

Abraham ibn Ezra: On Seeing God's Back

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In his first chapter of *Yesod Mora*, Ibn Ezra comments on the difficulty of unraveling the words of the prophets: “We [at times] grope walls as the blind do. One commentator offers one interpretation and another, a different one.”¹ The same may be said of Ibn Ezra’s own comments to Scripture. The latter is especially true for the philosophical parts of his commentaries where, as Julius Guttmann notes, “he strives for enigmatic brevity, leaving it to the reader to guess rather than understand their playful allusiveness... In a way, his veiled language is the expression most adequate to the esoteric quality of his thought.”² Dov Schwartz similarly comments: “Ibn Ezra’s enigmatic style does not seem to permit an unambiguous interpretation.”³

The first part of an excursus inserted by Ibn Ezra to his comments to Ex. 33:21 opening with “Abraham the Author says” is one of a number of such cases.⁴ It contains allusions to medieval philosophy, to astrology and according to some, to mystical concepts. Ibn Ezra employs such

¹ See *The Secret of the Torah: A Translation of Abraham ibn Ezra’s Sefer Yesod Mora Ve-Sod Ha-Torah*, translated and annotated by H. Norman Strickman (New Jersey, 1995) p. 17; henceforth, *The Secret of the Torah*. Also see R. *Avraham ibn Ezra, Yesod Mora Ve-Sod Torah* by Joseph Cohen and Uriel Simon (Ramat Gan, 2007) p. 76; henceforth *Yesod Mora*.

² Julius Guttmann, *Philosophies of Judaism* (New York, 1964) p. 118.

³ Dov Schwartz, *Central Problems of Medieval Jewish Philosophy* (Boston, 2005) p. 21.

⁴ This section was probably written independently of I.E.’s long Commentary on Exodus and later inserted there. The Section is also found with some variants in abridged form in the *Yesod Mora* 12:3, p. 176–179 and in abridged form in I.E.’s short commentary (henceforth S.C.) on Exodus 33:18. What we note here also applies to S.C. Ex. 33:21 and *Yesod Mora* 12:3.

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terms as *Yotzer Be-Reshit* (creator of the beginning); *Sar ha-Panim* (prince of the face); *Sar ha-Ko'ach* (prince of power); the *Po'el* (the Worker) and the *Kavod* (the Glory). He notes that Man moves towards the face; the body which is on high moves towards the right and that “God is all, with the all, in the all.”

The commentaries differ as to what these terms mean and how we should interpret them.

Ex. 33:18 tells us that Moses asked God: “Show me, I pray Thee, Thy glory (Ex. 33:18).” God then responded: “Thou canst not see My face, for man shall not see Me and live.” However, God offered Moses the next best thing: He told him: “Behold, there is a place by Me, and thou shalt stand upon the rock. And it shall come to pass, while My glory passeth by, that I will put thee in a cleft of the rock, and will cover thee with My hand until I have passed by. And I will take away My hand, and thou shalt see My back; but My face shall not be seen” (Ex. 33:21–23). Moses’ question and God’s answer troubled the medieval Jewish Bible commentators. They insisted that God is incorporeal and has no face or back. Yet here Scripture speaks of God having both a face and a back.

In the first section of his comments opening with “Abraham the author says,” Ibn Ezra seeks to explain what Scripture means by “thou shalt see My back.” Ibn Ezra’s explanation is unclear. The commentaries differ as to what he means. His explanation requires explanation. I will first quote Ibn Ezra’s comments and then do my best to explain them. Alternate interpretations will in most instances be noted in the footnotes.

Ibn Ezra prefaces his comments on “thou shalt see my back” with a number of comments on God’s relationship to the world.

Abraham the author states: I have previously explained that the name of God which is written but not pronounced is a proper name. This proper name refers to the Glory.

If you add up all the letters of God’s proper name you get seventy-two. The sages therefore said that it is God’s explicit name.

If you add the square of one, the first number, to the square of five, the true middle number, you will get the numerical equivalent of God’s name. This is also true regarding the five moving stars.

When you add up the letters that make up the words that one enunciates in sounding half of God’s name you will also get the numerical equivalent of God’s name.

When you add up the squares of the first four square numbers you get the numerical equivalent of half of God’s name.

When you multiply the first half of God’s name by the second half of God’s name you get the square of the odd numbers.

When you subtract the square of the first letter of God’s name from the sum of the squares of each of the first two letters of God’s name, the