Abstract

Rabbi Solomon ibn Gabirol was active in Saragossa in approximately the middle third of the eleventh century, and his book *Fountain of Life* is one of the first known philosophical tomes that originate in Andalusian Jewry. Scholarship on his thought is often typified by emphasis on its being an outlier in the Jewish intellectual world. Against this position, which considers his thinking foreign to that world, the central argument in this dissertation is that there is a close and highly meaningful connection between Ibn Gabirol’s philosophical thought and the teachings of Isaac Israeli (d. c. 950) and Sa’adia Gaon (d. c. 942), the two most prominent Jewish intellectuals who preceded him; and that Ibn Gabirol’s motivation for writing his philosophical treatise was theological.

At the locus of *Fountain of Life* stands the idea of universal hylomorphism. Ibn Gabirol attempts to prove that all of being, including the world of the intellects, is composed of two completely distinct substances—general matter and general form. Like all Neoplatonic thinkers, he describes the world of the intellects as a sequence of substances that emanate from one another, and the meaning of his universal hylomorphism is that this chain of emanation is composed *ab initio* of two separate, even opposing, essences that are unified by the power of the deity into single being. This idea clashes with the common Neoplatonic conviction that only oneness stems from the One God and that, accordingly, emanation entails only one principle. The contrast between the idea of hylomorphism and the Neoplatonic worldview raises questions about both Ibn Gabirol’s sources for this idea and his motives for devoting his book to the demonstration of its veracity.

Various scholars have noted that in the Greek and Arabic Neoplatonic literature, and even in Plotinus himself, one may find sources for the idea of intelligible matter and for dualism in the world of the intellects. When it comes to showing a direct connection between Ibn Gabirol’s teachings and these sources, however, they meet with difficulty. Furthermore, examination of the sources shows that they do not evoke the idea of absolute dualism at the very onset of the emanation and surely do not give it the emphasis that it acquires in Ibn Gabirol’s teachings.

With the discovery of fragments of Isaac Israeli’s *Book of Substances* and in his brief treatise *The Chapter on the Elements,* it transpires that the idea that being began with the compounding of two substances—matter and form—already appears in Israeli’s teachings. In these works, Israeli presents the idea that beings originate in matter and form and that the intellect is a compound of both. This, however, did not lead researchers of Ibn Gabirol to attribute special weight to the conceptual relationship between the two Jewish Neoplatonic thinkers. The reason for this, evidently, is rooted in Samuel M. Stern’s thesis of “Ibn Hasdai’s Neoplatonist.” According to this thesis, a translation of the gist of an ancient Neoplatonic treatise attributed to Aristotle was appended to the last chapters of R. Abraham ibn Hasdai’s Hebrew translation of *The Book of the Prince and the Ascetic*. In these chapters, one finds passages that parallel Israeli’s writings in several of the latter’s works and correspond to an addendum included in the tenth section of the long version of the *Theology* *of Aristotle* (an adaptation that adds to the *Theology,* which itself is an adaptation of segments of Platinus’ *Enneads*). In Stern’s view, these parallels indicate that this lost treatise predated Israeli and those who produced the long version of the *Theology of Aristotle.* Since the idea of the hylomorphism of the intellect is found in “Ibn Hasdai’sNeoplatonist,”one needs to cover little ground to consider this work representative of a distinct Neoplatonic school of thought which Israeli and Ibn Gabirol, together, are successors. According to this thesis, there is no need to attribute special weight to the fact that both of these Jewish Neoplatonic thinkers argue the case of duality from the very onset of emanation. As Fritz Zimmermann has already argued, however, Stern’s evidence for the precedence of “Ibn Hasdai’s Neoplatonist” to the long version of the *Theology of Aristotle* and to Israeli’s works is based on conjecture and does not stand up to criticism. By comparing the sources, one actually confirms a possibility that Stern rules out, namely, that the long version of the *Theology* *of Aristotle* served Israeli as a source. In *The* *Chapter on the Elements,* for example, we find expressions that appear in the long version of the *Theology of Aristotle* and not in “Ibn Hasdai’s Neoplatonist,” a fact that attests to an independent relationship between Israeli’s remarks and those in the *Theology.* In addition, it is Ibn Hasdai who translated Israeli’s *Book of the Elements* and attested, in his forward to the book, that he knew of additional works of Israeli’s and wished to publish them. This gives us reason to believe that “Ibn Hasdai’s Neoplatonist” is in fact based on writings of Israeli’s that were in the possession of Ibn Hasdai, who merged them into his translation of *The Book of the Prince and the Ascetic.*

What this means is that in the description of emanation in *The Chapter on the Elements*, Israeli used material from the long version of the *Theology of Aristotle* and edited it to add the idea of hylomorphism of the intellect, clearly contradicting the source in the long version of the *Theology of Aristotle* itself. By examining the idea of the hylomorphism of the intellect in Israeli’s teachings against the background of the long version of the *Theology of Aristotle,* one may infer that Israeli enunciated the idea by himself in a clear polemic with his Neoplatonic sources. This conclusion strengthens the relationship of Ibn Gabirol’s teachings with those of Israeli and demonstrates the need to investigate the extent to which Ibn Gabirol’s universal hylomorphism should be seen as a direct continuation of Israeli’s thinking.

The fundaments on which Ibn Gabirol bases the idea of universal hylomorphism are the concepts of general matter and general form, the existence of which in all being he wishes to prove. In two locations in *Fountain of Life,* Ibn Gabirol describes general matter and general form. These descriptions serve him as evidence of their presence in all being, their absolute separateness, and their interdependency in reality. Accordingly, each is described in respect of its presence in being per se and in connection with its counterpart. General matter is described as essentially one substance, a genus, and a substrate. The description of matter as one substance is meant to emphasize its separate essence, its description as a genus to stress its presence in all being, and its description as a substrate to underscore its essential connection with form in reality. General form, in turn, is described with respect to matter as an accident, and in respect of itself as a substance that maintains all forms. The description of form is also meant to stress its dependency on matter, its separateness, and its presence in all being. By comparing the accounts of matter and form in *Fountain of Life* with Israeli’s writings, one finds that all the fundaments of these accounts already appear in Israeli’s writings and are Ibn Gabirol’s sources, although in Israeli’s writings—at least those that remain in our possession—they are dispersed in various locations. By implication, it seems, Ibn Gabirol was profoundly familiar with Israeli’s teachings and relied on his writings as a philosophical substructure on which he formulated his universal hylomorphism. Consequently, *Fountain of Life* may be seen largely as an attempt by Ibn Gabirol to set Israeli’s idea of the hylomorphism of the intellect on a broader philosophical foundation, and these Jewish Neoplatonic thinkers should be viewed as sharing a worldview specific to them that blends the Neoplatonic idea of emanation with that of absolute ontological hylomorphism.

Even though Sa’adia Gaon does not share the Neoplatonic worldview of Israeli and Ibn Gabirol and rarely invokes the Aristotelian concepts of matter and form, study of his commentary on *Sefer Yetsira* shows that, according to his remarks, the book centers on the idea of ontological hylomorphism. In his introduction to the commentary on *Sefer Yetsira*, Sa’adia claims that the purpose of the book is to discuss the prime matter from which being was created and, after listing several methods that trace created being to only one principle, he presents the approach of *Sefer Yetsira* as he construes it. On this account, being was not created from one kind of matter only; instead, it is a composite of the First Air, on the one hand, and the action of numbers and letters, on the other. Air, in this description, is primal matter, while the action of numbers and letters are the forms of being. According to Sa’adia, of all philosophical approaches, that of *Sefer Yetsira* is the closest to the perspective of the Torah, but one should add to it the idea of creation-at-once. According to Sa’adia, therefore, *Sefer Yetsira* describes a quasi-hylomorphistic world-picture in which, in essence, all overt being (excluding the hidden Second Air, which is not considered part of being) is a composite of air and the action of numbers and letters, including the world of the souls and the angels. By implication, Ibn Gabirol and Sa’adia share the general idea that all being is composed of duality. That this similarity is not random and that Ibn Gabirol himself considered Sa’adia’s commentary on *Sefer Yetsira* a source for his concretization of the idea of universal hylomorphism is suggested by various parallels in the details of the ideas. In particular, it arises from Ibn Gabirol’s nearly verbatim quotation of Sa’adia’s commentary on *Sefer Yetsira*, in which, in effect, he identifies the compound nature of the material world, in his approach, constituted from primal matter and the form of quantity, with the idea that being is the product of the impress of numbers and letters on the air. The hylomorphistic outlooks of Sa’adia and Ibn Gabirol lead them to contrasting positions on the status of spiritual entities such as angels and souls. The compound conception of being steers Sa’adia to the belief that even these entities are ultimately physical, albeit delicately so, because he identifies hylomorphism with physicality. Ibn Gabirol, in contrast, following Israeli’s distinct way of thinking, reasons that there are substances composed of matter and form that are nevertheless simple and nonphysical. This may be the right place to suggest, parenthetically, that Ibn Gabirol may have set aside a whole chapter in his book (Chapter 3) to proving the existence of simple substances precisely as an outgrowth of the connection of this theory to Sa’adia’s remarks on ontological hylomorphism and as an attempt to apply this notion to simple substances as well—substances whose existence Sa’adia effectively denied.

The fact that these three Jewish thinkers stress ontological hylomorphism may be instructive of the theological motivation behind the idea. Admittedly, Israeli and Ibn Gabirol base the idea on philosophical proofs and do not reveal a theological motive for their emphasis on it, but Sa’adia discloses its theological meanings. Once these meanings come to light, traces of them can be found in Ibn Gabirol as well. What matters most here is that ontological hylomorphism attests to creation of being ex nihilo, and that creation attests to the existence and the absolute oneness of the Creator-God. The use of ontological hylomorphism to prove the truth of creation and the existence of God was central in Islamic theology; such proofs were grounded in those enunciated by Philoponus, who contended with the arguments of pagan Aristotelian and Neoplatonist philosophers who dismissed the idea of creation.

Thus, the significance of universal hylomorphism is a singular attempt by two Jewish Neoplatonic thinkers, Israeli and Ibn Gabirol, to propose the fusion of Neoplatonic ideas and the religious belief in creation. In their teachings, they subordinate the Neoplatonic idea of emanation to the belief in creation ex nihilo and attempt to prove, on the basis of ontological hylomorphism, that being was created and that, in turn, the Creator-God exists and is one.

Creation ex nihilo figures importantly in Ibn Gabirol’s *piyyutim* (liturgical poems), which, in this context, also tout the idea that the duality of being attests to its having been created and, as a corollary, that God exists and is one. Thus his poetry expresses the same theological intent that underlies his philosophical doctrine.

Alongside the idea of universal hylomorphism, the concept of divine will is also central in Ibn Gabirol’s teachings. In *Fountain of Life*, however, the concept is not taught systematically and its full meaning is difficult to fathom. From his remarks, we see that Ibn Gabirol intended to devote a special book to the discussion of this concept. The book, however, is not in our possession and may never have been written.

The enigma that envelops the concept of will in *Fountain of Life* has prompted scholars of Ibn Gabirol to offer different and even opposing interpretations. On the face of it, the concept of divine will seems essentially religious and theological in nature. Religious thinkers tended to invoke it to stress the spontaneous, non-necessary, and temporal nature of creation. Thus the concept was understood in *Fountain of Life* by the book’s medieval Christian readers. Ostensibly, the concept clashes with the Neoplatonic worldview, which, stresses the essential, necessary, and eternal nature of emanation. Accordingly, some scholars construe the concept of will as a concession by Ibn Gabirol to religious faith in creation, though it has also been suggested that this concession may have been mere lip service. Other authors reason that Ibn Gabirol adopted a position of volitional emanation, by which being does emanate from the divine essence but in a process that is willed and not necessary. Some of these scholars consider Ibn Gabirol’s use of will an artificial attempt to reconcile creation with emanation by positioning will as a mediator between them. Recently, scholars have argued that the divine will in Ibn Gabirol’s teachings should be denied its common religious meaning and instead should be interpreted as representative of the necessity of emanation, in accordance with the Neoplatonic outlook.

One might suppose that the religious context of the concept of divine will in *Fountain of Life*, on which many researchers have dwelled, would have triggered a thorough examination of its connection with the ideas of Jewish thinkers who preceded Ibn Gabirol. Notwithstanding a few remarks by several researchers, however, the possibility of a link between the concept of will in *Fountain* and the ideas of Israeli and Sa’adia has not attracted special attention. One reason offered for this is that the concept of will is so widespread in religious thinking that the fact of emphasizing it cannot attest to a special connection. Another reason put forward is that Ibn Gabirol attributed to will a special ontological nature. However, given the connection of Ibn Gabirol’s idea of universal hylomorphism with the teachings of Israeli and Sa’adia, as discussed in the first part of this work, the possibility of a linkage between them also in respect of divine will needs to be reexamined.

By comparing Ibn Gabirol’s writings in *Fountain of Life* to those of Israeli in *Book of Substances*, one indeed finds in *Fountain* a clear relationship between their teachings in three main aspects of the divine will. First, both Ibn Gabirol and Israeli explicitly dismiss the idea that will an essence separate from the deity, which mediates between God and being; both argue emphatically that the divine will is essentially an aspect of the divine essence. This idea stands out in particular given that, in this matter, Israeli appears to wage a direct polemic with the contents of the long version of the *Theology of Aristotle,* which positions the divine word (*al-kalimah*), identified with the divine will, as a mediator between the deity and being. Second, Ibn Gabirol and Israeli agree that the divine will is one and unchanging. Accordingly, both trace the cause of change and multiplicity of being not to willful change but rather, and solely, to the material substrate that receives the action of the will. For this reason, simple substances created directly by the unmediated divine will are eternal and their creation is not temporal. Finally, both thinkers see the action of the divine will as the key to distinguishing creation from emanation. Divine will creates substances by means of influence and action, in contrast to the necessary and essential nature of emanation. That is, unlike emanation, in which a necessary and essential link between the emanator and the emanated exists, in creation there is no such relationship between creator and created. What this means is that both Ibn Gabirol and Israeli subordinate the idea of emanation to creation and reject the idea that creation necessarily and essentially emanates from the essence of the deity. Given the immutability of the divine will, however, the creation of simple substances is ex nihilo and also eternal and a-temporal.

Even though the concept of divine will in Ibn Gabirol’s thinking is intimately related to Israeli’s teachings, it appears to deviate from these teachings in two aspects of will. One is the idea of mediation. Even though Ibn Gabirol reasons that the will is essentially inseparable from the essence of the deity and rejects the idea of mediation in this sense, he stresses that the divine will does mediate between the deity and being in terms of its action; thus, he gives will an ontological status that is lacking in Israeli’s teachings. The second aspect of will in which Ibn Gabirol strays from Israeli’s teachings is his emphasis that will is present and operative in all being—an underscoring that further strengthens its special ontological stature.

By comparing the concept of divine will in *Fountain of Life* with the corresponding tenet in Sa’adia’s commentary on *Sefer Yetsira,* one may find a clear connection between his doctrine and Sa’adia’s remarks in his commentary on *Sefer Yetsira* in the very aspects of the divine will on which Ibn Gabirol strays from Israeli’s teachings*.* Alongside the duality of being in his commentary on *Sefer Yetsira,* Sa’adia stresses the importance of divine will. On his view, via the concept of divine will—which he also calls the “Second Air”— *Sefer Yetsira* aims to explain how the deity is present and active in all being in the absence of direct contact between the deity, who is abstract, and being, which is corporeal. The divine will, he says, is present and active in the world just as the soul is present and active in the body and God is present and active in the will just as the intellect is present and acts in the soul. Like Sa’adia, Ibn Gabirol repeats time and again in *Fountain of Life* the idea that God is present in all being by means of His will and likens this to the presence of the intellect in the soul and the soul in the body. Apart from the textual nexus, which Shlomo Pines noted, it is evident that both thinkers attributed much importance to the belief that God is present and active in all of being but is totally different from being, and they explained this by invoking the concept of action of the will.

In theological terms, it appears that the divine will should be seen as a continuation of, and an addition to, universal hylomorphism. In Ibn Gabirol’s view, as stated, hylomorphism serves as evidence that being was created. The concept of will is an extension of this argument because the existence of will means that being, instead of emanating from God necessarily and essentially, is created ex nihilo through the action and influence of His will. It is true that the Neoplatonic understanding of the concept of God influences the way the divine will is comprehended and, accordingly, influences Ibn Gabirol’s and Israeli’s concept of creation. Evoked from these perceptions of God is the conclusion that God is eternal and unchanging and that, therefore, the action of His will has the same features. Thus, in turn, creation ex nihilo is eternal. The divine will adds to hylomorphism because it explains the belief that God is present and active in all being although He is totally separate from it. According to Ibn Gabirol, will not only renders matter into forms but is also the force that unifies all matter and form in being. Consequently, it is also present in all being. And because will and God are essentially one, God, by its mediating action, is present in all being.

Just as the theological importance of the idea of universal hylomorphism is reflected in Ibn Gabirol’s poetry, so do the theological meanings of the divine will resonate in his poetic oeuvre. In the piyyut *Keter Malkhut* (The kingly crown)*,* for example, the divine will is described “ as “a worker and a craftsman,” an expression that may be construed as reflecting the idea that creation traces to the action and influence of the will, in contrast to the necessary and essential nature of emanation. Concurrently, in many of Ibn Gabirol’s piyyutim one finds emphasis on the separate presence of the divine will in all of being through the mediation of His “power,” “glory,” or some other parallel locution. One may, for example, interpret Ibn Gabirol’s words in the verse in *Keter Malkhut* that describes the power of God as extending to the “uttermost ends,” and his referring to God in this piyyut as “soul of the soul,” as expressions of His mediating presence in all being.

The conclusion drawn in this study, then, is that Ibn Gabirol’s teachings belong to the Jewish philosophical tradition in the sense that the main ideas that he wished to impart originate in Jewish thinkers who preceded him, Israeli and Sa’adia, and in that his method is basically theological-religious, because it its geared to reinforcing belief in creation and in the presence and action of God in all being.

Structure of the study

The study is divided into two main parts. In Part 1, the concept of universal hylomorphism is discussed; Part 2 treats the divine will. In each part, the relationship between of Ibn Gabirol’s teachings and those of Isaac Israeli and Sa’adia Gaon is examined and its underlying theological significance is described.

In the introduction to Part 1, the idea of universal hylomorphism is presented and its singularity relative to the Neoplatonic philosophical tradition, to which Ibn Gabirol subscribes, is described. Also emphasized are the purpose of Fountain of Life—proving the veracity of universal hylomorphism—and the implication of universal hylomorphism, i.e., that duality permeates all being.

Chapter 1 of the study is devoted to discussion of various scholars’ proposals on how to trace the origins of universal hylomorphism within the Greek and Arab Neoplatonic tradition.

Chapter 2 concerns itself with the influence of the development of research into Israeli’s thinking on research of Ibn Gabirol. The main argument is that even though one encounters the idea of the hylomorphism of the intellect—a close neighbor of universal hylomorphism—in Israeli’s writings, the scholarly literature has not given this the importance that it deserves. The reason for this, in my opinion, is the development of the thesis concerning the earlier work known as “Ibn Hasdai’s Neoplatonist,” which is perceived as a common source for both Israeli and Ibn Gabirol. My claim is that this thesis is wrong and that Israeli was more original in his ideas than is commonly assumed.

In Chapter 3, the descriptions of matter and form in *Fountain of Life* are compared with similar ideas in Israeli’s writings. It is argued that this comparison indeed identifies Israeli as the source of these descriptions and that, consequently, in his enunciation of universal hylomorphism Ibn Gabirol wished to expand on and concretize Israeli’s idea of the hylomorphism of the intellect.

Chapter 4 presents the argument that Ibn Gabirol also drew on Sa’adia’s commentary on *Sefer Yetsira* for his hylomorphism. Discussed here is the philosophical stance that Sa’adia attributed to the author of *Sefer Yetsira* about ontological hylomorphism from the action of numbers and letters with overt air, this position is compared with the idea of universal hylomorphism.

In Chapter 5, the theological significance of the idea of universal hylomorphism is described and it is argued that Israeli, Sa’adia, and Ibn Gabirol had a similar worldview of ontological hylomorphism due to the theological importance that Ibn Gabirol attributed to it in proving creation ex nihilo and the existence of God.

In Chapter 6, several examples of the presence of the idea of universal hylomorphism in Ibn Gabirol’s poetry are given, and it is argued that they confirm the theological significance that Ibn Gabirol attributed to universal hylomorphism.

As stated, Part 2 of the study is devoted to discussion of the concept of divine will. In the introduction to this section, the enigmatic nature of divine will in *Fountain of Life* is presented and the opposing meanings that scholars have attributed to this notion are described. On this basis, it is argued that the vagueness surrounding the meaning of the divine will makes it all the more important to determine Ibn Gabirol’s sources for this idea.

Chapter 1 presents parallels between Ibn Gabirol’s comments on divine will and those of Israeli in three main respects: negating mediation between the deity and His will and creation, the claim that the divine will is not the precipitant of ontological change and multiplicity, and the argument that creation is distinct from emanation in respect of the action and influence of the divine will.

In Chapter 2, the concept of divine will in the commentary on *Sefer Yetsira* is presented and it is argued that Ibn Gabirol received from Sa’adia the idea that through the medium of the divine will God is present and active in all being.

In Chapter 3, the various theological meanings that Ibn Gabirol attributed to the divine will are discussed, and it is argued that the divine will in Israeli’s teachings and in Sa’adia’s commentary on *Sefer Yetsira* are integrated in *Fountain of Life*. On the one hand, the divine will is perceived as the deity’s ability to act not via the necessary imperative of His essence, in contrast to the essential and necessary nature of emanation (Israeli). On the other hand, the will is perceived in its action as a divine force that is present and operative in all being, by means of which God, too, is present and active in all being (Sa’adia).

In Chapter 4, several excerpts of Ibn Gabirol’s poetry are cited as reflective of both theological meanings that Ibn Gabirol attributes to the divine will.

The study concludes with a brief epilogue that underscores the general conclusion of the study: At the center of Ibn Gabirol’s philosophical writings are theological ideas that this philosopher wished to formulate and concretize within a Neoplatonic worldview. In addition, several additional conclusions adduced from this study are presented and issues for future research are proposed.