⁴⁵ An example is the writing down of the oral tradition in the Mishna by Rabbi Judah because of calamities facing Jews and the resulting dispersal of Jews throughout the world.⁴⁶ For Maimonides, the end point of this historical process is in the coming messianic age when the Messiah, as philosopher and political leader, will restore the full practice of Jewish law, regain Jewish sovereignty, and complete the process of educating the entire world in the knowledge of God, thus eradicating idolatry.

Ibn Kaspi differs from Maimonides in examining the workings of history independently from the development and project of Jewish law, and delineates more boldly and openly than Maimonides the power driven competition between nations in history, and the method by which the details of the divine chariot are progressively revealed over time. I do not believe he saw his interpretation, however, as a departure from the *Guide* and *Mishneh Torah*, but as the correct reading of it.⁴⁷

“The Reasons for the Stories” (*Ṭa’amei ha-Sippurim*)

Both competition for power and progress through history are taught, Ibn Kaspi argues, in the stories of the Hebrew Bible, so he chooses to put greater focus than Maimonides on the narrative part of the Jewish tradition. This may be a reason why Ibn Kaspi explicitly states in *Ṭirat Kesef* that his objective is to discern “the reasons for the stories” (*ta’amei ha-sippurim*), an expression constructed to mirror Maimonides’ project in the *Guide* of “the reasons for the commandments” (*ta’amei ha-miṣvot*).⁴⁸ A close look at the structure of the *Guide* reveals that Maimonides spent twenty-four chapters explicating the reasons for the commandments (*Guide* III 25–49) while only one investigating the reasons for the stories (*Guide* III 50). Ibn Kaspi rectifies that imbalance.⁴⁹

To understand these two kinds of teachings in the Bible, it is important to be aware that they are not explicated in any one place, but, according to Ibn Kaspi, divided up throughout the different biblical texts. Thus it is necessary to consider how artfully biblical texts are constructed and interwoven together. The art of the biblical narrative is an important tool to deciphering the underlying meaning. Ibn Kaspi begins *Shulḥan Kesef* by explaining that

The intention of this work is to explain one question, namely: what is the advantage of our Torah [Pentateuch] and the other books of the Bible with respect to the language (*siddur ha-lashon*) and the writing (*siddur ha-mikhtav*)—that is, the Hebrew language and the way in which the books are written and ordered—over that which is translated from our language [Hebrew] to another language.⁵⁰

Examples that fall under the category of the “language” and “writing” are, for Ibn Kaspi (not all of which are discussed in *Shulḥan Kesef*): the roots

of Hebrew words, the contradictions between biblical texts, the structure of biblical chapters and ordering of chapters, the dispersal of ideas through the biblical canon, the existence of mysterious empty spaces, the usage of equivocal terms, the reasons for repetitions of terms, the decision to be selective over what is disclosed, and the reliance on details that are historically contingent to the ancient world. While some of these are explained and employed by Maimonides in the *Guide*, he does not systematically interpret the Bible in light of these considerations. Ibn Kaspi takes on this task, and attempts to explain many of the textual problems apparent in biblical texts, problems that modern biblical critics will use to question the overall authorial intention of the biblical text.

Gersonides, Ibn Kaspi, and the Ethical-Political Reading of the Bible in Fourteenth-Century Provence

Levi Gersonides (1288–1344) like Joseph Ibn Kaspi (1280–1345) was born in the 1280s and both died in the 1340s. Both lived in Provence, and both considered themselves followers of the philosophic model of religion begun by Moses Maimonides and synthesized with Averroes' naturalism by Samuel Ibn Tibbon (1165–1232).⁵¹ Samuel ibn Tibbon, along with his son, Moses ibn Tibbon, his son-in-law, Jacob Anatoli (1194–1256), and his grandson, Jacob b. Makhir (approx. 1236–1304) continued the project of transforming Judaism into a philosophic religion. This was part of the movement to translate the great works of Aristotelian science and philosophy from Arabic into Hebrew.⁵² The challenge with this model of philosophic religion is that it is overly focused on natural science and mostly ignores practical philosophy.⁵³

In contrast, both Gersonides and Ibn Kaspi interpret the project of Maimonidean philosophical religion with a new focus on its practical implications. This was carried out under the influence of the Samuel ben Judah of Marseille's Hebrew translation of Averroes' *Commentary on Plato's Republic* and *Commentary on Aristotle's Nicomachean Ethics* in the 1320s. Gersonides and Ibn Kaspi developed the ethical-political implications of these writings in the form of biblical exegesis. The major commonality to the approaches of both Gersonides and Ibn Kaspi is that the Bible prioritizes the bodily necessity for physical survival as both an ethical and political goal, while simultaneously engaging in a process of greater intellectual enlightenment. They differ, however, on whether the

emphasis of the Bible should be on individualistic perfection or whether these goals should be viewed as part of a larger process of history.

Gersonides' model adds two new categories of individualistic virtues to Maimonides' model of ethics, virtues of self-preservation and virtues of altruism, which transcend the political nature of moral virtues. The virtues of self-preservation, endeavor (*hishtadlut*), diligence (*harišut*), and cunning (*hiteḥaḥmut*) in crafting stratagems (*taḥebulot*), arise as a response to "luck," which is an unavoidable feature affecting everything in nature. The virtues of altruism for Gersonides take the form of a non-political and universal altruistic ethics whereby we are obliged to cultivate the virtues of loving-kindness (*ḥesed*), grace (*ḥanina*), and beneficence (*haṭava*) in both knowledge and action independent of the political community and in imitation of God, who, to his mind, created the laws of the universe for no self-interested benefit.⁵⁴

Ibn Kaspi is much more cynical with regard to individual self-preservation, since he sees the human drive for self-preservation as primarily driven by large world empires. Their rise and fall determine who will succeed and who will fail. He highlights the opportunity for Jews to succeed in reviving their own state as a historical possibility, but only in the sense that any future event is possible and therefore, will happen eventually, given an infinite amount of time and thus the infinite number of possibilities as to how historical events will occur. In contrast, the increase of greater enlightenment is a process that takes place throughout the Bible with regard to knowledge of the secret of the divine chariot, which is merely hinted at in Genesis, but is explained in more and more detail by later prophets. Since Ibn Kaspi is harshly critical of the intellectual level of most people and groups, he sees the the progress of intellectual history as restricted to the few great prophets who have come to know these secrets and explained them in greater and greater detail over time.

Chapter Summary

The thesis of this book is that Ibn Kaspi develops a two-tiered philosophy of history in his interpretation of the Hebrew Bible. He builds on Maimonides' philosophy of history, radicalizing the competitive struggle of nations on the political level and the progressive movement of knowledge of the divine chariot on the intellectual level.⁵⁵ The first model

represents the endless competition of empires driven by a lust for power and glory; the second model signifies a cumulative process of coming to know over the course of history the nature of the divine chariot and the slow spread of that knowledge to others.

The first chapter analyzes history as driven by power and competition between kingdoms. This model of history is open to unlimited possibilities, as, he argues, the biblical prophets were fully aware. He argues that this teaching is a secret hidden in the Bible. To understand this truth about political history, it is necessary to dissect key verses and chapters. Examples are: “the scepter shall not depart from Judah” (at Genesis 49:8–10), the command to appoint a king (at Deuteronomy 17 and I Samuel 8), the metaphor of the four animals (Daniel 7) and the prophets’ predictions on the destruction of the temple and its rebuilding.

The second chapter describes history as a progressive explanation of the details of the divine chariot described in Isaiah 6, Ezekiel 1 and 10, and Zechariah 6. The imagery of God riding on a chariot is considered by rabbinic tradition to be one of the secret teachings of the Hebrew Bible. Ibn Kaspi, building on Maimonides, argues that the divine chariot is a metaphor for the nature and structure of existence, referred to by Aristotle as “metaphysics.” For Ibn Kaspi, the Bible describes a historical process in which different prophets came to discover these truths with greater and greater precision, from Abraham to Jacob to Moses, and share more and more details with others, as we move from Isaiah and Ezekiel to Zechariah.

The third chapter argues that the Bible’s method of enlightenment comes through its carefully constructed structure and form. He argues that the Bible is the perfect imitation of the philosophy of nature most importantly through its being written in the Hebrew language. He also argues that the form of the Hebrew Bible is a work of art, intended to convey its message to the reader using many different tools.⁵⁶ These devices and tools include contradictions, dispersal, empty spaces, repetitions and choosing to give only selective details. Without an awareness of this one will easily conclude that the text is haphazardly pieced together without foresight or plan. Despite this, he argues concurrently that much of the text is not reflective of a higher truth, but is influenced by the historical context of the ancient society and surrounding culture from which the Hebrew Bible originated.