**Commentary as a Tool for Cultural Change:   
Historical Contexts of Nahmanides’ *Commentary on the Torah***

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R. Moses b. Nahman (Nahmanides), a rabbi, kabbalist, interpreter of the Talmud and Scripture, preacher, congregational leader and public figure, was one the most influential personalities in West European Jewry in the thirteenth century. Nahmanides was born around the year 1194 under his contemporary name Bonastruc ça Porta in Gerona, Catalonia (Spain), where he spent almost his entire life and pursued most of his career. Only about three years before his death, he relocated to the Land of Israel, where he died circa 1270. Nahmanides was one of the most prolific of the medieval Jewish authors, producing commentaries on the Talmud, Talmudic polemics, some halakhic writing, commentaries on the Torah and Job, sermons, poetry, epistles, and more. Two of these works were among the most influential of all and established his reputation forever. One is his commentary on the Talmud (*Hiddushe haTalmud—* novellae), which became one of the most authoritative works in medieval halakhic literature. The other is his *Commentary on the Torah,* a mainstay of Jewish literature down the eons that expanded the circle of those who revered his teachings to areas outside the rabbinical and scholastic elites.

Although many studies have been written about Nahmanides’ works, various broad and inclusive aspects of his oeuvre have attracted scant discussion. Bible scholars seldom address Nahmanides’ commentary on the Talmud and researchers of Talmudic commentary take little interest in his non-halakhic homiletic and exegetic literature. Both sides eschew all interest in the occult and keep Nahmanides’ kabbalistic works at arm’s length, whereas researchers of Nahmanides’ kabbalistic writings examine them largely in dissociation with his other works as though the Nahmanides the kabbalist and the author of a scholarly commentary on the Talmud are two different people. I have tried to bridge this gap in my study, which is about to be published under the title *R. Moshe b. Nahman—an Intellectual-Religious Biography*. [או שמא בחרת בכותרת אחרת?] In this lecture, I wish to present something of my research project and examine the place of Nahmanides’ *Commentary on the Torah* within the broad context of his corpus and against the background of coeval religious challenges in which he was involved. In my remarks here, I will demonstrate the way in which, by means of writing the *Commentary on the Torah,* Nahmanides sought to influence and shape the intellectual agenda in the West European Jewish scene.

Nahmanides wrote his *Commentary on the Torah* over a period of decades that lasted until his final days in the Land of Israel. Even though its first edition came out before he set sail from Spain for the Land of Israel, until his final years he continued to reexamine, amend, augment, and proof his text ahead of a new edition. However, he did not begin to write this work, which was paramount among his concerns during this lengthy period and in fact amounts to his lifework, until he was in his fifties, as one may adduce by carefully comparing it with his earlier writings. What can explain the decision of a ranking Talmudic scholar such as Nahmanides, who had already established his rabbinical reputation, to plunge into writing a popular, comprehensive, and systematic commentary on the Torah, of all things, so late in life?

The puzzlement grows when we examine the history of Nahmanides’ works in the course of his life. In his early decades, Nahmanides devoted himself to Talmudic-halakhic writing. Thus, by the early 1220s, an edition of his mature Talmudic work *Hiddushe haTalmud* had already been placed before that generation’s leading rabbinical scholars. Some ten years of intensive effort by the young Nahmanides (apparently from his late teens to his early thirties) yielded an especially bounteous harvest— supplements to the halakhot of R. Isaac Alfasi, *Milhamot Hashem* on the tractates of the Talmud, and *Hiddushe haTalmud*. From then on, however, seemingly veering away from his earlier endeavors, Nahmanides almost totally disengaged from his commentary on the Talmud (even though, evidently, he had yet to produce systematic novellae on several tractates) and abruptly turned to other genres. The question is: What prompted this dramatic watershed in the young Nahmanides’ creative outpouring during the fourth decade of his life? The key to the riddle, as I will show presently, lies in his response to the challenges of his place and time.

Precisely as Nahmanides labored over his novellae on the Talmud, the intellectual history of West European Jewry took a new turn when Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed*, written several decades previously, was translated from Arabic into Hebrew. The final edition of R. Samuel ibn Tibbon’s translation appeared in Provence in 1224–1225 and R. Judah al-Harizi’s translation came out in Toledo, Spain, at almost the same time. These works mediated between Maimonides’ philosophical teachings and his students and broad circles of Jewish intelligentsia on both sides of the Pyrenees and stirred much intellectual ferment. Alongside enthusiastic responses in rationalist circles, the *Guide* attracted harsh criticism among those on the conservative flank of West European Jewry. These contrasting reactions escalated into a grim war, replete with excommunications and bans in which leading rabbinical and public personalities in West European Jewry, including Nahmanides, of course, were involved. The tinderbox of this strife was the Provence area, next to Catalonia, where Maimonidean philosophy had made broad inroads, and the fuse was set alight by the sage of Montpellier, R. Solomon b. Abraham. The focal points of opposition to Maimonides were in France and several locations in Provence. The chain of events that would be called “the Maimonidean controversy” broke out, evidently, in the first half of 1232 and ended no later than 1235, roughly concurrent, probably by not by chance, with the change of direction in Nahmanides’ endeavors.

Nahmanides, as I have noted, played a highly important role in this contest. In 1232, when the controversy erupted and writs of excommunication began to spread, Nahmanides was still in his forties but his rabbinical stature as an interpreter of the Talmud had already lent him a respected and influential status that may have had important if not definitive implications for each of the clashing sides in the new polemical arena. Although equally respected by both parties, Nahmanides seems to have been in no rush to identify strongly with either of them. As for the topical and personal sides of the matter, he was attentive to some of the criticisms that had been leveled against the Jewish philosophers of his time, and in many respects his stance was closer to that of the critics. As a leader who had public responsibility, however, he was troubled mainly by the rift that the controversy had created within the Jewish communities. He observed with trepidation the rapid and dramatic progression of the affair and feared its dire and dangerous potential. Several letters by Nahmanides that are associated with this affair are in our possession, and in them he strains to calm the tempers, smooth the jagged edges of the discourse, cleanse the controversy of its emotional residues, and shift the debate onto topical paths. The most important of these letters, sent to the rabbis of France in order to attenuate the anger against Maimonides, is named for its opening passage, *Terem E’ene* (Before I Reply). Eloquently and passionately, Nahmanides appeals to the rabbis of France, who had banned the study of the *Guide of the Perplexed* and the *Book of Knowledge*, and implores them to rescind the injunction. Nahmanides’ efforts may have paid off; pursuant to his impassioned appeal, the rabbis of France did step back and revoke the ban.

Thus, the crux of this letter is a defense of Maimonides who, according to Nahmanides, deserves respect due to his greatness in Torah and his stature, even if not all of his views should be accepted. In the last section of the letter, however, in a passage sometimes perceived as marginal and thus far given little scholarly attention, Nahmanides retreats somewhat from the position that he takes in the body of the letter. Here we find that, even if Nahmanides defends Maimonides wholeheartedly, he finds the Maimonidean philosophical movement of his generation genuinely menacing. After pleading with the French rabbis to repeal the ban on the *Guide of the Perplexed* and the *Book of Knowledge,* Nahmanides himself presents them with alternative proposals for action against the new trends of the time and guides them in how to restrain them. In lieu of a draconian and sweeping ban on “HaNesher haGadol” (the Great Eagle), Nahmanides proposes several other vital steps. Foremost, he urges an end to the contempt and derision that some intellectuals of his era express for homiletical traditions that are inconsistent with scientific-philosophical standards. Another measure that he suggests for his readers, instead of an outright injunction on the *Guide* is,amazingly, to limit engagement with the book in public:

Concerning those who engage [themselves] in group study of the book *Moreh Nevuchim* [the Guide of the Perplexed] lay the hand of your fear upon their mouth.… If you Rabbis will agree with the sages of Provence, we too will go forth in your footsteps. You should strengthen this matter with excommunication and imprecation, with thunder and quaking, and with the noise of the great tumult and the flame of a devouring fire…

Given Nahmanides’ impassioned defense of Maimonides in the first part of the letter, the grave restrictions on studying the book that he now recommends are somewhat bewildering. What prompted Nahmanides to propose a strict embargo on group study of the *Guide of the Perplexed*?

The answer evidently lies in Nahmanides’ third and final suggestion, expressed in the concluding passage of the missive. Here he instructs the French rabbis to do everything to preserve engagement in the Torah, the Mishna, and the Talmud as their flocks’ focal points of intellectual interest, and not to fall for the temptation of making room for philosophical study:

It is also appropriate for you to gently admonish everyone to completely desist from engaging abundantly [in the study of the Moreh Nevuchim]. He who fears Heaven should return and be diligent over the book of the Written Torah and the Oral Law, for that is the source of our life, and with it, our excellence will be magnified. He that hears—let him hear, and he that forbears—let him forbear, for it is impossible you to remonstrate and to force all Israel to be saints. The ‘fathers of the world’ conducted themselves in this way, reproving the great sages [to desist] from [pursuing the study of philosophy] and certainly to restrain from rationalism the students who are [just] beginning to learn.

This norm, Nahmanides emphasizes here in his remarks to the French zealots, cannot be imposed by force; it should be instilled by pleasant persuasion. But where the issue itself is concerned, he instructs them to uphold the status of traditional Talmudic study strictly, because “You will not find fear of sin, humility, and sanctity save among those who occupy themselves with the Mishna and the Talmud.” Nahmanides thus finds the study of philosophy problematic neither due to its theological positions nor on account of its interpretive approach, but rather because of its very attractiveness and the danger that it will offer an alluring intellectual alternative to traditional Talmudic study. Nahmanides cannot forbid engagement with the *Guide of the Perplexed* ab initio and does not wish to do so. This is because, first, he does not want to offend the status and legitimacy of the “Great Eagle” and second, so it seems, he sees no great danger in its contents. Instead, he wishes to stanch the spread of interest in this book as a focal point of study and deflect the menace of its spreading into the public sphere and intellectual consciousness at the expense of traditional Torah study. This is why Nahmanides proposes a strict ban on the formation of groups around the *Guide* and the establishment of what would amount to alternative *batei midrash* (houses of study) where philosophy is studied*.*

Nahmanides was so concerned about this matter that, beyond making regulatory recommendations to his ban-inclined French colleagues, he undertook a dramatic philosophical and literary demarche. To have a real and direct impact on preserving the status and scholastic allure of the Written Torah, Nahmanides saw a need for a return to Scripture, which he considered a potential magnet, and emphasized the singular value of this vocation. He expressed his new insights in a sermon that he devoted to the topic, the *Torat haShem Temima* sermon.

*Torat haShem Temima* is the first, and undoubtedly the most important, of several sermons that Nahmanides committed to writing. One may see this work, in effect, as an encomium to the Law of Moses. In the course of this lengthy address, Nahmanides paints the virtues of the Torah in bold intellectual hues for the purpose of reinforcing its image and attractiveness under the harsh conditions of competition for the heart of the Jewish intelligentsia of his time—an intelligentsia that, as I have noted, had begun to succumb to the enchantment of “foreign” sciences, foremost philosophy. Nahmanides evidently delivered the sermon in Barcelona at some time in the 1230s (after the controversy) or the early 1240s. What implicit message does this sermon send? How did Nahmanides wish to enhance the value of Torah in the eyes of his audience? The linchpin of *Torat haShem Temima* is the idea that all human wisdom and lofty religious truths are embedded in the Torah and, more so, all universal wisdom and science are but the “fruit of the fruit” of Torah, and all were revealed to humankind in the Revelation at Sinai, where the Torah was given. Thus Nahmanides writes in his introduction to the sermon:

You must initially recognize that whatever people know and understand is ‘the fruit’ of Torah or “the fruit of that fruit.” Were is not for [“the fruit of”] Torah, there would be no distinction between man and the donkey upon which he rides. You can see it [illustrated] today among the nations who are far from the lands [where] Torah and prophecy [have spread] ….

All these and similar matters represent ancient branches of true knowledge which were transmitted to those who received the Torah. When we were dispelled [dispersed] [from our Land], this knowledge shared our destiny only an erroneous surviving memory thereof reached a few individuals.… In conclusion of this matter, the Sages have found that all subjects pertaining to nature are alluded to in the Torah.

It is hard to find a precedent for this idea, which attributes a hidden universal stratum of meaning to the Biblical text, one that far transcends the overt laws and narrative of this text, either in the Talmudic literature or in medieval Jewish literature preceding the thirteenth century. Indeed, the myth that all knowledge and science originates in the Jews’ ancient wisdom was widely affirmed among Jews and non-Jews from antiquity to the Middle Ages and onward. Never before, however, had anyone argued that these sciences are encrypted in the Torah itself; at the most, it was claimed that they were handed down by oral or written tradition in lost or concealed books. It does not seem hard to guess why: no one had an interest in diverting attention from the overt stratum of the Torah, the stratum that conveys the constitutive meaning of religious life. Nahmanides, however, had good reason to break new ground under the circumstances of his temporal and physical setting.

By claiming that the corpus of human knowledge is encoded in the Torah itself, Nahmanides not only reworks the ancient myth but, in effect, proposes a new interpretive method. His statement of principle, according to which all of Scripture carries a broad and comprehensive stratum of scientific knowledge that, at least in greater part, stands separate from the plain semantic meaning of the text and is encrypted between its lines, is a dramatic pronouncement that may change the “rules of the game” in reading the Torah. From then on, in this sermon and pursuant to it, we find Nahmanides detecting various secrets in the Torah. Subsumed within a certain Biblical expression, in his opinion, is the “secret of leap-year calculation,” the astronomical method for determining the months, and the secret of cosmic history—the “days of eternity”—is encoded in specific commandments. Thus we find Nahmanides “tracing” allusions to agriculture, zoology, demonology, hand reflexology, physiognomy, and other fields to the Torah. Much of the content that Nahmanides considers encrypted in the Torah belongs to the discipline that would become known as Kabbalah. In these cases, Nahmanides finds in Biblical verses allusions to “secrets” associated with teachings of the sefirot, reincarnation, magic, theurgy, and so on. In all these places in the text, Nahmanides does not “deliver the goods”—he neither explains how to decode these secrets nor even reports the secrets themselves. All he wishes to do, by and large, is to instill the theoretical awareness that these secrets are found deep in the Torah. Thus he hopes to amplify the prestige and status of Torah as the “mother of all sciences,” a wondrous work that carries the universal knowledge that, from then on, need not be sought in non-Jewish pastures.

One should, as stated, construe this transition, which expands the meaning of the Biblical text to a broader horizon, as part of the need to contend with intellectual alternatives that explicitly or implicitly challenge the traditional option, which sanctified the engagement with the Torah. The idea of *Torat haShem Temima,* denoting the perfection or completeness of God’s Torah, [הוספתי—המתרגם] is meant to restore lost luster and proclaim the Torah itself, and in effect Scripture at large, as the most exalted of all objects of intellectual focus. It is in pursuit of this goal that Nahmanides delved into commentary on the Torah and from then on devoted himself to revealing its various strata—the literal stratum (*peshat*) and those beyond. By force of his rabbinical authority, Nahmanides set in motion a cultural change that contributed definitively to the interest that had begun to stir in the Bible and its interpretation, even at the expense of engaging in the Talmud.

The *Torat haShem Temima* sermon—like Nahmanides’ other works—is free-standing in the literary sense. It neither systematically relies on nor refers to the contents of other works, just as other works of Nahmanides do not reference or base themselves on this sermon. However, the sermon is closely related to Nahmanides’ *Commentary on the Torah.* More than twenty interpretive passages in the sermon, some extensive and lengthy, recur in the subsequently written *Commentary.* In each of these textual parallels, the similarity is evident to any reader and is manifested in content, style, and interpretive path. Furthermore, Nahmanides would later integrate the basic idea itself—that all wisdom is embedded in the Torah—into his methodological preface to Genesis. In fact, one may see *Torat haShem Temima*, largely, as an early version, perhaps a rough draft, of the *Commentary on the Torah.*

Let us sum up. As I have shown, Nahmanides wrote his *Commentary on the Torah* as an advanced stage of the intellectual shift that he had made several years earlier around the *Torat haShem Temima* sermon, in order to restore the intellectual status of the Torah in the eyes of intellectuals as a counterweight to the new philosophical Zeitgeist. At a certain stage, it seems, Nahmanides came to the realization that the focus on Talmud had lost the requisite attractiveness; consequently, he set out on a voyage of return to the primary fundaments of the Jewish faith—the Bible and its hidden contents. In this religious renaissance, he proposed to offer an internal Jewish alternative to the allure of non-Jewish philosophy. In this context, however, Nahmanides also crosses a dramatic personal watershed, in which he himself begins to find interest in the Biblical field. He applied to the craft of Biblical commentary the same gravitas and responsibility that he applied in his youth in his commentary on the Talmud. Apparently, as often happens in the history of culture, concern about an exogenous cultural threat powered the wheels of a religious intellectual movement in the direction of innovative tendencies within the rabbinical house of study itself. These wheels, steered by Nahmanides to make the change happen, are his *Commentary on the Torah.*

From a broad historical perspective, Nahmanides inadvertently brought about several revolutions in the traditional rabbinical world. First, his return to Scripture would make an important contribution to the revitalization of Bible study as a legitimate and respected discipline in scholarly circles. Second, the *Commentary on the Torah* also became a conduit that enabled the theological and philosophical discourse to permeate rabbinical circles that had no natural affinity for it. Henceforth, questions regarding such matters as the image and features of God, miracles and nature, and prophecy and revelation would resonate even in the most traditional and conservative circles and sometimes would became part of the religious intellectual agenda. Finally—in a revolution no less dramatic—the *Commentary* placed the status of Kabbalah on an upward trajectory in the West European Jewish religious world of the thirteenth century. Therefore, Nahmanides’ religious and cultural rear-guard measures against the potency of Maimonidean philosophy would prove to be precipitants of profound change within the Jewish religious mainstream.

Thank you very much.