

Article

“From Moses to Moses”: Late Medieval Jewish and Christian Interpretation of Moses’s Prophecy

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Abstract: The paper examines how the figure of the biblical Moses was philosophically interpreted in medieval Jewish and Christian writings. It highlights a turning point in a new concept of prophecy and scriptural authority and suggests that this transformation was made complicated for both Jewish and Christian intellectuals by the appearance of Moses Maimonides, who was most influential in promoting the Muslim model of philosophic interpretation of prophecy, and at the same time confusingly emerged as a living manifestation of semi-biblical authority. Against Jewish exclusivist interpretation of Mosaic law as the leading polemical argument to encounter competing revelations, the first part of my paper points out a mechanism of “Jewish successionism”, i.e., the re-interpretation of the biblical Moses as an instrument for rationalizing normative paradigmatic shift. The second, main part of the paper turns to the Latin translation of Maimonides’s *Guide of the Perplexed*, placing it in the midst of a crucial western Latin turn into a new phase of engagement with Old Testament concept of prophecy. A short comparison between some prominent twelfth century figures and later Scholastic thought demonstrates the central role of the new Arab Aristotelianism in general, and that of Maimonides in particular. Maimonides reception among the schoolman will culminate in the writings of Meister Eckhart, exposing the full potentiality of the double appearance of the Egyptian (Rabbi) Moses.

Keywords: Moses; bible exegesis; medieval philosophy; Moses Maimonides; Hildegard of Bingen; Thomas Aquinas; Meister Eckhart

1. Introduction

The advent of atheism in the early modern age prompted the emergence of a provocative book: the *Treatise of the Three Impostors* (*De Tribus Impostoribus*).¹ The three protagonists of this widely circulated work were the three founders of the three hegemonial orthodoxies: Moses, Christ, and Muhammad. Each of these three archetypical “conceptual personae” symbolized a concrete revelation event and represented a strong claim for the transmission of divine knowledge. Private names were generalized into the appellation of a concrete religion. The overall negation of the three founding fathers of the “Abrahamic religions,” leading to the negation of any positive revelation (as against deistic sentiment of natural religion), is typically identified with modern atheism. At the same time, negating a particular revelation through the refutation of its founders is a common traditional religious praxis. Jews and Christians are likely to be united in their negation of Muhammad while Jews will add to that the repudiation of Jesus Christ.

In the present paper, I would like to examine only one of this tripartite religious founding fathers’ nomenclature, dwelling on the figure of Moses, and concentrating on a specific transitional moment

¹ (Kahnert 1999; Massignon 1920).

in Jewish and Christian history. As I shall claim, Moses serves here as much more than a particular case study. Within Judaism, he becomes the prototypical *figura* of prophecy and divine authority per se, inventing the two forms of tradition qua transmission, written and oral, both harking back to the same Sinai revelation. Christian prophets throughout history, and especially in the time period here under examination, came to use Old Testament models of prophecy, in which Moses enjoyed a privileged status, as a living exemplar for the presence of God among humans. I will argue that both Jewish and Christian religious discourse were heavily affected by the appearance of another medieval Moses-figure, that of Moses ben Maimon (Maimonides, Rambam, 1138–1204).

Apparently, it is easy to distinguish between the Jewish post-Biblical exclusivist position and the Non-Jewish one. The Jewish rabbinic orthodox position must constantly deal with two great challenges: encountering non-Jewish competitive interpretation of Sinaic revelation, and developing a superstructure that would explain and justify paradigmatic normative shifts within the realm of Jewish Rabbinic orthodoxy.² Normally, such a position will accentuate the uniqueness of Moses's prophecy, in contrast to other biblical prophets, to post-biblical non-prophetic reality ("end of prophecy"), and even more to non-Jewish "deceivers." It rejects the typical Christian or Muslim inclusivist position, in which the prophecy of Moses functions as a prefiguration of later successionist figures (primarily Christ and Muhammad).

The first, introductory part of this paper deals with this Jewish tradition, claiming that, as much as one emphasizes the uniqueness of the Mosaic event, the apologetic-polemical interreligious position itself will dialectically load the Jewish traditional discourse with a plenitude of foreign elements. Moreover, a series of later poetic/prophetic figures within Jewish tradition seems to point out a kind of alternative, intra-Jewish successionist approach, often directly evoked out of Muslim and Christian religious models. I shall argue that Moses Maimonides's persona, and his discourse on prophecy, had a tremendous effect. The appearance of a second Moses—be the act of naming in itself a sheer accident or part of alleged "eschatological conspiracy"—dramatically reshaped all the above mentioned aspects of Mosaic prophecy: Maimonides embedded a series of conceptual changes of traditions related to Moses, both in philosophical and juristic discourse; he systematized the discussion of paradigmatic changes within Jewish tradition; he was perceived as a new beginning of many crucial elements in Jewish intellectual history, again in relation with his Mosaic nomination.

Turning to late medieval western Christian spirituality in the second, major part of this paper, I shall claim that the dramatic change that took place within Jewish discourse was not remained unnoticed among Christian intellectuals. It starts with the turn toward the Old Testament and its concept of prophecy during the 12th century, as I shall shortly describe. However, the transformation of the early monastic conceptions in 13th century scholastic thought is already intimately related to the emerging encounter with the medieval *Rabbi Moyses*. Hence, I shall relate to the translation of Maimonides' work into Latin during the 1230s and the reception of his discussion of prophecy among the Schoolmen³; finally, I will introduce the unique synthesis offered in the writings of Meister Eckhart, where the medieval Rabbi becomes the highest authority for the Christian theologian in his turn to the biblical figure of Moses.

2. The Jewish Moses between Tradition and Innovation

The chain of Kabbalah, in its basic meaning as transmission, starts with Moses on Mount Sinai (*Torah le-Moshe me-Sinai*) becoming the cornerstone of Jewish oral and written tradition. In the Mishna, in which Tractate Avot opens with the famous adage "Moses received the Torah from Sinai and he delivered it to Joshua, and Joshua to the elders, and the elders to the prophets, and the prophets to the

² (Halberthal 1997; Fisch and Benbaji 2011). In the context of Maimonides thought see (Michaelis 2019).

³ For a broader depiction of this significant turn in the context of authority and tradition see (MacIntyre 1990, pp. 105–126).

Men of the Great Assembly”, all the way through Abraham ibn Daud’s *Sefer ha-Kabbalah*⁴ (Book of Tradition, Toledo 1160) and to Maimonides’s introduction to his *Mishne Torah* (Reiteration of the Law/Deuteronomy), it is Moses, not Adam, Abraham, or any other biblical figure, who represents the full embodiment of divine revelation.

If Abraham, through his strong act of belief, becomes the paradigmatic figure of “man of faith” in the framework of the so-called Abrahamic religions, Moses stands for another set of connotations: as the author of the Pentateuch, he is a paradigm of authority and authorship in the strongest sense. His special authority derives its strength from a series of acts of divine revelation and prophecy, the unique quality of which the divine voice asserts repeatedly.⁵ The death of Moses provides mystical ecstatic traditions with the loaded notion of death by kiss as a leading metaphor for the unity of the human and the divine.⁶

However, as mentioned above, Moses, as the prophet and auctor of old law in Christianity, represents the highest divine voice before the incarnation and his massive presence in the Quran makes him into a Proto-Muhammad ideal of the perfect prophet. His imperfections, as portrayed in different places in Pentateuch, only emphasize the Gospels’ divine grace of the incarnation or the Quran’s miraculous nature of Muhammad’s message.

The most systematic Jewish response to these competing depictions of Moses was formulated in the Judaeo-Arabic tradition, first by Abraham ibn Daud, who is primarily occupied with the intra-Jewish anti-Karaite controversy on oral tradition as a legitimate part of Moses’ legacy, and, most significantly, by Maimonides, who emphasizes the prophecy of Moses as the true divine authority in contrast to that of the other false prophets.

In his Mishna commentary, in the introduction to Tractate *Ḥeleq*, Maimonides propounds his famous thirteen principles of faith. The sixth is the general belief in prophecy while the seventh, a rather lengthy principle, addresses the nature of the prophecy of Moses.⁷ I will not attempt to interpret this passage, it being one of the most quoted and celebrated texts of Maimonides, both in pre-modern Jewish literature and in modern scholarship. Embedded as it was with Rabbinic ideas, its implicit references to Islamic thought and to Islamic philosophy, especially to Alfarabi, are also common knowledge and have been thoroughly discussed.⁸

The same holds for Maimonides’s pointed negation of alternative prophecies, especially those of the founding fathers of the two main rival religions, Christianity and Islam. The Andalusian tradition in which he was raised attributed an essential role to the Abrahamic monotheistic religions in divine plane of salvation,⁹ and yet, his evaluation of the founding fathers of Christianity and Islam was purely negative. So, in his letter to Yemen (composed in 1172; translated into Hebrew by Samuel ibn Tibbon), defining the Jewish attitude to the issue of the false Messiah, Maimonides devotes lengthy passages to describing the false prophecies of Jesus and Muhammad. Regarding “Jesus the Nazarene, may his bones be ground to dust,” Maimonides offers a pejorative description, blasphemous for Christians and Muslims alike, of a descendent of impure origin who rebelled against the basic Mosaic laws and was

⁴ (Daud 1967).

⁵ Cf. Exodus 33, 11, Numbers 12, 8 and especially Deuteronomy 34, 10.

⁶ Cf. (Fishbane 1994; Afterman 2016, pp. 90, 117–20, 176f)

⁷ Maimonides, *Introduction to Pereq Heleq*: “The seventh principle—The prophecy of Moses our Master. That is, one should believe (*ya’taqīdu*) that he is the foremost prophet from among all who preceded or will follow him. All of them are inferior to him in rank. From the entire human species, he is God’s chosen one. He apprehended God in a manner surpassing that of any human who was or will be. He became so elevated above humanity till he reached the angelic rank, and became one whose rank is that of the angels. No veil (*ḥijāb*) remained that he did not rend, no physical hindrance limited him, no deficiency, small or great, flawed him. His imaginative and sensory powers were suspended in his acts of apprehension, his appetitive power ceased [to function], and he remained solely as intellect. For this reason it is said of him that he spoke (*yukāṭṭibu*) with God without the mediation of the angels.” (Kreisel’s translation).

⁸ Cf. (Kreisel 2001, pp. 170–78).

⁹ On “proselytizing redemption” in Sepharad as against Ashkenazi “vengeful redemption,” see (Yüval 2006, pp. 92–114)

punished accordingly by the Rabbis,¹⁰ offering a short and relatively mild version of the Talmudic and post-Talmudic counter-historical narrative tradition known as *Toledot Yeshu*.¹¹

Following the Christian deceiver, came the Muslim “madman” (*madjmun*), who invented his own religion. One of the major differences between the polemical strategies of Christianity and Islam according to Maimonides, one that makes Islam an even greater threat is that, while Christians accept the authority of Moses regarding the old law (*Hebraica Veritas*), the Muslims, failing to find any support for the prophecy of Muhammad in the Hebrew bible, choose to attack all Hebrew testimony as falsification (*tahrif*).¹² For this reason, Maimonides allows Jews to teach the Bible to Christians but not to Muslims.¹³

In general, Maimonides evaluates Judaism’s rival religions based on three different levels of theological, historical, and political considerations: first, the appearance and the development of Christianity and Islam as world powers are evaluated within the context of a *historia sacra*, or divine universal program. As part of a divine salvific plan, in the turning of humanity into a monotheistic polity, leading it into its final state of perfection, both rival religions play a positive role.¹⁴ Second, this general role can be evaluated theologically on the ground of each religion’s level of monotheistic abstraction as reflected in their doctrines, and under the uncompromised imperative of divine unity. Here Islam stands clearly above Christianity, reflecting the purest monotheistic formulation.¹⁵ Third, both religions are evaluated according to their level of departure from the original revelation of Moses. According to Maimonides, Christians are charged mainly with the false interpretation of scripture, not due to their basic scriptural orientation. Hearing Jewish explanations, they might even be converted under the impression of the *hebraica veritas*, and in any case their interpretation does not threaten the Jewish understanding.¹⁶

Two major elements are apparent in this polemical moment. The first is the competition between the religions of the book conceived by Maimonides to be a competition between the three “auctores” of those books. The second is that Judaeo-Arabic apologetics and polemics on prophecy are heavily loaded with Muslim Quranic and philosophical ideas that have become an integral part of Jewish thought on the matter.¹⁷ Maimonides fully adopts the Alfarabian model of the philosopher king imbuing into the

¹⁰ Arabic-English reference. *Moses Maimonides’ Epistle to Yemen; The Arabic Original and the Three Hebrew Versions* by Abraham S. Halkin, Boaz Cohen; *Iggeret Teiman*, translated by Boaz Cohen, notes by Abraham S. Halkin: “The first one to have adopted this plan was Jesus the Nazarene, may his bones be ground to dust. He was a Jew because his mother was a Jewess although his father was a Gentile. . . . He impelled people to believe that he was a prophet sent by God to clarify perplexities in the Torah, and that he was the Messiah that was predicted by each and every seer. He interpreted the Torah and its precepts in such a fashion as to lead to their total annulment, to the abolition of all its commandments and to the violation of its prohibitions. The sages, of blessed memory, having become aware of his plans before his reputation spread among our people, meted out fitting punishment to him”

¹¹ Maimonides was certainly well acquainted with the uncensored Talmudic versions, and perhaps also with the early oriental Jewish elaborations disseminated since the tenth century, with the Polemic of Nestor the Priest and the early versions of *Toledot Yeshu*; see (Deutsch et al. 2011; Lasker and Stroumsa 1996; Goldstein 2010).

¹² “After him arose the Madman who emulated his precursor since he paved the way for him. But he added the further objective of procuring rule and submission, and he invented his well known religion. . . . Inasmuch as the Muslims could not find a single proof in the entire Bible nor a reference or possible allusion to their prophet which they could utilize, they were compelled to accuse us saying, ‘You have altered the text of the Torah, and expunged every trace of the name of Mohammed therefrom.’ . . . The motive for their accusation lies therefore, in the absence of any allusion to Mohammed in the Torah.” Cf. (Lasker 2007).

¹³ Cf. (Schwartz 2018, pp. 31–59, here 44, n. 40).

¹⁴ See (Yuval 2006).

¹⁵ (Lasker 2008, pp. 89–91).

¹⁶ In his (Arabic) response to R. Ephraim’s pupils in Tyra, Maimonides answers the question whether it is absolutely forbidden to teach the law to the Gentiles. Here, Maimonides differentiates clearly between Muslims and Christians. There is no problem in studying law with Christians whereas any teaching to a Moslem is strictly forbidden. The reasoning is that Christians share the belief in value and authority of their common revelation (as expressed in the Hebrew scriptures) with the Jews, while Muslim scholars only seek for reasoning in order to devalue the Hebrew bible as falsified; cf. (Maimonides 2014, Vol. 1, p. 285).

¹⁷ So too are the Shi’i ideas adopted by Maimonides’ predecessor Judah Halevi, and see (Pines 1980; Krinis 2014).

figure of Moses the special philosophical qualities of Muhammed's prophecy, especially in regard to prophecy and miracles as presented by Avicenna and Alghazali.¹⁸

The Maimonidean claim of renewed Mosaic authority represents the canonization and deification of philosophical discourse and was one of the main reasons for the heavy debates within the Jewish world for more than a century. Notwithstanding Sara Stroumsa's reference to the early Maimonides controversy in the east,¹⁹ much of the later dramatic events took place on western European soil, mostly in the southern areas of Provence, Italy, and Christian Iberia.²⁰

Pro Maimonidean rhetoric during that long thirteenth century is replated with comparisons of the medieval authority and its biblical prefiguration. A short hymn attributed to the Kabbalist and Maimonides commentator Avraham Abulafia, one that might offer a combination of philosophical and kabbalistic "styles of reasoning" during the late thirteenth century, urges: "Learn the religion of Ben Amram [i.e., the biblical Moses] with the religion of Moses ben Maimon."²¹ Abulafia's contemporary, Hillel ben Samuel of Verona, who was the first to study with him the philosophy of Maimonides, composed his own mythologized historical narrative, relating to the famous controversy about the writings of Maimonides during the 1230s. Connecting the alleged burning of Maimonides's writings by the Inquisition in southern France—in which the anti-Maimonideans were directly accused by members of the Maimonidean camp—to the burning of the Talmud in Paris, during the early 1240s,²² Hillel based his narrative of divine punishment²³ on a similar conflation of the two figures of Moses:

God was looking down from heaven, and He was jealous for the honor of our holy Rabbi and for the honor of his books, and he sent his wrath and his anger to the communities of France, and he had no pity on them. And don't be surprised and ask: How could he not have pity for one thousand and two hundred books of the Talmud and of Aggadah just because of the *Guide* and the *Book of Knowledge*? You have to understand that our Rabbi Moses was almost a second Moses in his generation and the justice of the whole generation was dependent upon him.²⁴

Thereafter, Hillel refers to Maimonides as "our Rabbi Moses who was second only to Moses our Rabbi."²⁵

Could such an assertion be conceived as more than just a rhetorical indication of extremely high regard for the spiritual authority of Maimonides? Could it be rooted in the self-perception of Maimonides himself? No response on such matters could be more than a speculation, and a controversial one. And yet, I would like to give this consideration and point out the possibility of a radical, positive answer to both of these questions. Historian Israel Yuval has claimed that Moses Maimonides, the most important medieval Jewish intellectual leader, had strong personal Messianic aspirations. According to Yuval, those eschatological motives were rooted in Maimonides's family, especially in those of his father, Maimun the elder (*dayan*), which revealed itself in the very act of naming his son Moses.²⁶ Recently, Eliezer Schlossberg has analyzed in detail the Mosaic rhetoric of Maimun.²⁷ The anti-Islamic polemic is developed in his treatise through the figure of Moses as a counter-figure to the Islamic ideal of the prophecy of Muhammad. Shi'i traditions of the hidden Imam

¹⁸ (Avicenna 2005, p. 358f.; Al-Ghazālī 1965, pp. 271–87, esp. 281; Al-Ghazālī 2000, p. 172f.; Druart 1981, 1992; Smalley 1952, p. 294f.; Pines 1963, pp. lxxviii–xcii, esp. lxxviii, claims that Al-Farabi is "the philosopher whom ... Maimonides held in the highest esteem"); (Kreisel 1999, pp. 79f.; Stroumsa 2009, pp. 183–88).

¹⁹ (Stroumsa 1999).

²⁰ (Silver 1965).

²¹ First published in (Steinschneider 1896, p. 4); cf. (Idel 2020), p. XIV: "The parallel between Moses ben Amram and Moses ben Maimon is often cited by Abulafia, as it has been cited by Maimonideans throughout the ages."

²² Cf. (Schwartz 2019, pp. 55–57).

²³ (Leicht 2013).

²⁴ (Hillel 1856, 19r); translation (with slight changes) according to (Leicht 2013, p. 588).

²⁵ (Hillel 1856, 19r).

²⁶ See (Yuval 2007).

²⁷ (Schlossberg 2010).

are also used in order to portray the figure of Moses. His mysterious place of burial has now become transformed into the place of concealment of the living Messiah, awaiting his final return. Once this family background of Moses ben Maimon is taken into account, then the famous dictum “from Moses to Moses, there arose none like Moses” through which he was often described by later generations might offer itself as more than an empty rhetorical speech-act.²⁸ Maimonides’s audacity in naming his great Halakhic encyclopedia “*Mishne Torah*”, i.e., Deuteronomy, the common title of the fifth book of Moses, written in the first person as an autobiographical narrative, might serve as additional evidence for this subtle eschatological inter-textuality. At least part of his Orthodox readership perceived this title as blasphemous, precisely because it boldly and almost explicitly equated the work with its biblical predecessor, and preferred the more implicit title “*ha-yad ha-ḥazaka*.”²⁹

3. The New Role of Prophecy in Medieval Christian Exegesis and the Double Moses

The role of prophecy within Christian tradition is a complex issue or, more precisely, a conjunction of different problems and controversies, and it is certainly not within the scope of this short paper to delve into it in depth.³⁰ In his *Christian Prophecy: The Post Biblical Tradition*, Theologian Niels Christian Hvidt develops a complex historical and theological narrative in order to sustain the phenomenon of prophecy in post-biblical Christianity.³¹ He defines his work as a piece of Fundamental Theology and indeed, as much as it is embedded with historical sources, its focal point and arranging rationale do not lie in historical contextualization. And yet, the period here under consideration, i.e., the late Middle Ages, witnessed the remarkable emergence of a new intellectual impetus that contributed to the formation of a new society of knowledge.

The most well-known and crucial expression of the intellectual renewal of the European high Middle Ages is that of Abbot Joachim of Fiore (1135–1202), the spiritual icon, and its consequences for Franciscan spiritualists in the thirteenth century; but Joachim is a bold representative of a common topos among twelfth century clerics.³² Figures such as Joachim and Hildegard of Bingen (1098–1179) offer an interesting parallel to our discussion of their contemporary, Maimonides, for they were publicly accepted as being prophets and connected the subject matter of prophecy to an apocalyptic understanding of divine logos and the appearance of a human age of the spirit. One could speculate here on the axial emergence of a new intellectual consciousness, where a rising rationalism is connected with the intensive reversion to some old-new questions regarding ecstasy, *raptus*, cognition, and the limits of reason.³³ This general assertion lies beyond the scope of my present study. Instead, I would

²⁸ During the 1930s in Germany and later on in his post-war American career, the renowned rabbi and scholar Abraham Joshua Heschel was preoccupied with the question of post-biblical prophetic inspiration and, more concretely, with the question regarding Moses Maimonides’s understanding of himself as a prophet. (Heschel 1996, pp. 69–126). Heschel emphasized the intellectual interpretation of prophecy in Maimonides’s writings (pp. 95f, 109f.) and was convinced that, according to such intellectual norms, Maimonides was very clear in appropriating to himself the rank of prophet. Yet, he did not consider Maimonides’s personal linkage to the biblical figure of Moses, nor did he dwell on the eschatological messianic context of such a claim for spiritual perfection.

²⁹ Literally “the mighty hand,” referring both to the number of parts of Maimonides’ codex (in gematria “yad” = 14) but at the same time also to the final verse of the Pentateuch, Deut 34, 12: “And in all that mighty hand, and in all the great terror which Moses shewed in the sight of all Israel.” (King James translation). On Maimonides turn to Mosaic authority above the heads of the Rabbis see (Lorberbaum 2009, 2010). Lorberbaum claims that while, early in his life, Maimonides based his legal speculations and allegorical readings on Rabbinical literature, as apparent in his Mishna commentary, in the final stage of his life, he deliberately celebrated the constitutional status of Mosaic “divine law.”

³⁰ On the ambiguous meaning of the term itself in medieval discourse referring both to future telling and to manifold variations of inspiration and charismatic teaching, see (Fitzgerald 2017), 1f. Fitzgerald’s introduction also includes a comprehensive and updated survey of scholarly literature on medieval European theories on prophecy and inspiration, see pp. 5–7.

³¹ (Hvidt 2007, pp. 3–21, esp. 6f), where the author enumerates four reasons for the degradation of prophecy in Christianity. The motivation of the author is far more general than the limited scope of my present study and is derived to a great extent from modern theological super-structures.

³² (Reeves 1969, pp. 3–27); on the Franciscan Joachites and the Prophet Abraham Abulafia see (Hames 2007).

³³ Cf. (MacIntyre 1990, pp. 82–103). On the major occupation with this topic among the first generation of Parisian Theology magisters see (Even-Ezra 2019).

like to limit my investigation to the figure of the biblical Moses and its function as a model of the specific art of divine inspiration.

Just like in early modern Europe during the age of the Renaissance, Humanism, and Protestantism, the “renaissance of the twelfth century”³⁴ is marked not only by the reversion to classic pagan sources but also by its subscribing to a new level of literal and allegorical exegesis of sacred canonical texts, including biblical history and new understandings of ancient Israel.³⁵ For professional prophets such as Joachim and Hildegard, Old Testament biblical figures and Old Testament prophecy become essential elements.

In Hildegard’s three visionary works (*Liber Scivias*, composed ca. 1150, *Liber vitae meritorum*, composed before 1163, and *Liber divinorum operum*, composed before 1174), the most dominant Old Testament figures are Moses and David.³⁶ Both in her *Scivias* (vision IV, 7) and in the third part of her *Liber divinorum operum*, the 12th century *prophetissa* employs the Sinai event in order to portray the limits of the human vision of the godhead. In other places in *Scivias* and even more in the *Liber Divinorum Operum*, the figure of Moses also represents humility, suffering, and the limits of human knowledge of the divine, thus bringing him close to the human figure of Christ.³⁷

Moreover, if we accept Justin Strover’s description of Hildegard’s rhetorical strategy against the schools as representing monastic criticism of Scholastic rationalism, emphasizing the need for divine illumination, limiting the human autonomous intellectualism, and demanding the return of divine authority, then the figure of Moses becomes a paradigmatic exemplar of a true self-restricted and divinely illumined rationality.³⁸ Hildegard’s use of the figure of Moses and the Sinai revelation as paradigms of the limits of human knowledge also connects us to a long chain of Christian exegesis that relates the “cloud of unknowing” to Exodus 20, 17 (“and Moses approached the thick cloud where God was”).³⁹

The strongest visual image of Moses in Hildegard’s oeuvre appears in the illustrations of the Wiesbaden Codex, in the fifth vision of the first book of *Liber Scivias*, that of Synagoga.⁴⁰ Moses is the most impressive figure in that illustration sitting enfolded in Synagoga’s arms, on her chest, holding the tablets of stone and wearing a Jewish hat. Abraham, David, and the other prophets are located beneath him, in Synagoga’s womb. The relationship between text and image in Hildegard’s work and especially her authorship on the illustrations is still a matter for debate,⁴¹ and this general *problematic* becomes even more intriguing here, since text and image provide rather different hierarchy. While in the verbal depiction of the vision Hildegard posited Abraham at Synagoga’s heart and Moses at her bosom and all other prophets were located in her womb (“Et in corde ipsius stabat Abraham, et in pectore eius Moyses, ac in uentre ipsius reliqui prophetae”⁴², the illustrated image locates Moses alone on the upper side, at Synagoga’s chest, placing all other prophets in her bosom, where Abraham is the most dominant figure and David is added with clear attributes.⁴³ The manuscript is dated to the end of Hildegard’s lifetime and was created in her Rupertsberg Monastery, either under her direct guidance or by her close followers. Whoever might be responsible for the deviation from the textual ekphrasis, originally composed in the early 1150s, it might reflect a growing emphasis on the biblical figure of

³⁴ (Benson and Constable 1982).

³⁵ (Smalley 1952).

³⁶ (Beal 2013, p. 325). On the figure of Ezekiel see (Kienzle and Stevens 2014).

³⁷ (Bingensis 1996, [CCCM XCII], III, II, 9, p. 364, 33–37; III, IV, 6, p. 393, 6–8); and see especially III, IV, 7, p. 395f, 1–53 which opens with a long quotation from Exodus 33, 19–23, describing the different revelations of the divine as received by Moses on Mount Sinai, in order to discuss the highest potential and also the limitation of human cognition.

³⁸ (Strover 2014).

³⁹ Within Latin tradition, the most influential patristic representation of this basic Greek Neoplatonic idea is the formulation of Pseudo Dionysius the Areopagite, especially in his *Mystical Theology*, and see (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, 136f).

⁴⁰ (Saurma-Jeltsch 1998, pp. 73–77).

⁴¹ (Meier-Staubach 1979; Caviness 1998).

⁴² (Bingensis 1978, [CCCM XLIII], I, V, 5, pp. 93, 21–23).

⁴³ Both text and image emphasize, however, the legal authority of Moses, and see (Bingensis 1978, pp. 96–98).

Moses as the highest representative of pre-incarnational revelation and as the ultimate prophet of the old law.

4. Maimonides among the Schoolman and the Unique Synthesis of Meister Eckhart

Moses Maimonides died in Egyptian Fustat in 1204. His theological-political-philosophical magnum opus, *Guide of the Perplexed*, was completed in the early 1190s. At the time of his death, a first version of a Hebrew translation was already in circulation. The most dramatic phase of its reception, similar to the cases of contemporaries such as Joachim (died in 1202) and Averroes (died 1198), was to occur later during the thirteenth century. Just as in the case of Averroes's commentaries, Maimonides's dramatic and controversial reception was conducted in three different languages, i.e., in its Arabic source language and the two main target languages into which it was translated, Hebrew and Latin.

The Latin translation in itself, as well as its dissemination among its specific readership and reception in Scholastic literature, bears witness to the fact that the basic interest in the work lay primarily not in its philosophic content but in its Rabbinic data and hermeneutic approach.⁴⁴ "Rabbi Moyses Aegyptius" was definitely regarded as a *philosophus judaeus* but was mostly celebrated as an exegetical authority.⁴⁵ Most of his readers were theologians, many of them Dominicans, i.e., members of the new monastic movement which was deeply integrated into the schools, that were so massively rejected earlier by monastic figures such as Hildegard. One of the matters on which Scholastic theologians turned to the *Guide of the Perplexed* was Maimonides's detailed analysis of prophecy and the prophecy of Moses. In fact, one of the earliest references from the *Guide*, still without direct mention of Maimonides's name, is to be found in the theological Summa of the Parisian Franciscan Master Alexander of Hales (1185–1245). In the second question of the first part, Alexander asks whether God can be perceived in this life, face to face ("An Deus pro praesenti statu cognoscibili sint facie ad faciem"). In his answer, Alexander refers, just like Hildegard did, to the two interrogations of Moses in Exodus 33, 22 in a way that reflects a (direct or indirect) acquaintance with Maimonides's discussion of the topic in *Guide* I, Ch. 54.⁴⁶ Among the Dominicans it was especially Albert the Great⁴⁷ and Thomas Aquinas⁴⁸ who borrowed much from Maimonides's discussion of prophecy. Both relied heavily on his typology of the grades and different qualities of prophetic experience and both have adopted his philosophical interpretation of prophecy in accord with updated Aristotelian noetic theories (unity with the agent intellect). They each struggle in their own way with the strong naturalistic inclination in Maimonides's interpretation of the basic phenomenon.⁴⁹

Toward the end of Aquinas's lifetime, during the 1270s, a famous reaction to Arabic, Muslim, and Jewish teachings took place, of which the most well-known event is the 1277 condemnations in Paris and Oxford. Notwithstanding the centrality of the 1277 events, the reverberation was much broader and took place throughout the 1270s. It involved punctilious refutation of specific teachings, primarily identified with Averroes and his Latin followers but involving many other figures such as Alkindi, Avicenna, Al Ghazali, Gabirol, and Maimonides.⁵⁰

⁴⁴ (Schwartz 2019, pp. 51–55). For a similar claim based on Albert the Great's reception of Maimonides cf. (Fidora 2020, pp. 32f). For recent scholarship regarding the Latin translation of the *Guide* see (Rigo 2019; Di Segni 2019).

⁴⁵ For a general overview see (Guttmann 1908; Hasselhoff 2004).

⁴⁶ (Alexander of Hales 1575, p. 6) pars I, Q. 2, membrum I, art. 4, resolutio; (Guttmann 1908, pp. 148f.).

⁴⁷ (Guttmann 1908, pp. 169–75; Rigo 2001, pp. 56–62). For a general overview of Maimonides' teaching on prophecy in Scholastic literature see (Hasselhoff 2004, pp. 154–60).

⁴⁸ (Mausbach 1899; Harvey 1988, pp. 60–65).

⁴⁹ (Altmann 1981; Wohlman 1988, pp. 267–317). And see (Fitzgerald 2017, pp. 121–25). Fitzgerald emphasized the strong epistemological elements in Aquinas's understanding of prophecy but failed to recognize the crucial role played by Maimonides's teaching in this rationalistic turn.

⁵⁰ One of its major targets was a specific ontological-cosmological-epistemological construct, which involves heavenly spheres qua separate intellects, and at the same time provides explanations for a wide range of magical and epistemological phenomena, and see (Schwartz 2011).

One of the most fascinating summaries of this Latin criticism was provided by the author of the *Errores philosophorum*, attributed to Aegidius Romanus.⁵¹ The philosophers refuted in this text were Aristotle and his commentator Averroes, followed by Alkindi, Alfarabi, Avicenna, Al Ghazali, and finally Maimonides. While many of the cited errors are common to more than one individual author, in this list, the unique errors attributed to Maimonides are mostly those that are related to Old Testament exegesis. One of them involves the question of prophecy, where Aegidius directly points out Maimonides's natural concept of prophecy.⁵²

Remarkably, at the beginning of the fourteenth century we witness a new burgeoning interest in Hebraistic and Rabbinical sources, as well as a fresh reading of the texts of Maimonides.⁵³ In the last part of this paper, I would like to demonstrate this aspect through the unique structure of Meister Eckhart's writings, shedding, perhaps, some new light on his own project.

One of the most celebrated places in Eckhart's writing recounts his multi-cultural tolerant approach pronounced in a tripartite act of named authorities—Moses, Christ, and Aristotle: "It is the same which is taught by Moses, Christ, and the Philosopher [i.e., Aristotle], differing only according to its mode, that is as credible, probable or verisimilar, and as truth."⁵⁴ The suggested triangle here entails natural philosophy, Old Testament revelation, and Christian truth, with the difference lying only in the level of certainty, not in the content of their teaching, which is in fact identical.⁵⁵

Eckhart's existing Latin oeuvre present a small segment of the great *Opus tripartitum*, as portrayed in his general prologue to the tripartite work ("*Prologus generalis in Opus tripartitum*"). Instead of having three distinctive text-corpora—a massive collection of more than thousand propositions (*Opus propositionum*) organized in 14 tractates, a systematic commentary work of all the writings of the two testaments (*Opus expositionum*), and then, finally, a scholastic collection of dialectic discussions in the form of academic *quaestiones* (*Opus quaestionum*)—what remains is mostly a partial set of Bible commentaries. Instead of a schematic and systematic reductionist method, in which every *quaestio* is reduced to an exposition of Scripture, which is then solved on the basis of the matching proposition, we remain with an internal philosophic meaning of Scripture and internal Christological reading of the Old Testament. Eckhart himself provides an adequate description of this method in his prologue to his *Liber parabolarum Genesis*, where he reformulates his entire hermeneutic project, one that better reflects the factual exposition of his *Opus Tripartitum*.

It is of crucial importance in the context of my present discussion to note that this methodological introduction is entirely based on Maimonides's introduction to the *Guide*.⁵⁶ The famous metaphor,

⁵¹ (Giles of Rome 1944).

⁵² (Giles of Rome 1944), Chapter 12, n. 7, p. 62, 7–11 (Latin), 63 (English): "Again he [Maimonides] erred in regard to prophecy, believing that man of himself can put himself into the proper disposition to receive the grace of prophecy (credens hominem se posse sufficienter disponere ad gratiam prophetiae), and that God did not choose any particular man for the work of prophecy (in prophetando), but rather one who makes himself capable of such things. Thus he seems to hold that divine grace depends upon our actions. All this is clear from book II On the Exposition of the Law (De Expositione Legis), chapter xxxii."

⁵³ (Schwartz 2010). The new espousing of Maimonides includes new translations, especially of the medical writings, provided by Arnau de Villanova, who also relies heavily on Maimonides in his tractate on the tetragrammaton, and see (de Villanova 2004; Artau 1949).

⁵⁴ Eckhart, *Expositio Sancti evangelii secundum Iohannem* pp. 155, 5–7: "Idem ergo est quod docet Moyses, Christus et Philosophus, solum quantum ad modum differens, scilicet ut credibile, probabile sive verisimile et veritas." Cf. (Beal 2013, p. 335).

⁵⁵ One can add that although Islam is not part of the equation here, it is implicitly not necessarily excluded since the teaching of Islam was often identified in such rationalistic discourse with natural philosophy, and see Thomas Aquinas's assertion in the opening chapters of his *Summa contra Gentiles*, and cf. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, 2: "(Q)uia quidam eorum, ut Mahumetistae et Pagani, non conveniunt nobiscum in auctoritate alicuius Scripturae, per quam possint convinci, sicut contra Iudaeos disputare possumus per vetus testamentum, contra haereticos per novum. Hi vero neutrum recipiunt. Unde necesse est ad naturalem rationem recurrere, cui omnes assentire coguntur. Quae tamen in rebus divinis deficiens est." "(S)ome of them, such as the Mohammedans and the pagans, do not agree with us in accepting the authority of any Scripture, by which they may be convinced of their error. Thus, against the Jews we are able to argue by means of the Old Testament, while against heretics we are able to argue by means of the New Testament. But the Muslims and the pagans accept neither the one nor the other. We must, therefore, have recourse to the natural reason, to which all men are forced to give their assent. However, it is true, in divine matters the natural reason has its failings."

⁵⁶ Eckhart, *Prologus in Liber parabolarum Genesis*, LW I, pp. 447, 9–449, 3, 454, 11–455, 10; (Schwartz 2004, pp. 187–99).

provided by Maimonides, of “apples of gold in settings of silver”⁵⁷ is interpreted by Eckhart as a series of binary immanent relations, each representing the internal (normally related to as the “allegorical”) layer of an external, superficial text unit: the physical level of reality is penetrated with metaphysics, just as the Old Testament is embedded with the New Testament, and Christ’s message is to be found within the Mosaic text.⁵⁸ More subtle is the way Eckhart places his quotation from Maimonides almost solely within the commentaries on the Old Testament, mostly on Genesis and Exodus. Rabbi Moyses is the authoritative voice for deciphering the natural, physical truth, hidden within the message of the biblical Moses.

The depth and breadth of Eckhart’s reading of Maimonides is well known and massively studied phenomenon.⁵⁹ Eckhart primarily espouses Maimonides’s exegetic methodology and, accordingly, offers his theological philosophy mostly as exegesis⁶⁰, composing the major bulk of his writings as Sermons and Bible commentaries. Both his reading of Maimonides and his interpretation of the Old Testament rely heavily on Maimonides’s concept of esotericism.⁶¹

The role of Rabbi Moyses as a leading figure in interpreting biblical Moses, leading to a fresh reading in New Testament and ecclesiastical authorities, may be seen in Eckhart’s commentary on Exodus 20, 17: “Moses went into the darkness, wherein God was”:

In Book 3, Chapter 10, Rabbi Moses says: “When our intellect strives to apprehend the Creator, it finds a great wall dividing him [from us].” Below he says, “God is truly hidden from us in cloud and darkness. This is what is said, ‘Cloud and darkness are round about him’ (Psalms 96, 2), and again, ‘He made darkness his secret place’ (Psalms 17, 12) . . . It is known to all that the day Moses stood on Mount Sinai was a cloudy and dark one . . . The intention in speaking of darkness and cloud is not [to say] that obscurity covers God, because with him there is no obscurity, but clear light according to the saying, ‘The earth was illumined by his glory’ (Ezekiel 43, 2).”

The transition from Maimonides’s *Guide* to the second book of Moses, and then to Ezekiel, is just the first step, propelled by a quotation from the Gospel of John: “God is light; in him there is no darkness at all” (1 John 1,5: “Deus lux est, et tenebrae in eo non sunt ullae”). Together with this transition from Old to New Testament, Eckhart transforms the Maimonidean argument with an arsenal of quotations taken from the church fathers and Dionysus’s *Mystical Theology*:

The meaning is then “Moses went into the darkness wherein God was,” that is, into the surpassing light that beats down and darkens our intellect. We see the same thing when our eyes are beaten down and darkened by the rays from the sun’s disk. This is also what Dionysius says in the first chapter of the *Mystical Theology*: “The simple, hidden and unchangeable mysteries of theology are covered over by the surpassingly splendid darkness of hiddenly learned silence that causes the Supersplendent to shine forth in surpassing fashion in that which is most dark.” The first Letter to Gaius says, “Perfect ignorance is the

⁵⁷ Maimonides, *Guide, Introduction*, (Pines 1963), I, 11, quoting Proverbs 25, 11. Perhaps first applied in Christian literature by Raymundus Martini in his *Pugio Fidei*, and see Ramundi Martini Ordinis Praedicatorum *Pugio Fidei* Adversus Mauros et Judaeos, cum observationibus Josephi de Voisin et Introductione Jo. Benedicti Carpzovi, Lipsiae 1687, p. 427: “R. Moses filius Maimon in libro qui a Judaeis Moreh Nebbuochim, a Latinis vero dicitur directio neutrorum . . . תפוחי זהב במשכיות כסף.”

⁵⁸ Eckhart, *Expositio s. evangelii sec. Iohannem* 444, LW, III, 380, 12–381, 7: “De Praemissis patet quod evangelium et lex vetus se habent ad invicem sicut demonstrator et topicus, sicut metaphysicus et physicus: evangelium contemplatur ens in quantum ens. Esse est autem dicimus illa quae ipsa quidem natura incorporea sunt et immutabilis substantiae ratione vigentia (. . .). Promittit evangelium aeterna, lex vetus temporalia. Patet ergo, sicut frequenter in nostris expositionibus dicitur, quod ex eadem vena descendit veritas et doctrina theologiae, philosophiae naturalis, moralis, artis factibilium et speculabilium et etiam iuris positivi”.

⁵⁹ (Koch 1929; Reffke 1938; Liebeschütz 1972; Imbach 1990; Schwartz 2004; Di Segni 2013; Enders 2016).

⁶⁰ (Winkler 1965, pp. 22–49).

⁶¹ A second major focus, which will not be addressed here, relies on the field of ontology: Eckhart’s special formulation of negative theology and the principle of divine unity, and see (Schwartz 2005, 2012).

knowledge of him who is over all that is known.” John Sarracenus in his Prologue to the Mystical Theology says, “Since man ascends to knowledge of God through removal, what God is remains hidden and covered at the end.”⁶²

Note again the order of things here. The basis is Moses’s entry into the cloud, a leading motif of Christian spirituality from late antiquity onwards, as the Christian authorities quoted toward the end of the commentary clearly show. First, a thorough study of Maimonides’s commentary is offered to the reader, based on a meticulous reading of Guide III, Ch. 9 (Ch. 10 in the Latin translation), and conjoined with other Old Testament prophetic voices (Psalms, Ezekiel). Only then is a quotation from John introduced, followed by the words of the Church authorities. This seemingly innocuous quasi-chronological order represents an epistemic evolution. The dark vision of God was never linked to an essential attribute of the divine in itself but to the limitation of human knowledge. This limitation, however, was abridged with the incarnation of the Word, when divine light was shining directly on humanity. Yet, it is far from being a simple evolution, since the Greek Neoplatonic tradition, here followed by Eckhart, adheres very closely to the notion of the dialectic appearance of the divine presence in the material world. Maimonides’s message is still relevant for the Christian too. It might even assist the Dominican Magister in his efforts to rehabilitate Christian Greek Neoplatonic concepts that evoked much suspicion among scholastic theologians in the Latin West, while transforming them to the more updated Neo-Aristotelian language of Judaeo-Arabic philosophy.⁶³

But there is another point to emphasize here. It does not seem to be coincidental that John serves here as the marker of the transformation from the Old Testament and Jewish authorities to the New Testament and patristic literature. Ezekiel’s (1, 16) “wheel within a wheel” was perceived in Christian exegesis, at least since Gregory the Great,⁶⁴ as symbolizing the relationship between the New and the Old Testaments. It is interpreted by Eckhart in terms of the imperative of Maimonides’s above mentioned exegetical principles of Aristoteles’s physics and metaphysics as esoteric inner layers of scripture, a principle which Maimonides himself provocatively adapted to a most sacred layer of rabbinic esotericism.⁶⁵

Shortly after introducing his Christian reader, in the Prologue to *Liber Parabolarum Genesis*, with the basic principles of Maimonides’s hermeneutics,⁶⁶ Eckhart implements it in his commentary on Genesis 1, 3–4.⁶⁷ While doing that he repeatedly uses the “wheel within a wheel” metaphor, here directly referring to the logos of John 1,1 as an explanatory level of Genesis, “novum testamentum in veteri.”⁶⁸ The word/logos as inner truth of physical reality reveals itself also in the interpretation of the highest manifestation of the divine to a human being, i.e., in God’s revelation to Moses on mount Sinai. That this is the case can be seen clearly in Eckhart’s commentary on Exodus, 24, 12, “Come up to me on the mountain, and be there”:

There follows, “on the mountain” (*in montem*) Note that he does not say “to the mountain.” The reason seems to be love and the will look at the thing itself, and they take their stand and are at peace in it. But the intellect does not take its stand in the reality of the thing itself, but according to its name of “in-tellect.” It enters into the principles of the thing and there receives the thing in its principles, in its root and origin. It receives God “in the bosom of the

⁶² LW II, n. 237; English translation Bernard McGinn, in (McGinn 1986, pp. 117f).

⁶³ On the problematization of radical negative language resulting from Neoplatonic concepts of divine unity by the Greek Church Fathers in its migration into western Latin Christianity see (Armstrong 1975; Sells 1994).

⁶⁴ Homiliarum in Ezechielem, lib. I, hom. 6; Sancti Gregorii Magni Opera omnia II, Patrologia Latina 76, Migne, 1857, pp. 834a: “Rota intra rotam est Testamentum Novum, sicut diximus, intra Testamentum Vetus, quia quod designavit Testamentum Vetus, hoc Testamentum Novum exhibuit.”; (Christman 2005, pp. 55f.).

⁶⁵ Cf (Halbertal 2007, pp. 49–68).

⁶⁶ Cf. note 56 above.

⁶⁷ Liber parabolarum Genesis, n. 47–72, LW I, pp. 514–38.

⁶⁸ Liber parabolarum Genesis, n. 48, n. 51; LW I, pp. 516, 12–517, 4; 519, 13–520, 2: “Patet ergo quomodo id ipsum est quod hic scribitur: dixitque deus etc., et Ioannes ait: ‘In principio erat verbum’. ‘Rota in medio rotae.’”

Father” (John. 1, 18)—the Word with God, the Word in the Principle, the Word himself the Principle. “In the Principle was the Word” (John 1,1).⁶⁹

“*In montem*” is here equivalent to *in-tellectus*, which is again reduced to Johannite Logos-Theology. Eckhart’s interpretation also sheds light on his encounter with the teaching of Maimonides with respect to the Sinai event, which is both surprisingly accurate and scandalously misleading. It is accurate because the deepest true meaning of Moses’s ascendance on Mount Sinai, according to Maimonides, is depicted as a pure epistemic event, i.e., an ascending of the grades of the intellect all the way to achieving union with the active intellect. At the same time, it is misleading because it radicalizes the teaching of Maimonides into an extreme form of unio-mysticism.⁷⁰ The cloud of unknowing no longer represents the limitation of human knowledge but the depth of the divine and the human intellect. However, as we have seen above, such radical interpretations of Maimonides, either from the perspective of more extreme Averroists or from the point of view of Kabbalists such as Avraham Abulafia, are to be found among Jewish readers of Maimonides too.⁷¹

With regard to the chain of Christian prophetic spirituality as briefly portrayed in this paper, Eckhart represents the stage of the mature reception of Arabic Aristotelian speculation. Unlike his Dominican predecessors, his oeuvre is mostly exegetical, and surprisingly open to Jewish ideas. His openness toward Jewish contents is well reflected in the volume covering Old Testament writings, but also in the dominant presence of Moses Maimonides precisely within these Old Testament commentaries.⁷²

5. Conclusions

The figure of Moses occupied a unique role in the complexities of prophecy and law, tradition and innovation, and it has done that for all three religions. As much as Jewish position will tend to represent a more traditional and legal view of Mosaic prophecy, inner-Jewish dynamics provide their own moments of paradigmatic shift within the Mosaic normativity framework. The somewhat surprising embodiment of all this in the figure of the second Egyptian Moses, in twelfth century *Fustat*, complicated things not only for Jews, but for Christians as well. While the earlier turn to the Old Testament in general, to prophetic experience, and to the figure of Moses, took place independently, already during the 12th century, scholastic approach is heavily marked with the encounter with Maimonides and his *Guide of the Perplexed*. What remained as partial and critical engagement in the works of Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas will get a radical and extreme expression in Meister Eckhart’s writings, which probably makes him one of the most significant figures on the way to Renaissance and early modern Christian Hebraism and Christian Kabbalah.

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⁶⁹ Expositio Lib. Exodi, 265; LW II, 213, 11–14: “Sequitur: in montem. Nota: non ait ad montem. Ratio videtur: amor enim et voluntas ad rem ipsam respiciunt et in ipsa sistunt et quiescent. Intellectus vero non sistit in re ipsa in se ipsa, sed iuxta nomen intellectus intrat ad ipsa rei principia et ibi rem accipit in principiis suis in radice et origine; (McGinn 1986, p. 125).

⁷⁰ On such interpretation see (Faur 1999; Blumenthal 2006).

⁷¹ On Maimonides in Jewish mystical tradition see (Altmann 1936; Idel 1991, 2004).

⁷² On Eckhart’s place in relation to his contemporary Hebraists see (Schwartz 2010).

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