

Alexander Green. *Power and Progress: Joseph Ibn Kaspi and the Meaning of History.* Albany: SUNY Press, 2019. xix + 210 pp. \$32.95, e-book, ISBN 978-1-4384-7604-9.

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Joseph Ibn Kaspi—a prolific Jewish-Provencal grammarian and biblical commentator from the thirteenth century—has recently stirred the attention of modern scholarship. In just a few years, two remarkable yet quite different monographs have been published: Adrian Sackson’s *Joseph Ibn Kaspi: Portrait of a Jewish Philosopher in Medieval Provence* (2017) and Alexander Green’s *Power and Progress: Joseph Ibn Kaspi and the Meaning of History*, reviewed here. Both scholars have strenuously tried to raise Ibn Kaspi from his ordinary consideration as a biblical commentator, emphasizing his brilliance and original thought. This is no easy task. Ibn Kaspi was a prolific writer and a literalist commentator of scripture—a *pashtan*—who believed that biblical narratives would be as worthy of trust as Aristotle’s writings on logic and nature. His scholarship is large, as he authored several works spanning Hebrew grammar, lexicography, logic, philosophy, theology, and anthropology. There is no doubt that he was an intriguing thinker who is finally getting the attention that he has always deserved.

Green’s monograph is short and agile. It includes a brief introduction and three longer chapters: “History as Power and Competition,” “History as the Progressive Revelation of the Divine Chariot,” and “The Pedagogical Structure of the Hebrew Bible.” A succinct conclusion offers a

summary of the preceding content. In the introduction, Green shows that Ibn Kaspi was not a simple follower of the medieval thinker Maimonides but rather his trusted successor who tried to substantiate his predecessor’s fairly undeveloped philosophy of history that argues for a more optimistic idea of progress due to the divine providence. In the first chapter, Green depicts Ibn Kaspi as well aware that history is driven by power and competition between kingdoms. This also implies a specific evaluation of the world in which history progressively takes place. In the second chapter, Green argues that Ibn Kaspi departs from the ordinary rabbinic understanding of the divine chariot (Is 6, Ez 1, Zech 6), which is typically interpreted as a “prophetic” vision of a metaphysical truth if not a prodrome to mystical knowledge, and rather considers it a representation of nature that emerges as the actual space for human life and its possibility to progressively uncover truth. This possibility is specifically examined in the third chapter, which mostly deals with the intellectual means by which such progressive knowledge can be acquired in history: the Hebrew language, its special connection to creation, and the Bible’s implicit philosophy of nature.

Green presents Ibn Kaspi as an interesting author who not only devoted himself entirely to bib-

lical exegesis but also succeeded in developing a specific philosophy of history. Green has often remarked that Ibn Kaspi carefully departed from his major intellectual source—Maimonides’s systematization of Jewish law and Jewish thought—and presents Ibn Kaspi not as the most original author of his time but instead as a noteworthy scholar and commentator on Maimonides. While Ibn Kaspi’s philosophy has often been projected against the greater background of Maimonides’s system, Green has chosen not to treat the position of Ibn Kaspi in the still ongoing (and only briefly mentioned) “Maimonidean controversy,” and he should be commended for his emphasis on Ibn Kaspi’s dependency on Maimonides and the former’s efforts to offer a genuine alternative to the latter’s powerful philosophy of history. The major point of departure between the two medieval scholars is not on a general assumption—history emerges as “a war on idolatry” through the millenary transformation from animal sacrifices to prayer and study—but rather on the circumstances that have historically allowed for this spiritual evolution. Maimonides believes in the necessary moral progress of humanity through Jewish law. To the contrary, Ibn Kaspi is more cautious and betrays a more problematic—if not darker— notion of humanity. Historical circumstances (might) allow for morality and immorality, but there is no general providential structure that guarantees a morally positive resolution. Hence, in Green’s words, “a consistent standard of justice cannot be ensured over time, Ibn Kaspi argues, because it is impossible to predict what the nature of the next ruler will be and, therefore, whether or not he will be just or enforce justice” (p. 15).

Green deftly shows how carefully Ibn Kaspi tried to “rephrase” Maimonides’s philosophical system and play it to his own angle. While compared to other monographs that offer a comprehensive portrait of Ibn Kaspi, Green’s effort might appear insufficient, but such accusations would be unfair, as Green is especially focused on elucidating “the meaning of history” (as the title suggests)

in Ibn Kaspi. Taking a narrower and more focused approach, Green instead selects just a few meaningful passages, which he invites us to ponder, giving the reader a more intimate personal perspective into Ibn Kaspi’s work. In doing so, Green invites the reader to browse between many different works without taking the burden of examining all of them. The reader is invited to follow Green’s thread that selects between many sources, whose detailed examination would require a longer but less agile treatment. In this respect, the major merit of this monograph is that it offers a comprehensive representation of Ibn Kaspi’s notion of history without burdening the reader with exhaustive summary. In doing so, Green summarizes Ibn Kaspi’s assumptions into two “separate and concurrent” “models of history”: “the first is a secular political history that is defined by power and competition between kingdoms. The second is a history of the progressive accumulation and dissemination of the secrets of the divine chariot, inspiring an increase in love and compassion for the lower parts of nature” (p. 145).

Yet the merit of summarizing Ibn Kaspi’s probably hypertrophic scholarship into two clear and straightforward models does not come without a cost. Green does not fully explore his fundamental contradiction between history and metaphysics, or political realism and metaphysics. This leaves the reader with the impression that Green was forced to treat Ibn Kaspi, so to say, in a splendid isolation. As a result, he had to refrain from considering Ibn Kaspi’s work as an expression of an evolving society that was affected by both humanism and the already raising Kabbalah. Should he have the opportunity to continue working on Ibn Kaspi, Green might find it interesting to further investigate his interconnections with contemporary society, the challenges of modern humanism, and the intellectual alternative to both Talmudic and philosophical Judaism that was offered by the Kabbalah.

Ibn Kaspi's examination of the hybrid notion of kingship—especially his disingenuous nature of history as a struggle for power—seems to anticipate similar observations to be found later in Niccolò Machiavelli, the famous and notorious founder of modern political science. In Green's words, Ibn Kaspi was fully aware of "another consequence of the animalistic nature of kingship and politics ... that there are no universal standards of justice between nations that protect the weak. Justice is the advantage of the stronger.... The competition of animals for survival is the model on which nations relate to one another" (pp. 43-44). One cannot avoid thinking of Machiavelli's disenchanted notion of power and his famous metaphor for describing the perfect qualities of a political leader: being "a fox to recognize traps and a lion to frighten wolves." Just like Ibn Kaspi, Machiavelli appears to articulate politics in the same "animalistic" manner. Similarly, Ibn Kaspi also says, in Green's words, that the art of war "needs to be guided by the practical wisdom of the prophets who can predict the contingent future by knowing many of the particular circumstances, strength, and weaknesses of the different kingdoms, which makes them valuable advisors" (p. 49). I am left wondering if Green might have wanted spending some more time for examining this intriguing topic—the prophet as the consigliere of a secular king—and its theological-political ramifications.

On the other hand, one cannot overlook Ibn Kaspi's remarkable interpretation of the *merkavah* (spelled as *merkava* in Green's book) "as a metaphor for Aristotelian metaphysics," and therefore as a metaphysical device that affects human reality (p. 57). Green aptly summarizes Ibn Kaspi's treatment of the merkavah as a rhetorical and speculative means for considering "history as the progressive revelation of the Divine Chariot" (p. 55). Further, he describes the theological-political implications descending from this metaphysical model of history as it is implicitly concurrent with Christian eschatology. Interestingly, Green

notes that Ibn Kaspi rejected Christianity for its doctrine of incarnation rather than because of the Trinitarian notion of God—as Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Ibn Kapsi argues that the Trinity is a genuine Jewish constellation of theological principles and "contends that the Trinity became a convenient way of expressing God's plurality in many traditions, including Judaism and Christianity" (p. 103). This could be an opportunity for exploring the complex interactions between the rabbinic and kabbalistic notion of monotheism. One should especially consider how the Kabbalah was also stigmatized for depicting God as a plurality of emanations—namely, the ten *Sefirot*. Abraham Abulafia famously (and sarcastically) remarked that Christians may adore "three gods," but Kabbalists are even worse because they worship "ten" of them! The reader is left wondering whether Ibn Kaspi's notion of merkavah and his positive philosophical treatment of the Trinity might have influenced some more speculatively sensitive streams of contemporary Kabbalah, whether he might have been influenced by the Kabbalah, or whether Ibn Kaspi might have simply proposed a theoretical alternative to both Talmudic and philosophical Judaism.

These are questions that emerge for the specialist after reading. The monograph's main merit is, undoubtedly, its ability to help unexperienced readers access Ibn Kaspi's work for the first time, but it is probably less intriguing for more experienced scholars who might have appreciated a deeper discussion of Ibn Kapsi's main topics. These few suggestions do not deprive merit of Green's monograph, which offers an effective synthesis of Ibn Kaspi's laborious scholarship.

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