



**Aaron W. Hughes, James T. Robinson, eds.** *Medieval Jewish Philosophy and Its Literary Forms*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2019. viii + 363 pp. \$100.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-04252-1.

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Among the religious and intellectual innovations in which medieval Judaism abounds, none sparked controversy more than the attempt of certain rabbis and scholars to promote teachings of ancient Greek philosophy. Most notable, of course, was Moses Maimonides, the foremost legist and theologian of the age. Not only did he cultivate Greco-Arabic philosophy and science, but he also taught the radical proposition that knowledge of some of its branches was essential for a true understanding of revealed scripture and for worship of God in its purest form.

As an object of modern scholarship, medieval philosophy has not suffered from a lack of attention. Since the advent of *Wissenschaft des Judentums* more than a century and half ago, studies have proliferated, whether on specific topics (e.g., theories of creation), leading figures (e.g., Saadiah Gaon, Judah Halevi, Maimonides), or the historical, religious, and intellectual settings in which Jewish engagements with philosophy occurred—first in Arabophone communities in the Babylonian East and Spanish West, then in centers of Mediterranean Judaism in Christian Europe. For all the undeniable advances, the editors of the volume under review express dissatisfaction with the current state of the field, calling it “fairly technical and unwelcoming.” Among other things, they lament its nigh total obliviousness to a trend that

they identify in general medieval studies to interact with “the larger humanities.” To remedy this situation, and for other reasons that they delineate with clarity and sophistication, contributors to this volume aim to provide a set of “new and critical” investigations of medieval Jewish philosophical texts focusing on the role of genre (p. 2). The thirteen essays that result exemplify this new model in ways that are at once educative and rife with lessons for others who might wish to perform similar investigations. Since the confines of a short review do not allow for meaningful comment on each contribution, it seems better to evoke a few themes brought into relief by the volume’s integrating perspective and to venture some general observations about a book grounded in the proposition that the way in which a philosophical (or indeed any) text generates an argument is intimately connected to the argument itself.

One conspicuous gain from the emphasis on genre is that it brings into sharp focus the text–reader relationship and questions about the varied audiences to which different modes of medieval philosophic discourse were directed. Consider, on a basic level, the observation of Steven Harvey, in an enlightening chapter on introductions as a literary form, that “in an age before flashy covers ... the author’s first few pages were his best chance to entice the potential reader to peruse his book” (p. 133).

Charles Manekin's study of the philosophical epistle and its subgenres distinguishes between writings whose "context and audience is not restricted to experts in philosophy" and epistolary exchanges between cognoscenti (p. 264). Here as elsewhere lies a distinction that, as it is unpacked in several essays, unsettles what might be a common presumption about medieval philosophers' understandings of the prospects for popular education. For example, Aaron Hughes finds that some writers saw the composition of philosophical dialogues as a convenient vehicle "to popularize and thus disseminate philosophy to a wider reading public" (p. 209). Similarly, Chaim Neira proposes that Jacob Anatoli, aware that elitist tracts written prior to his day were not suited to the spread of scientific knowledge, opted for the genre of the philosophic homily as a way to broadcast "the elite culture of the educated individuals to the public at large" (p. 293). Openly avowed elitists though they were, then, medieval philosophers at times strove to enlighten those whom they condescendingly called "the multitude," making strategic choices about genre accordingly.

Another salutary outcome of the focus on genre is to bring within our purview a vastly expanded number and range of writers who deployed philosophy and/or campaigned on its behalf. Indeed, the editors announce at the outset their determined effort to treat "minor or at least lesser known thinkers" who, on their reckoning, have often been ignored precisely because of the genres in which they expressed themselves (p. 6). Witness James Robinson's characteristically learned account of medieval philosophical lexicons, which devotes a whole section to the anonymous *Kitāb ma'ānī al-naḥs*, said to be one of the "most interesting ... works in the history of Jewish thought" even as it is certainly one of the least studied (p. 319). Zerahiyah Ha-Levi Saladin, a preacher from the Catalo-Aragonese school of Hasdai Crescas (usually classed as one of medieval Judaism's great antirationalists), and members of the Ibn Shem Tov family are but some of the lesser

known (in this case Sefardic) writers steeped in philosophic culture who emerge more prominently from the shadows under the aegis of a generic approach.

Cross-cultural borrowing and appropriation, a recurrent leitmotif of medieval Jewish intellectual history, is markedly salient when it comes to genres of medieval philosophic expression, as many chapters fastidiously display. As regards the Karaite and Rabbanite dialectical theologians studied by Gyongyi Hegedus, their point of departure in Islamic Kalam is patent. In other instances, however, it is helpful to be reminded that when, say, Judah Halevi deployed the dialogue form for his *Kuzari*, he was invoking a well-established form used in various Islamicate subcultures. Drawing an example from the sphere of medieval Christendom, Shira Weiss observes that Gersonides's *Milḥamot Hashem*, one of three works explored in her investigation of late medieval "summas," not only reflects Aristotelian methods but presentational habits favored by the Latin scholastics. Beyond horizontal cross-cultural contextualization of this sort, the authors note, where applicable, actual or possible roots of different modes of presentation in Greek antiquity.

Taking a step back from themes such as these, one can make a few basic points about the essays in their ensemble. First, they generally strike a judicious balance between an aerial view of the often ample terrain that they attempt to map, both geoculturally and chronologically, and close-up examples that illustrate nuances in the genres that they discuss.

Second, notwithstanding the laudable effort to broaden the canon of medieval Jewish philosophy, and the editors' plaint that the overwhelming volume of secondary studies on Maimonides has crowded out other thinkers, there is no attempt to deny the abiding and often decisive role of Maimonides in the rise and development of some of the genres discussed. In his chapter on philosophic Bible commentaries, Raphael Dascalu notes the in-

delible Maimonidean imprint on the genre in later medieval times while Steven Harvey observes in his aforementioned study devoted to the philosophic introduction that “Maimonides merits a subheading of his own” (p. 143). Indeed, commentaries on Maimonides’s *Guide of the Perplexed* are treated in a separate chapter as a genre unto themselves. In it, Igor H. de Souza handsomely illustrates the dynamism and substantive, methodological, and literary heterogeneity present in a genre that one might assume to be pallid and narrow.

Finally, to appreciate the sort of fresh findings that a genre-based approach can yield, one need look no further than the opening essay by the late lamented Kalman Bland, to whose memory the book is dedicated, which offers, among other things, a politically oriented exploration of animal fables. It arrives at the unexpected conclusion that “the imaginative fabulists often beheld a this-worldly, Machiavellian, somber realism that eluded their more idealistic and optimistic counterparts, the practitioners of medieval Jewish philosophy” (p. 29).

For all their reach and ambition, books such as these will inevitably have elements of unevenness as well as lacunae. As regards the former, the implied aspiration to integrate larger humanistic concerns is not realized equally across the volume. One essay that points the way is Maud Kozodoy’s study of poetic summaries of scientific and philosophical works. In terms of coverage, the admittedly underresearched sphere of high and late eastern Mediterranean centers of Jewish learning, particularly in Byzantium, gets short shrift. To be sure, medieval Jewish philosophic activity was largely centered in the West. Still, in the wake of the 1204 Fourth Crusade, significant segments of Byzantine Jewish literature took a rationalist turn facilitated by the arrival of philosophic methods, ideas, aims, and sources from Spain and southern France. Were the genre-based approach enlisted to explore this little-known body of literature, it would bear

out the important observation of the editors that “a renewed attention to genre shows us to what extent medieval thinkers made connections between the literary, the exegetical, the philosophical, and the mystical,” spheres that, they further contend, *Wissenschaft des Judentums* unjustly “tore asunder” and made into separate subdisciplines (p. 3).

The essays also attend fairly lightly to generic developments in relationship to some of the factors that may have shaped them, figuratively and literally, though there are exceptions. Witness Kozodoy’s speculation that Jewish versified philosophic texts might have been few in number due to “the lack of institutional contexts” for such expressions (p. 238). Similarly, in his chapter on Hebrew Aristotelian commentaries and supercommentaries, Yehuda Halper refers to Aragonese and Venetian trade routes in order to explain a geographic shift in fifteenth-century productions in the field. As far as I noted, Halper’s is the lone study that comes with an image, in this case a manuscript page containing Hebrew commentaries on the *Isagoge* of Porphyry (or, more precisely, on the “middle commentary” on the work by Averroes). By analyzing the manuscript’s *mise-en-page* (in tandem, of course, with its contents), Halper throws light on matters of genre as they intertwine with ones of format, explaining how commentators, in this case Gersonides and Judah Messer Leon, can “play with what they considered the authentically authored meaning” or how a copyist could create a layout that left readers of a manuscript free to decide for themselves which commentator might be right (p. 122).

Here, then, are a few fleeting indications of ways in which *Medieval Jewish Philosophy and Its Literary Forms* enlarges and reshapes our understanding of an important constituent of medieval Jewish learning and literary endeavor. Comprising sophisticated scholarship and realizing its goal of challenging conventions in the study of medieval Jewish philosophy, it convincingly advocates for a

fruitful approach that, it may be hoped, others will be inspired to pursue.

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