“Do What is Right and Good in the Sight of the Lord”:

New Insights and Burgeoning Creativity in the Writing of Nahmanides’ Commentary[[1]](#footnote-1)

Yuval Vadee

In the commentaries on the Torah that Nahmanides completed in Acre at the end of his life[[2]](#footnote-2) – alternatively, the additions to his Torah commentary that were written in the land of Israel[[3]](#footnote-3) – much has been written.[[4]](#footnote-4) About the work of Ofer and Jacobs in concentrating on these additions, Mack writes:[[5]](#footnote-5)

… In this way readers will internalize the fact that Nahmanides’ commentary on the Torah was not written all at once, and that the author saw fit to respond to various criticisms of his commentary, and to incorporate new discoveries and new insights into it, as would anyone who is intelligent and wide-awake and does not rest on his laurels, anyone whose work is growing, developing, and changing with the times and with alterations in his circumstances and in his environment.

Ofer and Jacobs point to changes that were made after the writing of the commentary was complete, primarily after Nahmanides arrived in Israel, but in Spain as well.[[6]](#footnote-6) Recently Marcus has pointed to changes that were made during the original writing of the commentary in Spain, before the original version of the commentary was completed, examining a single case ­– Nahmanides’ explanation of the phenomenon of “inquiring of God.” In his comment to Gen 25:22, Nahmanides gives one explanation of the idiom, in his comment to Exod 18:15 he changes his mind and adopts a different explanation, and in his comment to Deut 13:5 he changes his mind once more and offers yet a third explanation, all without revising his comments to the earlier occurrences.[[7]](#footnote-7) Marcus did not sufficiently emphasize the fact that in his comment to Exod 18:15 he explicitly references his comment to Gen 25:22, writing, “Similarly ‘and she went to inquire of the Lord,’ *as I explained there*” (emphasis added). To me, this undercuts the entire basis for analyzing the differences in Nahmanides’ explanation of this idiom in his comments on the various occurrences, since when he wrote his comment to Exod 18:15 his comment to Gen 25:22 was already written, as is evidenced by his saying, in the past tense, “I explained.” This makes it clear that Nahmanides is presenting these explanations as identical.

Like Marcus, I shall point in this article to changes that took place in the course of writing the commentary and before the first version of the commentary was completed in Spain. Like Marcus too I will do so by examining a single case – Nahmanides’ explanation of Deut 6:18, “and you shall do what is right and good in the eyes of the Lord.” In contrast to the case discussed by Marcus, where Nahmanides refers explicitly to an “identical” comment that he has already written – making it difficult to describe the alteration as a change in Nahmanides’ thinking – in the case discussed in this article Nahmanides refers to comments that he has yet to write. It is therefore possible to show that this case does involve changes in Nahmanides’ thinking about Deut 6:18, demonstrating a process of growth and development, and to clarify the altered circumstances that led to these changes.

Nahmanides comments on this verse *ad loc.*, but he has already mentioned it in his comments to Exod 15:26 and Lev 19:1, alluding to his future discussion of it:

I will discuss this further in my comments to “you shall do what is right and good in the eyes of the Lord,” if the good God is good to me. [to Exod 15:26]

As I shall explain (God willing) when I reach that text. [to Lev 19:1]

From these comments it is clear that when he writes his comments to Exod 15:6 and Lev 19:1, his comment to Deut 6:18 has not yet been written. We may generalize this conclusion and say that his procedure in writing his commentary on the Torah was the standard one of writing a book from beginning to end, verse after verse in their biblical order It was not done by writing comments atomistically and collecting them together into a complete commentary.[[8]](#footnote-8)

Naturally, Nahmanides writes more briefly in the two earlier comments about “what is right and good,” and expands on it in the place where it actually occurs. This fact led many people to take all three comments as expressing the identical idea.[[9]](#footnote-9) But careful study of the comments shows that what we have here is not an identical idea presented briefly in the earlier comments and more extensively where the actual phrase occurs. Rather, he has developed a new insight in the comment to Deut 6:18, one that is different from the idea presented in the earlier comments.

Two further comments in Deuteronomy were written from the perspective of this new insight, and an examination of these comments will strengthen and deepen this new insight.

I shall first examine the two earlier comments; then the comment to Deut 6:18 and the two comments that followed in its wake.[[10]](#footnote-10)

1. \* I thank Prof. Jonathan Jacobs and R. Yehuda Tropper for their insightful comments. MSS of Nahmanides’ commentary to the Torah will be identified by numbers, printed editions by letters; see the list at the end of this article. Biblical quotations in English are taken from NJPS with slight alterations where necessary.

 On changes and \*\*processes of development of the creativity \*\*among medieval authors, among them Nahmanides in his various \*\*compositions, see Henshke [5769], pp. 120-121 with n. 6, and Yosef Ofer and Jonathan Jacobs, *Nahmanides' Torah Commentary Addenda Written in the Land of Israel* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 2013), 17-21. On \*\*processes of development of Nahmanides’ worldview that come to expression in his various creations in the course of his life see Haviva Pedaya, *Nahmanides: Cyclical Time and Holy Test* [in Hebrew] (Tel Aviv: Am Oved, 2003), 87-88, and more recently Oded Yisraeli, *R. Moses b. Nachman (Nachmanides): Intellectual Biography* [in Hebrew] (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 2020). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Per R. Yitzhak of Acre; see H. A. Erlanger, *Sefer meir’at einayim ve-hu biur sodot hatorah beferush haramban z”l al hatorah kefi kabbalato mipi soferim usefarim l’rabbenu yiẓhak b”r shemuel demin acco zẓ”l* (Jerusalem: n.p., 1993), 227a. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. As Ofer and Jacobs call them in their 2013 book. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Already in the second half of the 19th century cataloguers of Hebrew manuscripts in the various libraries noted the existence of lists of these additions at the end of many of the manuscripts (Steinschneider 1864, 119; Neubauer 1886, 783; and Margaliot 1899, 157); Eisenstein [5719] was the first to make note, with regard to MS 9, of passages appearing already in various versions as an organic part of Nahmanides’ commentary to the Torah and to present them as additions; Kahana [5729] collected the additions attested in letters sent by Nahmanides from Israel back to the Diaspora, in which he instructs that they be incorporated into his commentary; Sabato [5765] collected additions that were not attested in these letters but focused only on Genesis; Ofer [2008] worked on lists of the attested additions, preparing the ground for study of the unattested ones; Ofer and Jacobs (2013) conducted an extensive study of the additions, collecting and discussing both the attested and unattested ones; Shneur [5774] worked on eight additions that deal with geographical matters; Jacobs [2012] broadened the discussion to include the motivation for some of the additions: books that Nahmanides discovered in Israel; Ofer [2013] extensively discusses the additions that have to do with Rachel’s tomb. See also, more generally, Ofer and Jacobs [5773] 21-26. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Mack [5776] 191. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Chapter 6 of their book, “Early Additions,” deals with seven additions that Nahmanides added to his commentary while he was still in Spain, using as their criterion the expressions “and again I found,” “I afterwards found,” and “afterwards I saw.” See Ofer and Jacobs [5773], 579-600. They find two further sections in which there are indications of an even earlier stage of the text. See ibid. 290-291 and 533-535. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Marcus 5781. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This process is recognizable also from many other comments, both those alluding to later texts on which he will comment in the future and those alluding to earlier texts on which he has already commented. Nahmanides continued this practice in the comments that he added when he was in Israel and asked that they be incorporated as an organic part of his commentary. Ofer and Jacobs [5773], 166-167, raise the possibility that Nahmanides’ desire to incorporate these later comments seamlessly into his commentary and not as subsequent clarifications led him, in a comment that was added to the Genesis commentary, to refer in the future tense to a passage in the Leviticus commentary that had already been included in the earlier version of his commentary.

This description of Nahmanides’ general writing process is not intended to contradict the possibility that at certain points Nahmanides incorporated into his commentary some passages that had already been written before he began writing the Torah commentary. R. Yehuda Tropper is currently working on an analysis of an extremely important passage of this kind, which will include the analysis of several additional passages of the kind.. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Meira 5734, 260-265; Hanokh 5742, 123-131; Halbertal 5766, 286-291; Rotenstein 5773 פט. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. Nahmanides commentary is taken from the HaKeter edition, ed. M. Cohen, [www.mgketer.org](http://www.mgketer.org), corrected with reference to the manuscripts. Significant alterations in the places that require emendation will be marked and explained in the notes. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)