

Translation of an Even-Shmuel Footnote on Contemporary Criticism of Maimonides' Philosophy,

by Scott Alexander

The following is a translation of footnote 285 on page 111 from Rabbi Dr. Yehuda Even-Shmuel's Introduction to his commentary on Book 2 of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, of his footnote 285 on page 111, regarding contemporary critics of Maimonides' philosophy.

It was typical for the writers commenting on Maimonides' philosophy in *The Guide of the Perplexed* to emphasize their notion that Maimonides adapted the Torah to the ideas of Aristotle. They ascribed to him an elucidation of Torah which was not its plain meaning, by introducing of foreign ideas into the Bible, and into the words of the prophets.

The truth is, to the contrary, that Maimonides simply indicates several places where the words of Aristotle entirely accord with the Torah.

Does the critics' portrait of Maimonides totally conflict with the truth? Maimonides thought that his Torah was based only on its true intent. This intent was concealed from the many who cannot differentiate between everyday language and the figurative, allegorical language of the Torah and of the prophets. Maimonides taught how to read the Torah and the prophets by explaining the meaning of their poetic terminology. He grasped not only that which was revealed to all, but also that which was concealed, and the secrets hidden in those figurative and allegorical accounts.

It is an error of the critics to make the hackneyed charge that he allegorized the Torah. This was the position of not only the Enlightenment intellectuals of the *Haskalah* movement, but also of some real scholars. They were all influenced by the teachings of Spinoza, who rejected every interpretive technique except the literal reading of the Bible.

But Spinoza utterly failed in this, just as Karaites before him failed. Those who strive to understand the Bible only on its literal level erase both Jewish history and the tradition of the oral Torah. They also ignore the contributions of the generations from the giving of the Torah at Sinai up to the end of the second Temple. They create a caricature of Judaism, relying on the literal reading of the text to the exclusion of all else.

Spinoza arrived at his childish interpretation like someone who had a tin ear for the sense of biblical language. According to him, the prophets gave us only principles of philosophy, but denied their teaching that the Torah held sway over ethical or political life.

In this Spinoza laid down the foundation of the so-called school of "Higher Biblical Criticism" (of Julius Wellhausen and Karl Graf), that misled many generations. But that was only until the students of a later generation, Jewish and Gentile, realized that most of the work of those critics was nothing but a crumbling plaster (טיח תפל).

Gentile scholars subsequently pursued Spinozism only because it cast the Bible as nothing but a lower level preparation for the universal acceptance of Christianity. They relegated Jewish beliefs at best as a formulation of Spinozism, not to the classic teachings of Israel: that the Jews were people of deeds (not of faith) – as if this were the great innovation of Judaism – the distinction between deed and intention.

Copyright © 2019, Scott Michael Alexander, no copying or use permitted without express written permission of the author.