

Ibn Ezra: ‘The All Knows Every Part via the All’

By: H. NORMAN STRICKMAN

A number of Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra’s annotations to Scripture have troubled some readers of his commentaries, for they seem to contradict accepted Jewish beliefs.¹

For example, Genesis 18:21 reads:

And the Lord said: “Verily, the cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is great, and, verily, their sin is exceeding grievous. I will go down now and see whether they have done altogether according to the cry of it, which is come unto Me; and if not, I will know.”

Ibn Ezra comments:

I believe that this verse is to be explained as follows: I will go down and see if all of them have done this evil. For in truth, the All knows every part via the all, not via the part.² Proof that this interpretation is correct, although it is a great mystery, is Abraham’s plea, “Wilt Thou indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked” (ibid. 23).

Ibn Ezra’s comment “For in truth, the All knows every part via the all, not via the part” is cryptic.³ The commentaries differ as to its meaning and they offer five different interpretations:

¹ See footnotes: 20, 22, 23, 27.

² כי האמת שהכל ידע כל חלק, על דרך כל, ולא על דרך חלק. והעד כי זה הפירוש הוא האמת, ואם הוא סוד גדול שאמר אברהם, האף תספה

³ Seymour Feldman, *The Wars of the Lord*, vol. 2 (Philadelphia: JPS, 1987), p. 137.

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Interpretation 1. God (the All) does not know the individual (the part, the particular) as such. He knows what the particular has in common with the all (the kind).

Interpretation 2. God's knowledge takes in the kind (the all) and all of its parts.

Interpretation 3. The "parts" refer to non-Jews.

Interpretation 4. "The All knows every part via the all, not via the part" deals with how God determines whether a group is righteous or wicked.

Interpretation 5. God's knowledge takes in the kind plus those individuals who cleave to God.

We now proceed to analyze each of the above interpretations.

Interpretation 1. God (the All) does not know the individual (the part, the particular) as such. He only knows what the particular has in common with the kind (the all).

Many commentaries found the above very disturbing. It seems to contradict traditional Jewish belief. The *Mishnah* teaches:

Know what is above you: An eye that sees, an ear that hears, and all of your deeds are recorded in a book.⁴

The Talmud states:

Even a light conversation between a man and his wife are recalled on the day of Judgement.⁵

No man bruises his finger here on earth unless it was so decreed against him from On High.⁶

If a person sees that suffering comes upon him, let him examine his conduct.⁷

On Rosh Hashanah, all the inhabitants of the world pass before God like a flock of sheep.⁸

⁴ *Avot* 2:1.

⁵ *Hagigah* 5b.

⁶ *Hullin* 7b.

⁷ *Berakhot* 5a.

⁸ *Rosh Hashanah* 1:2.

The Jerusalem Talmud relates that Rabbi Shimon b. Yochai once saw a hunter spread his net over a bird. He then heard a heavenly voice declare, "Mercy." The bird escaped.⁹

One of the Rosh Hashanah prayers, the *Zikbronot*, reads,

You... are mindful of the deeds of every creature ... there is not a thing hidden from your eyes. You remember every deed. No one is kept out of your sight. All things are known to you.

Rabbi Judah Ha-Levi (c. 1075–1141) writes:

The religious person never acts, speaks or thinks without believing that he is observed by eyes which see and take note, which reward and punish and call to account for everything objectionable in word and deed...

Altogether he believes in and bears in mind the following words: "Consider three things, and thou wilt commit no sin; understand what is above thee, an all-seeing eye and a hearing ear, and all thine actions are written in a book" (*Avot* 2:1). He further recalls the convincing proof adduced by David: "He that planted the ear, shall He not hear; He that formed the eye, shall He not see?"¹⁰

Maimonides summarized the Jewish view regarding God's knowledge of human behavior as follows.

All evils and afflictions as well as all kinds of happiness of man, whether they concern one individual person or a community, are distributed according to justice; they are the result of strict judgment that admits no wrong whatever.

Even when a person suffers pain in consequence of a thorn having entered into his hand, although it is at once drawn out, it is a punishment that has been inflicted on him [for sin], and the least pleasure he enjoys is a reward [for some good action]. All this is meted out by strict justice; as is said in Scripture, "all His ways are judgment" (Deut. 32: 4).¹¹

God knows all that men do and never turns His eyes away from them, as those who say "The Lord has abandoned this earth" (Ezek. 8:12, 9:9) claim. Rather, as Scripture has it, "Great in counsel, mighty in insight (is God), Whose eyes are open to all the ways of men" (Jer.

⁹ Jerusalem Talmud, *Shevi'it* 9:1.

¹⁰ Judah Ha-Levi, *Kitab al Khazari (Kuzari)* 3:11, translated by Hartwig Hirschfeld, 1907, <https://www.worldcat.org/title/kuzari-kitab-al-khazari>

¹¹ *The Guide for the Perplexed*. Translated by M. Friedlander (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1904) 3:17, p. 285.

32:19), or “The Lord saw that great was the evil of man on earth” (Gen. 6:5), or the verse, “The cry of Sodom and Gomorrah is powerful” (ibid. 18:20).¹²

Pious Jews accepted the above verbatim.¹³ Hence, Ibn Ezra’s comment, if interpreted to mean that God does not know the individual, presents a major problem. It, as noted above, seems to contradict a basic Jewish teaching.

The famous Bible and Talmud commentator and mystic Rabbi Moses b. Nachman (Ramban) (1194–1270) claims that Ibn Ezra’s comment to Gen. 18:21 is based on non-Jewish sources. He writes:

Rabbi Abraham... pleases himself with the brood of aliens.¹⁴

The phrase used by Ramban to characterize Ibn Ezra’s explanation of Gen. 18:21 is based on Isaiah 2:6. The latter condemns Israel for imitating pagans. It reads, “For they (Israel) are replenished from the east, and with soothsayers like the Philistines, and they please themselves in the brood of aliens” (Isaiah 2:6).¹⁵

The “brood of aliens” that Ramban had in mind was Aristotle and his disciples. The latter taught that God does not know the particulars.

¹² Maimonides, *Introduction to Perek Helek*; Maimonides Heritage Center, <https://www.mhcn.org/qt/1005.pdf>. Though Maimonides later nuanced what he said in the above quotes (see *Guide for the Perplexed* 3:18, 20), we can be sure that the above description of God’s providence was accepted at face value by most pious Jews.

¹³ The Chasidic movement stresses God’s providence over all of creation, man and beast. Rabbi Pinchas of Koretz taught: “A person must believe that even a straw which lies on the ground does so because God decreed where it should lie and what compass points its ends shall face” (*Be’er La-Yesharim* 38 [Benei Berak: 5788]).

Rabbi Menachem Mendel of Vitebsk taught: “There is no grass that is uprooted, and there is no stone thrown except at its proper time... [there is no movement] large or small that is not directed by God” (*Peri Ha-Aretz* [Russia, 1980], Torah Portion *Bo*).

Rabbi Chaim Halberstam writes, “No living creature could exist without the creator of all the worlds giving it life and feeding it. It is all by God’s providence. The truth is that a bird is not caught unless it is so decreed by providence from On High. This is so even though Rambam has a different opinion.” (*Divrei Chayyim al Ha-Torah, Parshat Mikketz* [Brooklyn, 1980]).

The above, with some variations, is the commonly accepted view among Orthodox Jews. It is the one taught in *yeshivot*.

¹⁴ Ramban Gen. 18:20: ורבי אברהם אמר בו סוד: מילדי נכרים יספיקו בו.

¹⁵ בית, יעקב--לכו ונלכה, באור יי. ו כי נטשתה, עמך בית יעקב--כי מלאו מקדש, וענגים בפלשתים; ובילדי נכרים, ישפיקו.

Maimonides (1138–1204) cites Aristotle as teaching the following:

Whilst one part of the Universe owes its existence to Providence and is under the control of a ruler and governor, another part is abandoned and left to chance... [Aristotle] holds that God controls the spheres and what they contain... From the existence of the spheres other beings derive existence, which are constant in their species but not in their individuals... Providence sends forth [from the spheres to the earth] sufficient influence to secure the immortality and constancy of the species, without securing at the same time permanence for the individual beings of the species... Each individual being [receives] ...such properties as are required for the preservation of the species to which it belongs... each individual... is enabled to manage, to calculate, and to discover what is conducive both to the temporary existence of the individual and to the preservation of the species. All other movements, however, which are made by the individual members of each species are due to accident; they are not, according to Aristotle, the result of rule and management; e.g., when a storm or gale blows, it causes undoubtedly some leaves of a tree to drop, breaks off some branches of another tree, tears away a stone from a heap of stones, raises dust over herbs and spoils them, and stirs up the sea so that a ship goes down with the whole or part of her contents. Aristotle sees no difference between the falling of a leaf or a stone and the death of the good and noble people in the ship. Nor does he distinguish between the destruction of a multitude of ants caused by an ox depositing on them his excrement and the death of worshippers killed by the fall of the house when its foundations give way. Nor does he discriminate between the case of a cat killing a mouse that happens to come in her way, or that of a spider catching a fly, and that of a hungry lion meeting a prophet and tearing him. In short, the opinion of Aristotle is this: Everything is the result of management which is constant, which does not come to an end and does not change any of its properties, as e.g., the heavenly beings, and everything which continues according to a certain rule, and deviates from it only rarely and exceptionally, as is the case in objects of Nature. All these are the result of management, i.e., in a close relation to Divine Providence. But that which is not constant, and does not follow a certain rule, as e.g., incidents in the existence of the individual beings in each species of plants or animals, whether rational or irrational, is due to chance and not to management; it is in no relation to Divine Providence.

Aristotle holds that it is even impossible to ascribe to Providence the management of these things... This view ... is the belief of those who

turned away from our Law and said, “God hath forsaken the earth” (Ezek. 9: 9).¹⁶

While Ramban only hinted at what Ibn Ezra meant by “the All knows every part via the all, not via the part,” the Biblical exegete and philosopher Rabbi Joseph Ibn Kaspi (1280 Arles–1345)¹⁷ was more explicit. Rabbi Kaspi claims that Ibn Ezra’s statement that “the All knows every part via the all, not via the part” means that God knows all that will eventually befall the world due to the laws of nature. He knows that the aforementioned will affect individuals. However, he does not know what will befall a specific individual, for individuals are transient and God only knows that which is permanent.¹⁸

Rabbi Levi b. Gershom (Ralbag) (1288–1344) interpreted Ibn Ezra similarly:

God the exalted knows all that will happen in this the lowest of all worlds. [He knows all] aside from the acts of man. What God knows regarding man’s action is that which is destined to befall them due to the decrees of heavenly bodies on the day of their birth... However, he does not know things which are possible [that is, things that may or not come about].¹⁹

In other words, God knows what nature has programmed for the world or its inhabitants as a whole. However, He does not know what choices a person will make or what may accidentally befall him.

¹⁶ Rambam, *The Guide for the Perplexed*, translated by M. Friedlander (Pardes Pub. Press, 1946; Dover, 1956) 3:17, pp. 282–283.

¹⁷ Rabbi Joseph Ibn Kaspi wrote a commentary on Ibn Ezra’s annotations to the Bible called “*Parashat Kesef*.” See “*Parashat Kesef*,” edited by David Ben-Zaron in *Five Early Commentators on R. Abraham Ibn Ezra*, H. Kreisel, Editor in Chief (Be’er Sheva University of the Negev, 2017) p. 87.

¹⁸ שהכל ידע כל חלק על דרך כל ולא על דרך חלק. ועל זה פירש רבי אברהם: כי השם יודע כל מה שעתיד להיות בעולם וכל החלקים ההויים על דרך כלל, כלומר: כי הוא יודע כח כל הגלגלים וכי בכחם יש לעשות מה שעושים בעולם. ולא על דרך חלק. פירוש לא יצאו החלקים אל גבול ההויה, כי החלקים משתנים ואין בידיעת הבורא, ואין לפרש זהו שנאמר: וזהו סוד גדול. פירוש אחר: כי הכל ידע החלק על דרך כלל לא על דרך חלק ר"ל שהשם ישגיח בחלק כשיהיה מציאות החלק על צד המכוון במציאות מינו. אבל כשהחלק אינו נמצא כי אם על מציאות האישי-איננו מושגה שאם יהיה מושגה ימשך מזה התחדשות רצון.

¹⁹ Ralbag, *Commentary on the Torah*, edited by Menachem Cohen (Bar Ilan University, 1998) *Parashat Va-Yera*, p. 231.

Ralbag claims that Ibn Ezra is of the same opinion.²⁰ He claims that this is what Ibn Ezra means by "For in truth, the All knows every part via the all, not via the part."

Abarbanel accepted Ralbag's interpretation of Ibn Ezra. However, whereas Ralbag referred to Ibn Ezra as a sage whose opinion is in keeping with the teachings of the Torah, Abarbanel was incensed at Ibn Ezra for implying that God does not know the particulars. He declares this opinion heretical and contrary to the Torah.²¹ He notes that Rabbi Hasdai Crescas (1340–1410) also condemned this opinion and referred to it as heresy.²²

Interpretation 2. God's knowledge takes in the kind and its parts.

These commentaries maintain that there is nothing untraditional in Ibn Ezra's comments. They insist that Ibn Ezra would never say that God does not know the individual as an individual. These interpreters claim that such readings of Ibn Ezra are wrong.

Thus Rabbi Shem Tov Ibn Shaprut (fourteenth century) asserts that those who hated Ibn Ezra deliberately misinterpreted his comments to Gen. 18:21.²³

Rabbi Elazar b. Matityahu (thirteenth century) writes: "Some of the wise men... who came after this sage (Ibn Ezra) charged that Ibn Ezra

²⁰ יהודה איזנברג ... רבי לוי בן גרשון, הרלב"ג, ספר מלחמות השם, אתר דעת תשע"ז, דף קמט, והנה ספר הרב המורה זכרונו לברכה בפרק העשרים מהחלק השלישי מספרו הנכבד מורה הנבוכים שכבר נטו קצת בעלי העיון שהידיעה נתלית במין ומתפשטת על שאר אישי המין בענין אחד, ואמר שזוה הוא דעת כל בעל תורה לפי מה שהביא אליו הכרח.

[ו]החכם רב אברהם אבן עזרא זכרונו לברכה הוא מזה הכת, כי הוא אמר בפירושו לדברי תורתנו התורה והאמת שהוא ידע כל חלק על דרך חלק. וכבר יראה הראות יותר שלם שדעת אצל המאמר בענין ידיעת השם יתברך מסכים למה שהביא אליו העיון במה שיבא אחר זה. בהשגחה לפי דעת תורתנו.

²¹ Abarbanel's *Commentary to the Torah*; Genesis 18:20, <https://mg.alhatorah.org/Dual/Abarbanel/Bereshit/18.1#m7e0n6>.

כתב הראב"ע ארדה נא ואראה אם עשו כלם הרעה הזאת כי האמת ידע כל חלק ע"ד כל ולא ע"ד חלק. ולפי שכסתה כלימה פניו לבאר דעתו עשאו סוד ובא רעהו וחקרו הרלב"ג שביאר לכל אדם במ"ג ממלחמותיו ובפרושו לתורה בזה המקום שמה שידע ית' מפעלות בני אדם הוא המסודר להם מהגרמים השממיים ומהצד שהם דברים מסודרים מוגבלים ידעם ואולם מה שהוא אפשרי ובבחירת האדם או מקריי לא תתכן בו הידיעה האלהית וכתב שזוה הדעת הוא מחוייב מצד התורה ומצד הענין והתבאר בו מאד ופער פיו ולשונו כנגד הרב המורה במה שחשב זולת זה אבל רבי חסדאי השיב עליו דברים נכוחים וביאר שהדעת הזוה הוא כפירה מוחלקת כפי התורה.

²² Ibid.

²³ See Abe Lipshitz, *Ibn Ezra Studies* (Hebrew), (Jerusalem: Mosad Harav Kook, 1982), p. 33, fn. 50.

taught that God does not take notice of the deeds of the individual who make up the kind.”

Rabbi Elazar b. Matityahu then goes on to show that these “wise men” misinterpreted Ibn Ezra.²⁴

Rabbi Shemu’el Tzartzah Ibn Senah (ca. 1369)²⁵ similarly writes, “Many men who consider themselves wise find fault with this wise man (Ibn Ezra) because of his... comment [to Gen. 18:21]. However, they misunderstand him.”²⁶

Rabbi Shelomoh Ha-Kohen of Lissa (eighteenth century) writes, “The earlier sages sharply criticized what the Rabbi (Ibn Ezra) wrote because his manner of writing led to misinterpretation. Furthermore, people who perverted their ways, learned from his words to deceive [the readers of Ibn Ezra]. They were able to twist his words.²⁷ They quoted Ibn Ezra in support of their corrupt opinions.²⁸ Hence, I said it is a time to expound and interpret [the words of Ibn Ezra]. Please judge [what I write] and [you will] see that there is no deceit and corruption in Ibn Ezra’s thinking.”²⁹

J.L. Krinski (early twentieth century) comments: “The wise man (Ibn Ezra) did not reject, in his comments, God’s knowledge of the particulars, for no thought is hidden from the Omnipotent.”³⁰

Rabbi Yeshayah b. Meir (thirteenth century) explains “The All knows the part via the all, not via the part” as follows:

When a person sees something, he cannot know all of its parts until he actually sees each part by itself. However, God, blessed be He, knows each part by knowing the whole; he does not learn anything new, part by part.³¹

²⁴ Rabbi Elazar b. Matityahu’s Supercommentary on Ibn Ezra, edited by Orli Shoshan in *Five Early Commentators on R. Abraham Ibn Ezra*, H. Kreisel, editor-in-chief (Be’er Sheva: University of the Negev, 2017), p. 143.

²⁵ Author of *Zafanat Pa’aneah, Fountain of Life*, a supercommentary on Ibn Ezra.

²⁶ *Mekor Chayyim* in *Margaliyot Tuva* (Jerusalem, 1973), p. 22.

²⁷ Ibn Ezra’s comments to Gen. 18:21 lend themselves to misinterpretation.

²⁸ Literally, they hung their corrupt words on a large tree.

²⁹ בראשית י”ח:כ”א: אבי עזר

ו**אם לא אדעה וגו** כבר צוחו קמאי על דברי הרב שנתן מקום לטעות בדבריו. גם אנשים אשר מבעטים ארחותם למדו מתוכה לשקר. וכאן עלה להשחית דבריו. ותולין דבריהם הנשחתים באילן גדול על כן אמרתי עת לדבר ולפרש. שפטו נא וראו כי אין רמיה. ודעת כוזבת במחשבותיו. הביטו בספר קהלת א, וז”ל היוצר לבם יודע הכלל ופרט

³⁰ Judah Leib Krinsky, *Humash Mehokekei Yebudab* (N.Y., 1975), Gen. 18:21, p. 124.

According to Rabbi Yeshayah b. Meir, the “All knows the part via the all, not via the part” is similar to the rabbinic statement that on Rosh Hashanah all humanity “is viewed with one glance” and “the Creator sees their hearts together.”³²

Rabbi Yeshayah b. Meir goes on to say that Abraham’s plea, “Wilt Thou indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked” (ibid. 23) should be understood as follows:

Since you, God, know the part “via the all,” why destroy the wicked along with the righteous? You know who is wicked and who is righteous.³³

Ahavat Nefesh, a popular fourteenth-century supercommentary to Ibn Ezra, whose author is unknown, similarly explains Ibn Ezra’s comment on Gen. 18:21:

God, whose knowledge takes in all, knows all that exists within His all-encompassing knowledge, for everything is pictured in His essence, and He does not have to examine the world piece by piece as a person does...³⁴

Similarly, Prof. Uriel Simon³⁵ and Joseph Cohen³⁶ explain that Ibn Ezra refers to God’s knowledge as knowledge of the whole because when God knows the part He fully knows it. However, a human being can only attain partial knowledge of any thing. Man’s knowledge is called knowledge of the particulars because that is all that man can know.

Interpretation 3. The “parts” refer to non-Jews.

Rabbi Nehemiah Sheinfeld, who currently lives in Jerusalem, published a commentary on Ibn Ezra called *Da’at Ezra*.³⁷ He accepts the interpretation that “The All knows every part via the all” means that

³¹ Rabbi Yeshayah b. Meir’s supercommentary on Ibn Ezra, edited by Eliezer Davidowitz, in *Five Early Commentators on R. Abraham Ibn Ezra*, H. Kreisel, editor-in-chief (Be’er Sheva: University of the Negev, 2017), p. 144.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ *Ahavat Nefesh*, supercommentary on Ibn Ezra, edited by H. Kreisel, in “Five Early Commentators on R. Abraham Ibn Ezra,” H. Kreisel, editor in-chief (Be’er Sheva: University of the Negev, 2017) p. 145.

³⁵ *Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra Yesod Mora Ve-Sod Ha-Torah*, edited by Joseph Cohen and Uriel Simon (Bar Ilan University Press, 2007), p. 175.

³⁶ Joseph Cohen, *Heguto Ha-Filosofit Shel R. Avraham Ibn Ezra* (Israel, 1996) p. 260.

³⁷ Rabbi Nehemiah Sheinfeld, *Da’at Ezra* (Jerusalem: 2010).

God's providence does not know the individual as an individual. However, he applies it to non-Jews.³⁸ He writes, "God's providence over the nations of the world is not upon the individual, but is upon the group."³⁹ On the other hand, God's providence upon Israel extends to every Jew.

Interpretation 4. "The All knows every part via the all, not via the part" deals with how God determines whether a group is righteous or wicked.

Rabbi Yitzhak Meller (nineteenth century) maintains that "the All knows every part via the all, not via the part" deals with reward and punishment. It teaches that God is only concerned with the majority of the group and not its parts when it comes to recompense. In other words, if the majority of a group is righteous then the entire group is judged as righteous.⁴⁰ However, if the majority of the group is wicked then the entire group is treated as wicked.⁴¹

Interpretation 5. God's knowledge takes in the kind plus those individuals who cleave to God.

Rabbi Joseph b. Eliezer Tov Elem (fourteenth century), the author of the *Zafnat Pa'aneah*, a supercommentary to Ibn Ezra's exposition of the Torah, points out that Ibn Ezra notes that the philosophers teach that God only knows that which is eternal and unchanging.⁴²

Rabbi Eliezer Tov Elem implies that Ibn Ezra accepted the position of the philosophers with a proviso. What the philosophers said applies only to those who do not cleave to God. However, God's knowledge and hence His providence extends to the righteous who attach themselves to God.

Thus, according to Rabbi Eliezer Tov Elem "the All knows every part via the all, not via the part" is to be interpreted as follows: God knows

³⁸ Ibid., Genesis 21.

³⁹ דעת רבינו... היא שהשגחת הקב"ה על אומות העולם אינה פרטית כי אם כללית.

⁴⁰ Yitzchak Meller, *Ezrah Lehaviv* (Berditchev, 1900) p. 30:
אם רובם צדיקים הרי רובם ככולם... ואם רובם רשעים יאבדו הכל
their punishment in due time.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Ohel Yosef in *Margaliyot Tuva*, p. 22a.

humankind. He does not know the particulars.⁴³ However, an individual can become part of the kind and thus come under God's providence if he cleaves to God.⁴⁴

Rabbi Moshe b. Yehudah *min ha-ne'arim* (fourteenth century) similarly notes "the All knows every part via the all, not via the part" means that God is only aware of the kind. However, when a particular member of humankind cleaves to God, he is known by God. Rabbi Moshe writes:

The parts are known... by God Blessed be He as part of the whole, they have no individual status. However, when an individual is found to be fully perfect then... this individual is known by God as a separate being because he cleaves to the All...⁴⁵

Problems with Interpretation 1. God's Knowledge of the Particulars.

While "The All knows every part via the all" can be interpreted to mean that God is only aware of the all, there are a number of instances in which Ibn Ezra clearly states that God knows the individual.

For example, Exodus 20:6 reads, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain; for the Lord will not hold him guiltless that taketh His name in vain." Ibn Ezra comments, "The one who swears falsely follows the opinion of the wise men of India who say that God does not know the details (the parts), for if the one who swears falsely by the name of God would believe that the Lord hears his oath, he would fear God [and not swear falsely by His name]."⁴⁶

Psalms 94:9 reads, "He that planted the ear, shall he not hear? He that formed the eye, shall he not see?" Ibn Ezra comments, "This is a very strong argument for God's awareness of what occurs on earth. Our verse maintains that God has no need for eyes and ears for He gives to the eyes the ability to see and to the ear the ability to hear."⁴⁷

⁴³ Ibid. שהשם יודע כל הנמצאים בעולם השפל ומשגיח עליהם בדרך כלל ר"ל שהוא משגיח על כל המינים שיעמדו תמיד ולא יאבדו. ואינו משגיח בפרטים.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 22b: כי הש"י יודע את הדבקים בו ומשגיח עליהם כי בהדבקים ישוב להיות כמלאכים: 22b:

⁴⁵ Rabbi Moshe b. Yehudah *min ha-ne'arim's* Supercommentary on Ibn Ezra, edited by Ofar Elijor in *Five Early Commentators on R. Abraham Ibn Ezra*, H. Kreisler, editor-in-chief (Be'er Sheva: University of the Negev, 2017), p. 146:

שהחלקים, הכוונה הפרטים, יודעו, וישגו אצל ה' יתברך על אופן כללי מסולק מן הפרטות. אולם כאשר ימצא פרטי אחד שלם בשלימות הראוי, יאמר שהפרטי הוא יושגו ממנו השגה פרטות לסבת הדבקות בכללי.

⁴⁶ Ibn Ezra, Exodus, 20:1. Short Commentary.

⁴⁷ Literally, He gives power to the eyes to see and to the ear to hear.

Thus, sight and hearing come from the Lord. How then can one argue that God is not aware of everything? Ibn Ezra also writes, “The Creator knows the kind and the particulars, for He created them all.”⁴⁸ “God knows what is in a person’s heart.”⁴⁹

Aside from writing comments to Scripture, Ibn Ezra also composed poetry. A large portion of his poetry was of a religious nature. In fact, some of his poems are to be found in the prayer book.⁵⁰ His religious verse reveals a belief in God’s knowledge of the particulars.⁵¹ One of his poems reads:

For all the sons of men
Thou hast a book prepared
Where, without hand or pen,
Their deeds are all declared.⁵²

Another poem reads:

O God, You have searched me and know my mind;
You discern my thoughts from afar, You are privy to my every move.
You anticipate my plans; my walking and reclining.
You observe and are familiar with my ways.
You see the word forming in my heart before it reaches
My tongue.⁵³

The above appears to confirm the opinion of those who say that Ibn Ezra held that God knows the particulars. However, it contradicts Ibn

⁴⁸ Ibn Ezra, *Kobelet* 1:8.

⁴⁹ Ibn Ezra, Exodus 18:25.

⁵⁰ Israel Levin, *Shirei Ha-Kodesh shel Avraham Ibn Ezra*, vol.1 (1976), p. 44.

⁵¹ There are those who question the use of poetry in ascertaining the philosophic views of the poet. See Joseph Cohen, *Heguto Ha-Filosofit shel R. Avraham Ibn Ezra* (Israel, 1996), p. 43: בשל החשש שתפארת לא נתייחס לדעות והשקפות המבעות בשירה... המליצה מאפילה על הדיוק בהבעת הרעיון. See also *The Poetry of Philosophy* (Hebrew), edited by Ephraim Hazan and Dov Schwartz (Bar Ilan University Press, 2016), p. 48. The authors quote Ezra Fleisher who writes: השירה אינה מקום להגות, אדם הוגה אינו כותב שירה, הוא כותב חיבר פילוסופי, שירה והגות..הן מין בשאינו מינו.

The above should not be taken as the final word on the relationship between ideas expressed in poems and those expressed in philosophic writings. Each case should be judged on its own terms.

⁵² “Hymn of Praise,” translated by Alice Lucas, from Alice Lucas, *The Jewish Year* (New York: Bloch, 1926).

⁵³ “God’s Providence” in Leon J. Weinberger, *Twilight of a Golden Age: Selected Poems of Abraham Ibn Ezra* (The University of Alabama Press, 1997), p. 130.

Ezra's comment to Psalms 73:12⁵⁴ where he writes that God "knows the kinds, which are permanent. However, the parts, the particulars, are constantly changing. God does not know them because they are not everlasting."⁵⁵

Some might argue that Ibn Ezra wrote for two audiences⁵⁶—one, those trained in philosophical thought; the other, those not so trained. The statement that God knows the kinds, which are permanent, but does not know the particulars, because they are not everlasting, is aimed at the philosophically trained, whereas his comments regarding those who swear falsely and other such comments are directed to those not so trained.

There is, however, another possibility. Towards the end of his life Ibn Ezra wrote a work called *Yesod Mora*. In chapter 10 of this work Ibn Ezra discusses God. He mentions his belief that God knows the parts via his knowledge of the whole:

A person must know that the Lord is One and that there is no being to anything that exists unless it cleaves to God.⁵⁷ Scripture therefore says, *And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart* (Deuteronomy 6:5). The meaning of the latter is, "If you desire to exist in This World and also in the World to Come, then love God. I will allude to this secret at the end of the book. It⁵⁸ is the foundation of all wisdom.⁵⁹ God alone is the Creator of all. God knows the particulars by His knowledge of the whole, for the particulars are in flux."⁶⁰

The statement: "God knows the particulars by His knowledge of the whole, for the particulars are in flux" is very similar to Ibn Ezra's comment to Gen. 18:21 that "The All knows every part via the all, not via the part." However, not all of the interpretations given to Gen. 18:21 apply to Ibn Ezra's statement in the *Yesod Mora*. Thus Ibn Ezra's dictum

⁵⁴ See Joseph Cohen, *Heguto Ha-Filosofit shel R. Avraham Ibn Ezra* (Israel, 1996), p. 260. Cohen believes that Ibn Ezra's comment to Psalm 73:12 clearly shows that Ibn Ezra believes that God does not know the particulars.

⁵⁵ והוא חכם לב שידע הכללים שהם עומדים והחלקים שהם הפרטים הם משתנים בכל עת כן לא ידעם השם כי אינם עומדים .

⁵⁶ See Dov Schwartz's, review of M. Halbertal's, *Concealment and Revelation: The Secret and Its Boundaries in Medieval Tradition* (Hebrew), Zion, LXVIII, p. 114. 56.

⁵⁷ I.E.'s paraphrase of Hear O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is One. And these words . . . shall be upon thy heart.

⁵⁸ The knowledge and love of God.

⁵⁹ Maimonides employs practically the same language in his *Mishneh Torah*. See *Sefer Ha-Madda* 1:1, "The foundation of foundations and the pillar of all wisdom is to know that there is a first cause."

⁶⁰ "The Secret of the Torah: A Translation of Abraham Ibn Ezra's *Sefer Yesod Mora Ve-Sod Ha-Torah*" by H. Norman Strickman (Kodesh Press, 2021) p. 111.

in the *Yesod Mora* can serve as a yardstick by which to assess the interpretations offered for his comment on Genesis 18:21.

In fact, Ibn Ezra's statement in the *Yesod Mora* that "God knows the particulars by His knowledge of the whole, for the particulars are in flux" eliminates three of the five earlier mentioned interpretations of "The All knows every part via the all, not via the part" (Ibn Ezra to Gen. 18:21). They are:

Problem with Interpretation 4. "The All knows every part via the all, not via the part" deals with how God determines whether a group is righteous or wicked.

Nowhere in the section cited from the *Yesod Mora* does Ibn Ezra deal with the issue of how God determines whether a group is righteous or wicked.

Problem with Interpretation 3. "The All knows every part via the all, not via the part" refers to non-Jews.

What we noted above with regards to "The All knows every part via the all, not via the part, deals with how God determines whether a group is righteous or wicked" also applies here. Nowhere in the section cited from the *Yesod Mora* does Ibn Ezra deal with non-Jews. Hence it is a far stretch to maintain that "The All knows every part via the all, not via the part" applies to non-Jews.

Furthermore, Ibn Ezra makes a comment on Ps. 1:6 which is very similar to his comment on Gen. 18:21. He writes,

There is no doubt that the revered God knows the whole and the particulars. The whole is the soul of all life that animates all created beings. The particulars refer to each one of the species. The particulars also refer to each and every individual creature of the kind, for they are all the work of His hands. However, the knowledge of each individual be he righteous or wicked is by way of the whole.

Psalm 1:6 deals with Jews. It is thus clear that Ibn Ezra's comment to Gen. 18:21, however we interpret it, also refers to Jews.

Problem with Interpretation 2. "The All knows every part via the all, not via the part" means, God fully knows the part.

If "God knows the particulars by His knowledge of the whole, for the particulars are in flux" means, God fully knows the particulars then Ibn Ezra should have read, "God knows the particulars by His knowledge of the whole," period. Why add "for the particulars are in flux"? What sense is there to "God fully knows the parts, because the parts are in flux?"

This being so, we are left with two possible interpretations for “The All knows every part via the all, not via the part.” They are Interpretation 1 and Interpretation 5.

Problem with Interpretation 1. God (the All) does not know the individual (the part, the particular) as such. He only knows what the particular has in common with the all.

The above contradicts tradition. It also, as earlier noted, contradicts what Ibn Ezra writes elsewhere.

Problem with Interpretation 5. God’s knowledge takes in humankind as a whole and those individuals who cleave to God.

According to Joseph Cohen, “The All knows every part via the all, not via the part,” represents the thinking of Ibn Ezra. Ibn Ezra believes that God does not know the individual, for the individual is transient and God only knows that which is permanent. However, the transient may become lasting by cleaving to God. In this case God knows him, for he has become an eternal being.

Cohen’s interpretation is in keeping with the opinions of Rabbi Joseph b. Eliezer Tov Elem and Rabbi Moshe b. Yehudah *min ba-ne’arim*. This view is supported by what Ibn Ezra writes in the *Yesod Mora*, namely:

The intelligent person will understand that life is short, that the soul is in the hand of its Creator, and that one does not know when God will reclaim it. He will therefore seek after all things that lead a person to the love of God. The wise person will study the sciences. He will investigate belief so that he recognizes and understands the work of God. The intelligent man will not occupy himself with the vanities of the world. On the contrary, he will isolate himself for the purpose of studying and meditating upon God’s law and observing the Lord’s precepts. God will then open the eyes of his heart and will create a new and different spirit in him. He will be beloved of his Creator while he is yet alive. His soul will cleave to God and enjoy the fullness of the joy of God’s presence. Furthermore, God’s right hand of bliss will be eternally upon his soul when it separates from the body.

Man’s soul is unique.⁶¹ When given by God, it is like a tablet set before a scribe. When God’s writing, which consists of the

⁶¹ Man is created in God’s image. According to I.E., this refers to man’s soul. See I.E. on Genesis 1:26. I.E. thus points out that man’s soul, like that of its Creator, is unique.

categorical knowledge of the things made⁶² out of the four elements,⁶³ the knowledge of the spheres, the throne of glory, the secret of the chariot,⁶⁴ and the knowledge of the Most High, is inscribed on this tablet⁶⁵ the soul cleaves to God the Glorious while it is yet in man and also afterward when its power is removed from the body⁶⁶ which is its place⁶⁷[here on Earth]. [Scripture states:] “And these words [... shall be upon thy heart]” (Deuteronomy 6:6). This means that a person must know that the Lord is One and that there is no being to anything that exists unless it cleaves to God.⁶⁸ Scripture therefore says, *And thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart* (Deuteronomy 6:5). The meaning of the latter is, “If you desire to exist in This World and also in the World to Come, then love God.” I will allude to this secret at the end of the book. It⁶⁹ is the foundation of all wisdom.⁷⁰ God alone is the Creator of all. God knows the particulars by His knowledge of the whole, for the particulars are in flux.

According to the above, those segments of Ibn Ezra’s comments that speak of God knowing only the kind, speak of those who do not have a relationship to God. On the other hand, those sections of Ibn Ezra’s commentary that speak of God’s knowledge of the particular, speak of God’s knowledge of the individual who has a relationship with God. They speak of a person who is no longer a “part.”

The problem with this interpretation is that those portions of Ibn Ezra’s commentary which speak of God’s knowledge of the particular do

⁶² Lit. born.

⁶³ Lit. the four roots. See Chapter 1, n. 127. Like God, man must attain eternal knowledge. Hence, I.E. speaks of knowledge of the categories rather than knowledge of the particulars.

⁶⁴ Seen by Ezekiel. See Ezekiel, Chapter 1.

⁶⁵ Man’s soul.

⁶⁶ When it leaves the body. According to I.E., man must master the physical and the metaphysical sciences in order to attain immortality. In his introduction to *The Guide for the Perplexed*, Maimonides refers to the former as *ma’aseh bereshit* and to the latter as *ma’aseh merkavah*.

⁶⁷ Lit., palace.

⁶⁸ I.E.’s paraphrase of “Hear O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One” and “these words . . . shall be upon thy heart.”

⁶⁹ The knowledge and love of God.

⁷⁰ Maimonides employs practically the same language in his *Mishneh Torah*. See *Sefer Ha-Madda* 1:1, “The foundation of foundations and the pillar of all wisdom is, to know that there is a first cause.”

not indicate that Ibn Ezra is speaking only of those who are linked to God. We noted earlier that Psalm 94:9 reads:

He that planted the ear, shall he not hear? He that formed the eye,
shall he not see?

Ibn Ezra comments:

This is a very strong argument for God's awareness of what occurs on earth. Our verse maintains that God has no need for eyes and ears for He gives to the eyes the ability to see and to the ear the ability to hear. Thus, sight and hearing come from the Lord. How then can one argue that God is not aware of everything?

Nowhere in the above comment does Ibn Ezra indicate that the verse speaks only about a person who has a close relationship to God. The same applies to the other earlier cited references where Ibn Ezra indicates that God is aware of the particulars. In none of them does Ibn Ezra even hint that he speaks of people who are close to God.

A new approach

This being the case, we are faced with the above-cited contradictions in Ibn Ezra with regard to God's knowledge of the particulars. The question thus arises: Can these contradictions be reconciled? They can.

It is possible that Ibn Ezra, like Moses Maimonides, believes that God's knowledge is of a different nature than man's knowledge.

Maimonides believes that man has free will. He also believes that God knows the future. He writes:

One might ask: Since the Holy One, blessed be He, knows everything that will occur before it comes to pass, does He or does He not know whether a person will be righteous or wicked? If He knows that he will be righteous, [it appears] impossible for him not to be righteous. However, if one would say that despite God's knowledge that he would be righteous, it is possible for him to be wicked, then God's knowledge would be incomplete.⁷¹

Maimonides resolves the problem by maintaining that God's knowledge and human knowledge are of totally different natures. If *A* knows with a certainty that *B* is going to act in a certain way then *B* has no freedom of choice regarding what *A* knows he will do. However, if

⁷¹ Rambam, *Mishneh Torah* translated by Eliyahu Touger, *The Laws of Teshuvah*: 5:10. https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/682956/jewish/Mishneh-Torah.htm

God knows what a person will do, then the person is free to act as he or she wishes, for God's knowledge of the future does not determine how a person will act. In the words of Maimonides,

Know that the resolution to this question [can be described as], "Its measure is longer than the earth and broader than the sea." Many great and fundamental principles and lofty concepts are dependent upon it. However, the statements that I will make, must be known and understood [as a basis for the comprehension of this matter].

As explained in the second chapter of *Hilkebot Yesodei Ha-Torah*, the Holy One, blessed be He, does not know with a knowledge that is external from Him as do men, whose knowledge and selves are two [different entities]. Rather, He, may His name be praised, and His knowledge are one.

Human knowledge cannot comprehend this concept in its entirety for just as it is beyond the potential of man to comprehend and conceive the essential nature of the Creator, as [Exodus 33:20] states: "No man will perceive Me and live," so, too, it is beyond man's potential to comprehend and conceive the Creator's knowledge. This was the intent of the prophet's [Isaiah 55:8] statements: "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor your ways, My ways."⁷²

Maimonides makes this very same point in Chapter 3:20 of the *Guide*. He writes,

God's knowledge is not of the same kind as ours, but totally different from it and admitting of no analogy. . . . The homonymity of the term "knowledge" misled people; [they forgot that] only the words are the same, but the things designated by them are different: and therefore they came to the absurd conclusion that that which is required for our knowledge is also required for God's knowledge.⁷³

He notes:

It is generally agreed upon that God cannot at a certain time acquire knowledge which He did not possess previously; it is further impossible that His knowledge should include any plurality.

Philosophers decided that since... God's knowledge does not admit of any increase, it is impossible that He should know any transient thing. He only knows that which is constant and unchangeable.⁷⁴

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ *Guide for the Perplexed* 3:20. Translated by M. Friedlander (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1904), p. 293, second paragraph.

⁷⁴ Ibid., first paragraph.

[However,] every person who adheres to a revealed religion and follows the dictates of reason⁷⁵ accepts the opinion that knowledge has the kind for its object, and in a certain sense extends to all individual members of the kind.⁷⁶

Maimonides' statement that "Knowledge has the kind for its object, and in a certain sense extends to all individual members of the kind"⁷⁷ is very similar to Ibn Ezra's formulation that "the All knows every part via the all."⁷⁸ It can be rewritten as: The All knows the kind, and in a certain sense this knowledge extends to all individual parts of the kind.⁷⁹

Reconciling Ibn Ezra's seemingly contradictory statements

The question still remains: How do we reconcile Ibn Ezra's statements regarding God's knowledge of the individual with his comment that God "knows the kinds, which are permanent. However, the parts which are

⁷⁵ According to Orli Shoshan, Rabbi Elazar b. Matityahu believed that Maimonides was referring to Ibn Ezra. See Rabbi Elazar b. Matityahu's Supercommentary on Ibn Ezra, edited by Orli Shoshan, in *Five Early Commentators on R. Abraham Ibn Ezra*, p. 61.

⁷⁶ *Guide for the Perplexed* 3:20: כמה מבעלי-העיון דגלו בקביעה שהידיעה מתייחסת למין. זאת היא דעתו של כל בן-תורה ונמשכת אל כל פרטי המין במובן-מה. (Schwarz's rendition of the *Guide*). See note 58.

⁷⁷ "Species as such do not exist external to the mind. But in the mind of God they may be known as concepts—and through these concepts, apprehended in particulars." Lenn E. Goodman, *Rambam, Readings in the Philosophy of Moses Maimonides* (New York, 1976), p. 303.

⁷⁸ See Rabbi Elazar b. Matityahu's Supercommentary on Ibn Ezra, edited by Orli Shoshan, in *Five Early Commentators on R. Abraham Ibn Ezra*, p. 143. Also see Shoshan's comments on page 60 of her introduction to the above.

⁷⁹ They are even more similar in the Hebrew.
Ibn Ezra reads: על דרך כל חלק, על דרך כל.
Ibn Tibbon's translation of the *Guide* 30:10 (NY:Feldheim, 2019) reads: הידיעה נתלית במין ומתפשטת על שאר אישי המין בענין אחד.
Al Charizi's translation (Vilna, 1912) reads: דעתו תלויה במין והוא מתפשט על שאר אישי המין בענין אחד.
Y. Kapich's version (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1977) reads: כי הידיעה שייכה במין, ומתרחבת על שאר אישי המין מבחינה מסוימת זוהי השקפת כל תורני.
M. Schwarz's translation (Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed: Hebrew Translation from the Arabic* by Michael Schwarz [Tel Aviv University Press, 2002]) reads:
כמה מבעלי-העיון דגלו בקביעה שהידיעה מתייחסת למין ונמשכת אל כל פרטי המין במובן-מה. זאת היא דעתו של כל בן-תורה.

the particulars, are constantly changing. God does not know them because they are not everlasting (Psalm 73:12).

The answer is, Ibn Ezra's comments to Psalm 73:12 does not express the thinking of Ibn Ezra. They represent the belief of those who see the wicked prospering.⁸⁰

Psalm 73:2–13 reads:

2. But as for me, my feet were almost gone; my steps had well-nigh slipped. **3.** For I was envious at the arrogant, when I saw the prosperity of the wicked... **5.** In the trouble of man they are not; neither are they plagued like men... **10.** *Therefore His people say...* **12.** Behold, such are the wicked; and they that are always at ease increase riches... **13.** *Surely in vain have I cleansed my heart, and washed my hands in innocence* (Psalm 73: 2–13).

As described in the italicized text above, the success of the wicked leads the righteous to think that God does not know what is happening on earth. In the words of the Psalmist:

11. And they [the righteous] say: “How doth God know? And is there knowledge in the Most High?” (Psalm 73:11)

When Ibn Ezra writes,

The righteous know with a certain knowledge that there is a God who is exalted beyond the knowledge of man. God is wise of heart. He knows the kinds, which are permanent. However, the parts are constantly changing. God does not know them because they are not everlasting. The righteous are grasped by doubt because they see that the wicked are always physically at peace and have great wealth (Psalm 73:2)

Ibn Ezra is stating his interpretation of Psalm 73:11. It is not Ibn Ezra's personal conviction. His belief is stated in Psalm 1:6. There he writes,

There is no doubt that the revered God knows the whole and the particulars. The whole is the soul of all life that animates all created beings. The particulars refer to each one of the species. The particulars also refer to each and every individual creature of the specie, for they are all the work of His hands. However, the knowledge of each individual be he righteous or wicked is by way of the whole.

⁸⁰ See Lipshitz, Abe. *Ibn Ezra Studies* (Hebrew), p. 179, footnote 138.

How does God know the individual via the whole? We do not know. In the words of Ibn Ezra: "It is a great secret."⁸¹ Maimonides put it this way:

Human knowledge cannot comprehend ...[God's knowledge] for just as it is beyond the potential of man to comprehend and conceive the essential nature of the Creator, as [Exodus 33:20] states: "No man will perceive Me, and live," so, too, it is beyond man's potential to comprehend and conceive the Creator's knowledge. This was the intent of the prophet's [Isaiah 55:8] statements: "For My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor your ways, My ways."⁸²

A final loose end that needs to be interpreted

There is still one loose end that has to be tied up. Psalm 1:6 reads,

For the Lord knows the way of the righteous; but the way of the wicked shall perish.

Ibn Ezra comments on the above,

There is no doubt that the revered God knows the whole and the particulars. The whole is the soul of all life that animates all created beings. The particulars refer to each one of the species. The particulars also refer to each and every individual creature of the kind, for they are all the work of His hands. However, the knowledge of each individual be he righteous or wicked is by way of the whole. God knows the souls of the righteous because they are everlasting and eternal. The Lord also knows that the souls of the wicked will perish. The meaning of "But the way of the wicked shall perish" thus is: The way of the wicked leads to destruction... the souls of the wicked will perish...

Joseph Cohen maintains that the meaning of the above is as follows. God knows the whole and the particulars, that is, God knows that the souls of the righteous are everlasting and eternal. The Lord also knows that the souls of the wicked will perish. In other words, God does not know the individual as such. He knows what shall befall an individual who falls into the category of being righteous or wicked.⁸³

⁸¹ I.E. on Gen. 18:21.

⁸² Rambam, *Mishneh Torah*, translated by Eliyahu Touger, *The Laws of Teshuvah*: 4:5. https://www.chabad.org/library/article_cdo/aid/682956/jewish/Mishneh-Torah.htm.

⁸³ See Joseph Cohen, *Heguto Ha-Filosofit shel R. Avraham Ibn Ezra* (Israel, 1996), p. 260.

Ibn Ezra, however, does not have to be so interpreted. Ibn Ezra is saying two things in the above comment.

1. There is no doubt that the revered God knows the whole and the particulars. The whole is the soul of all life that animates all created beings. The particulars refer to each one of the species. The particulars also refer to each and every individual creature of the specie, for they are all the work of His hands. However, the knowledge of each individual be he righteous or wicked is by way of the whole.
2. “For the Lord knows the way of the righteous; but the way of the wicked shall perish,” does not qualify “God knows the whole and the particulars”... It does not tell us that God’s knowledge is limited to knowing that the souls of the righteous are eternal and that the souls of the wicked will be destroyed. It merely interprets what Scripture means by “For the Lord knows the way of the righteous; but the way of the wicked shall perish.” It does not claim that this is the only thing that God knows about the righteous and the wicked.

Ibn Ezra’s comments to Gen. 18:21 are to be understood as follows:

I will go down and see if all of them have done this evil. For in truth, the All knows every part of the all, by knowing the all. God’s knowledge of the individual via the all is a great mystery. Abraham’s plea, “Wilt Thou indeed sweep away the righteous with the wicked” (ibid., 23) is proof that God knows the individual.

If this reading is correct then Ibn Ezra does not contradict tradition. Neither does he contradict himself. 