

The Role of Esoterics and Contradictions in Joseph Ibn Kaspi's Exegesis

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Abstract— This article explores Joseph Ibn Kaspi's Biblical exegesis and his relationship to Maimonidean thought.

The Middle Ages introduced an onslaught of exegesis to the Jewish literary canon. Beginning in the ninth century with the Geonim —the rabbinate from the sixth to eleventh century— in Babylon, this era ushered in new modes of understanding the Bible. Drawing heavily from both Christian and Islamic thought, Jewish thinkers reimagined how Jewish people interact with the Bible. Exegetes, philosophers, and theologians such as Rashi, Saadya Gaon, and Abraham Ibn Ezra published works that left an indelible mark on the Jewish literary landscape and continue to shape Jewish tradition, perspective, and exegesis.

In the wake of these literary legends comes a new wave of thinkers whose ideologies and exegetical styles were directly influenced by the works of the giants before them. Rather than reinvent the wheel, this second generation of exegetes, philosophers, and theologians focused on intertwining their own respective weltanschauungs with the teachings of their masters, always with a twist. A remarkable figure from this second wave is Joseph Ibn Kaspi, an assiduous thinker whose philosophies closely followed Maimonides. Throughout his various commentaries on the Bible and on Maimonides' *Guide to the Perplexed*, Ibn Kaspi directly engages with Maimonides' use of esoterics, allegory, and theory of Biblical contradictions, exploring the limits of rationalist thought yet ultimately developing his own distinct lens through which he, and many subsequent exegetes, approach the Bible.

Joseph Ibn Kaspi was a rationalist, grammarian, and Biblical exegete who lived in Provence, France. He was a self-appointed student of Aristotle,

Maimonides, and above all, the Hebrew Bible.¹ In his life, he published over 30 works, including dozens of Biblical commentaries, as well as numerous works on Maimonides' seminal work, *The Guide for the Perplexed*.

Ibn Kaspi's commentaries are distinct both in content—specifically in how they blend traditional rationalist rhetoric with Ibn Kaspi's deeply devout ideals—and in writing style. Ibn Kaspi often wrote in the first person, establishing an intimate and direct personal connection with the reader. Sometimes, these details would be abrasive and critical of the society around him. Ibn Kaspi had reclusive proclivities and had no shame in publicizing his opinion that there were few other truly knowledgeable or intellectual individuals in Provence.² Despite closely following many rationalist and Maimonidean techniques, Ibn Kaspi and his works stand out among his contemporaries because Ibn Kaspi was arguably the first exegete to approach the Bible from a historical perspective.³ Lastly, Ibn Kaspi was an intense individual who pushed the ideas of his time to their extremes, as will be demonstrated.⁴ His commentaries delve deep into the text and convey profound and intriguing teachings that beautifully build on the emerging thought of his time.

Ibn Kaspi belongs to the group of exegetes who approach the Bible from a rationalist perspective. This movement to reconcile the Bible with the rational philosophic worldview bears a few hallmarks—mostly notably, the rejection and reinterpretation of the many corporeal descriptions of God in the Bible. The notion of God being described, and therefore limited within the human realm, is typically uncomfortable for rational thinkers. As part of their polemic against anthropomorphism, rationalists approach God through a negative theology—describing what He *is not*, rather than what He *is*. In order to accommodate their preferred reading of the Bible, rationalists must read a new stratum of meaning onto these anthropomorphic definitions. In doing so, they create a hierarchy within the methods of Biblical interpretation. Within these new figurative understandings of the Bible, rationalists argue, exists a far more profound, higher truth that only the well-educated can achieve.⁵

One of the most famous Jewish rationalists of all time is Maimonides.

¹ State University of New York Press, Albany, 2019, https://sunypress.edu/content/download/453535/5521658/version/1/file/9781438476032_imported2_excerpt.pdf.

² Rock, Dr. Avigail. *The Biblical Exegesis of Joseph Ibn Kaspi*, Bar Ilan University Press, 2017, pp. 1-2, <https://avigailrock.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Avigail-Rock-Ibn-Kaspi-2.pdf>.

³ Shatz, David. *The Biblical and Philosophical Background to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*. Cambridge University Press, 2006, p. 16.

⁴ Rock, Dr. Avigail. *The Biblical Exegesis of Joseph Ibn Kaspi*, Bar Ilan University Press, 2017, pp. 75-77, <https://avigailrock.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Avigail-Rock-Ibn-Kaspi-2.pdf>.

⁵ Shatz, David. *The Biblical and Philosophical Background to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*. Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 18-21.

Maimonides developed a distinct theology that opts for a generous use of allegory and asserts that this figurative understanding points not to a truth but to *the* truth of the Bible. Ironically, Maimonides seems to argue that the figurative read *is* the literal understanding of the Bible; or rather, his approach is not figurative, but philosophical. Maimonides strives to convey this technical and precise truth through the context and structure of his work and wrote *The Guide for the Perplexed* to work under a similar premise as the Bible itself: to encode the ultimate truth in confounding contradiction, accessible only to those deft enough to properly navigate this daunting and esoteric textual labyrinth.⁶

The Guide for the Perplexed is one of Maimonides' seminal works and is notorious for its internal contradiction. In his introduction to *The Guide*, Maimonides delineates the seven types of contradictions that exist within a literary work: (I) issues of multiple authorship, when the author curates opinions from multiple people and fails to denote such; (II) issues of development, when the author presents two opinions representing his original and later opinion but fails to distinguish between the two; (III) issues of allegorical read, when either one text has a relevant metaphorical reading and another text is similar, but only has a literal meaning, or when two texts have contradicting literal meanings, but their parables align; (IV) issues of context, when the author presents two ideas that seem to contradict, but in reality they simply are not completely explained in one or both places of mention; (V) issues of methodology, where the author initially refrains from teaching an entire idea so as not to confuse the reader, which results in a seeming contradiction within the text; (VI) issues of unintended flawed logic, when the author makes two contradictory points that reveal a deeper flaw in the author's logic unbeknownst to the author; (VII) and lastly, issues of hierarchy, where the author deems it necessary to conceal the true, profound meaning of the text under the guide of a more superficial and easily understood premise that seems contradictory.⁷

Maimonides then explores how these seven contradictions manifest themselves in different types of text in the Jewish literary canon. Most notably, Maimonides refrains from directly relating this theory to the Bible itself.

Maimonides, and *The Guide for the Perplexed*, was one of the biggest influences on Ibn Kaspi's life. Although the two figures' lives never overlapped, Ibn Kaspi assumed the role of Maimonides' student, assiduously studying his philosophy and works and even traveling to Egypt

⁶ Kraemer, Joel L. *Moses Maimonides: An Intellectual Portrait*, Cambridge University Press, 2006, pp. 41–42.

⁷ *Guide for the Perplexed, Translation*. University of Virginia Press, pp. 73-75, <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=uva.x030589251&view=1up&seq=73>

in order to directly learn from Maimonides' descendants.⁸ Ibn Kaspi gravitated towards Maimonides' belief that the real, profound truth must be encrypted, accessible only to the elite. In fact, he was one of the first Jewish thinkers to employ Maimonides' aforementioned technique, employing esoterics and contradictions in an unprecedented and even radical way.

Ibn Kaspi wrote a number of profoundly enigmatic volumes that were intended exclusively for the philosophically inclined, including his commentary on the Bible, *Tirat Kesef*, his commentaries on esotericism in Genesis and on the Account of the Chariot narrative in the book of *Ezekiel*, *Gevia' Kesef* and *Menorat Kesef*, respectively, and his commentary on *The Guide for the Perplexed*, *Maskiyyot Kesef*.⁹ At the same time, Ibn Kaspi was also quite prolific in his exoteric commentaries as well, writing grammar books and commentaries on both the Bible and *The Guide for the Perplexed* for the layman. Intriguingly, even these exoteric writings allude to the esoteric underworld that exists within the Jewish literary landscape. It was unusual for exoteric texts to contain such depth. Through Ibn Kaspi's writings, the layman is uniquely able to get the sense that there is more to *The Guide*, the Bible, and most other Jewish texts that remains indiscernible to his uneducated eye.¹⁰

This broad spectrum of exegesis, and the decision to interact with the notion of allegory in any capacity, especially to the great extent that he did, is quite significant and reflects a great tension in Ibn Kaspi's life. On the one hand, as a rationalist, Ibn Kaspi strove to uncover the deeper, true meaning of the Bible—such a feat is achieved through allegory. Ibn Kaspi wrote entire commentaries dedicated to this esoteric pursuit and relies heavily on allegory to guide him in this endeavor.

Additionally, many of Ibn Kaspi's writings on allegory are projections of his broader historical context. Although he often was himself against the craft, Ibn Kaspi was a staunch defender of the use of allegory to understand the Bible against Christian polemicists, who sought to undermine this pillar of Biblical exegesis.¹¹ On the other hand, Ibn Kaspi was a self-proclaimed *pashtan*, an exegete with literal-reading proclivities. Ibn Kaspi felt that many of his counterparts, and even many of the great exegetes that preceded him, stretched the words of the Bible too thin and employed allegory when

⁸ Rock, Dr. Avigail. *The Biblical Exegesis of Joseph Ibn Kaspi*, Bar Ilan University Press, 2017, p. 112, <https://avigailrock.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Avigail-Rock-Ibn-Kaspi-2.pdf>.

⁹ State University of New York Press, Albany, 2019, https://sunypress.edu/content/download/453535/5521658/version/1/file/9781438476032_imported2_excerpt.pdf.

¹⁰ State University of New York Press, Albany, 2019, https://sunypress.edu/content/download/453535/5521658/version/1/file/9781438476032_imported2_excerpt.pdf.

¹¹ Rock, Dr. Avigail. *The Biblical Exegesis of Joseph Ibn Kaspi*, Bar Ilan University Press, 2017, pp. 6-8, 27 <https://avigailrock.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Avigail-Rock-Ibn-Kaspi-2.pdf>.

it was unnecessary.¹² As a result, Ibn Kaspi's commentaries oscillate between apologetics and scathing critiques of the exegetical use of allegory.

This discussion of parables in the Bible naturally evolves into one about multiple truths. In this realm too, Ibn Kaspi echoes rationalist thought, as he recognizes that the Bible contains multiple layers of truth and meaning. For example, in the tenth chapter of his esoteric commentary on Genesis, *Gevia' Kesef*, Ibn Kaspi analyzes the narrative of Abraham, Hagar, and Ishmael. In his analysis, he praises the Bible for conjugating verbs in the past tense—a tense that can point to the future or to the past—as an exercise in esoterics. Ibn Kaspi points to one particular verse, in which God tells Abraham not to worry about the future of Ishmael, for He has—or perhaps He will, as Ibn Kaspi holds—blessed Ishmael. This tension between past and present leads to a dichotomous understanding of this verse.

While explaining a certain blessing that God gives to Abraham, Ibn Kaspi notes:

“the expression is equivocal, intentionally written in this attractive way by the writer of the Torah so that its exoteric sense be understood (as a new prayer). According to this exoteric explanation, the meaning of the verse, when God says “I will bless him and make him fruitful,” refers exclusively to the future (as blessings promised for the future in response to Abraham's new prayer), as an event that will exist in the future....My own (preferred) explanation, however, is in accordance with the esoteric meaning and with precise philosophic insight. Both explanations here possess truth. This is true of the entire Torah, in that every term and statement possesses a meaning within a meaning, both of which are true.”¹³

Ibn Kaspi identifies both the exoteric and esoteric meanings of this verse, although, in true Maimonidean fashion, he dances around expounding upon what the esoteric meaning actually is, instead merely acknowledging that it exists, and it is the preferred understanding. Furthermore, Ibn Kaspi recognizes that there is more to this verse than the esoteric truth he's uncovered in contemplating this verse in a more profound manner. Ibn Kaspi aligns himself with rational thought in his concession of the validity of the exoteric reading not only of this verse, but of all verses. To him, the literal interpretation is both a vessel for greater understanding and an avenue

¹² Rock, Dr. Avigail. *The Biblical Exegesis of Joseph Ibn Kaspi*, Bar Ilan University Press, 2017, pp. 26-28, <https://avigailrock.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Avigail-Rock-Ibn-Kaspi-2.pdf>.

¹³ Herring, Basil. “Gevia' Kesef 10:13” *Sefaria*, [www.sefaria.org/Gevia_Kesef.10.13?ven=Trans. by Basil Herring, New York, Ktav, 1982&lang=en&with=About&lang2=en](http://www.sefaria.org/Gevia_Kesef.10.13?ven=Trans.by%20Basil%20Herring,%20New%20York,%20Ktav,%201982&lang=en&with=About&lang2=en).

of understanding in its own right.

Despite his loyalty to the rationalists, and more specifically to Maimonidean thought, Ibn Kaspi explores how far he could extend the bounds of Maimonides' techniques, beyond mere encrypted truths in his oeuvre. The result is an unprecedented read of Maimonides' aforementioned theory of contradictions: Ibn Kaspi asserts that of these seven contradictions, some can be directly applied to the Bible itself. Throughout his esoteric anthology, specifically in *Gevia' Kesef*, Ibn Kaspi points out contradictions within Maimonides' works that address various categories of contradiction, such as those that create issues of multiple authorship, incomplete thought, and parables and encrypted truths. Ibn Kaspi beautifully reconciles these contradictions through examples in the Bible, reaffirming the genius of Maimonides and *The Guide for the Perplexed*, and the validity of the Bible as a Divine text free of competing ideas.

One of the most compelling contradictions that Ibn Kaspi deftly navigates is the issue of Biblical authorship. Ibn Kaspi is bold, and borderline heretical, for applying the first type of contradiction outlined in the introduction of *The Guide for the Perplexed* to the Bible itself and entertaining the question about God's sole authorship of the Bible. Throughout his various commentaries, Ibn Kaspi looks at seemingly contradictory accounts of the same narrative within prophets and Writings—such as the story of David and Bathsheba, which is described in the book of Samuel as David's greatest sin, and yet goes unmentioned in the chapters in Chronicles that speak at length about his life—and reconciles their differences through an assertion of multiple authorship, citing that one need “not be surprised that there are differences between the authors of the biblical books because many people wrote down the events.”¹⁴

In other words, Ibn Kaspi asserts that God is the sole *author* of the Bible, but not the sole *transcriber*. Every book in the Bible, Ibn Kaspi posits, has a unique author who brings his own voice to the writing.

It is important to note that Ibn Kaspi is not extending this notion of intertextual contradictions to the Pentateuch itself; to assert that multiple perspectives wrote the Five Books of Moses would be far too heretical and radical for a devout figure like Ibn Kaspi. Ibn Kaspi explicitly states that this is not his intention in *Gevia' Kesef*, writing that “We cannot compare or equate the Torah to other books, nor can we compare Moses, who wrote the Torah, with other authors, (nor can we compare them to) the Lord, who was the prime writer and giver of the Torah.”¹⁵ Ibn Kaspi assigns Moses the exclusive authority of transcription of the Pentateuch.

¹⁴ Green, Alexander. “Joseph Ibn Kaspi on Contradictions in the Bible.” *The University of Chicago Press Journals*, 2022, <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu/doi/full/10.1086/718396>.

¹⁵ Herring, Basil. “Gevia' Kesef 9:3” *Sefaria*, www.sefaria.org/Gevia_Kesef.9.3?ven=Trans_by_Basil_Herring_New_York_Ktav_1982&lang=en&with=About&lang2=en.

As for the books of prophets and Writings, Ibn Kaspi creates space for the rabbinic tradition that different prophets and religious figures wrote different books.¹⁶ Such “contradictions” are not cries of multiple authorship and heresy, but rather testimony to the very nature of the Bible: it is a Divine order relayed through people. Ibn Kaspi’s theology here is brilliant. He pushes Maimonides’ notion of contradicting authorship further than expected, while skirting any heresy. He is agile in his ability to synthesize inconsistencies within prophetic narratives with the notion of the Bible’s divinity and sole authorship. Further, this approach fits beautifully with Ibn Kaspi’s philosophical roots.

As a rationalist, Ibn Kaspi is uncomfortable with attributing physical descriptions to God. To assert God as the *writer* of the Bible would be improper; to simply declare Him the *conveyer* is devout. Through striking this delicate balance, Ibn Kaspi gracefully challenges this Maimonidean concept in a rather impressive manner.

Another fascinating example of Ibn Kaspi’s exercise in these Maimonidean contradictions focuses on the fourth contradiction: issues of context. In the third chapter of *Gevia’ Kesef*, Ibn Kaspi discusses the two names of God, *Elokim* and the Tetragrammaton (Lord), and the “rules” that dictate when each name is employed. He concludes that *Elokim* is used in a more material and immediate context, whereas the Tetragrammaton connotes a slightly more theoretical notion, such as a promise or event that has yet to occur. And yet, Ibn Kaspi notes, when God appears to Rebecca to tell her that she is pregnant with twins, the verse says: “and the Lord said to her, ‘two nations live in your womb, two separate peoples will come from your body.’”¹⁷ This use of the name “Lord” (Tetragrammaton) contradicts Ibn Kaspi’s definition. To reconcile this deviation from the norm he writes:

“Regarding what is said of Rebecca—“And the Lord said unto her”—there is no problem, for it is not always and forever necessary to be precise. Sometimes the Torah is exact, and at other times it is inexact, as Maimonides wrote regarding the fifth cause of contradiction...”¹⁸

Although Ibn Kaspi himself classifies this contradiction as methodological, in reality its nature aligns much more with the fourth type of contradiction. Whereas the fifth contradiction attributes missing or

¹⁶ Bava Batra, 14b-15a.

¹⁷ Genesis 23:25

¹⁸ Herring, Basil. “Gevia’ Kesef 3:4” *Sefaria*, [www.sefaria.org/Gevia_Kesef.3.4?ven=Trans. by Basil Herring, New York, Ktav, 1982&lang=en&with=About&lang2=en](http://www.sefaria.org/Gevia_Kesef.3.4?ven=Trans.by%20Basil%20Herring,%20New%20York,%20Ktav,%201982&lang=en&with=About&lang2=en).

differing information to pedagogical reasons, the fourth one presents such a tension as something more natural or matter of fact: contradictions arise because the Bible expounds upon something in one place and not in another. Regardless, Ibn Kaspi resolves this tension in the text by applying the Maimonidean lens shaped by the fourth type of contradiction, therefore implying that at a later point in the Bible, this notion will be truly reconciled. Embedded in this remark is also the Maimonidean idea of hierarchy. Such is the way of the Bible, Ibn Kaspi explains; its methodologies are intentionally not conveyed in their entirety at every instance, resulting in what the unknowledgeable reader will perceive as a contradiction. Only those truly in touch with the esoteric undercurrent of the Bible can appreciate the sophistication of such a technique (the small-minded will simply see tension). Ibn Kaspi takes Maimonides' idea of a contextual contradiction and uses it to resolve linguistic tensions within the Bible.

A few chapters later, in the ninth chapter of *Gevia' Kesef*, Ibn Kaspi again calls on the introduction to *The Guide for the Perplexed* as a tool to reconcile a textual contradiction. In this chapter, Ibn Kaspi discusses the interactions between God and those who receive prophecy. Specifically, Ibn Kaspi hones in on the fate-sealing covenant between Abraham and God in which God tells Abraham that his descendants will become enslaved in a foreign land, but ultimately will be redeemed. Ibn Kaspi notes that the parable used in this scene is relayed over four verses, but its solution is conveyed in only two. These gaps in the interpretation of the parable requires further exploration and explanation, which Ibn Kaspi provides:

“Sometimes not all the details of the question and answer are mentioned, as when the Lord merely provides the parable for the “student,” who later establishes his own explanation....Accordingly, as Maimonides said, it is not always necessary that all the details of a parable and its interpretation be identical....Now the Lord, (like) a teacher, was careful to conceal in the middle that which was not part of the main explanation of the parable, as is proper for one who wishes to conceal and hide...It appears from all of this that the Lord wanted to reveal to Abraham that some of his seed would be slaves in a strange land not owned by them, but He did not want to reveal to him which land (that would be), except to tell him that the fourth generation would escape from that servitude.”¹⁹

In this example, Ibn Kaspi resolves the brewing contradiction by

¹⁹ Herring, Basil. “Gevia' Kesef 9:4-6” *Sefaria*, www.sefaria.org/Gevia_Kesef.9.4?ven=Trans_by_Basil_Herring,_New_York,_Ktav,_1982&lang=en&with>About&lang2=en.

declaring that this discrepancy between parable and interpretation is intentional; God *chose* not to reveal the entire truth to Abraham. The methodology behind identifying and resolving this issue highlights Ibn Kaspi's dedication to expounding both the literal meaning of even the minutiae of the Bible and the deeper meaning that can be read in between the verses. Again, Ibn Kaspi applies a Maimonidean lens to the Bible in order to reconcile its many seeming contradictions, impressively demonstrating the endurance of Maimonidean thought and the Bible's nuance. This example also beautifully highlights an aspect of Ibn Kaspi's signature writing style: relaxed and matter of fact, yet conveying a profound and insightful interpretation of a complicated text.

These three examples together create an image of Ibn Kaspi as a true Maimonidean thinker. And, in many respects, this portrayal is accurate. Nonetheless, Ibn Kaspi was a renegade in two main ways. The first, as previously mentioned, is that Ibn Kaspi greatly valued, and even prioritized, the *pshat* read of the Bible. While he was able to appreciate and occasionally implement Maimonides' love of allegory, Ibn Kaspi ultimately felt that the true purpose of exegesis was to help guide the reader to the literal reading of the text.²⁰ The second way Ibn Kaspi was a renegade, was that although Ibn Kaspi relied heavily on Maimonides' guidelines for approaching the Bible, he ultimately uses a different foundation for his personal exegesis.

Ironically, when Ibn Kaspi went to Egypt to be as *physically* close to Maimonides as possible, he found himself gravitating towards a new philosophy, thus distancing himself ideologically from the great rationalist thinker.²¹ In Egypt, Ibn Kaspi began to notice cultural phenomena that helped him better contextualize and understand the Bible's deep connection and cold attitude towards Egypt and Egyptian values. This experience in Egypt creates a new foundation for Ibn Kaspi's exegesis. Ibn Kaspi's subsequent writings—especially his commentaries on the latter part of Genesis and the first half of Exodus—approach the Bible through a distinctly historical lens, through which he attempts to understand the contents of the Bible through their time, place, and context.²²

Ibn Kaspi is truly a hidden font of wisdom in the Jewish literary canon. Although at first unappreciated, Ibn Kaspi's risks ultimately yielded the great rewards of renown and respect in the world of Biblical exegesis. His contributions as both a commentator on Maimonides and a Maimonidean commentator have uncovered treasure troves of profound and

²⁰ Rock, Dr. Avigail. *The Biblical Exegesis of Joseph Ibn Kaspi*, Bar Ilan University Press, 2017, p. 26, <https://avigailrock.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Avigail-Rock-Ibn-Kaspi-2.pdf>.

²¹ Rock, Dr. Avigail. *The Biblical Exegesis of Joseph Ibn Kaspi*, Bar Ilan University Press, 2017, pp. 29-30, <https://avigailrock.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Avigail-Rock-Ibn-Kaspi-2.pdf>.

²² State University of New York Press, Albany, 2019, https://sunypress.edu/content/download/453535/5521658/version/1/file/9781438476032_imported2_excerpt.pdf.

unprecedented insights into the Bible and Maimondes' works. Through reconciling contradictions, Ibn Kaspi not only demonstrates his deep connection to Maimonides, his works, and his philosophy, but also proves his own brilliance, and reaffirms both the compelling genius within *The Guide for the Perplexed* as well as the Divinity and sanctity of the Bible. Above all, they highlight the ways in which Ibn Kaspi ultimately diverges from Maimonidean thought and paves his own path as a revolutionary renegade in the realm of rationalist exegesis.