Derrida: From Athens to Jerusalem

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In this essay, I would like to bring Jacques Derrida, an Athenian philosopher, to Jerusalem. I will argue that a central concept in Derrida's philosophy, *différance,* is analagous to the "**shared name**" of Maimonides and I am to show this using the parable of Jacob's ladder. Therefore, I will demonstrate that Derrida is a Jewish-Greek philosopher. Gideon Ofrat wrote about him, suggesting that an understanding of Derrida's depth is impossible without the illumination of the Jewish dimension in his thought. Ofrat claims that beneath the surface, beneath the veil, beneath the text, Judaism is concealed. Judaism is hidden, almost "compelled." Does the revelation of Jewish identity, emerging from darkness to light, not lie at the roots of the Derridean endeavor? Isn't it the "source," the "ultimate" (essence, idos, logos) for Derridean writing? Derrida's closer engagement with Emmanuel Levinas in recent decades has brought to the forefront a kind of Judaism that was concealed in his earlier writings.[[1]](#footnote-1) I will explore this through a conversation and correspondence with Maimonides. I refer to this as "correspondence" because Derrida's deconstruction is done using the hermeneutical method.

Both Derrida and Maimonides, in their interpretation of the biblical text, are hermeneuticians. Both philosophers were interpreters of texts. Therefore, Derrida engages with Maimonides. There is a time gap between the two Jewish philosophers, with Maimonides being a philosopher of the 12th century and Derrida a philosopher of the 20th century. I will argue that this gap can be bridged, and I will do so through deconstructive method, interpreting the text of *The Guide for the Perplexed* by Maimonides, who himself derives interpretations from the biblical text. In other words, I will describe the hermeneutics of the deconstruction and then apply it to Maimonides through a case study of the parable of “Jacob's Ladder” from *The Guide for the Perplexed.* In this essay, I will highlight the similarities between Maimonides' hermeneutics, as a biblical interpreter, and that of Derrida.

But what is hermeneutics? Hermeneutics is the "art of interpretation" that deals with the translation, explanation, and interpretation of texts to clarify a complex and difficult narrative. When interpretation includes additional explanations by the interpreter ("the explainer") within it, it becomes hermeneutics. In Greek mythology, Hermes was the messenger of the gods whose role was to translate, explain, and interpret divine words into human language and thus, hermeneutics, derived from Hermes, refers to interpretation and deconstruction, specifically the interpretation of texts. The function of hermeneutics is to convey and translate something beyond human understanding into something that people can grasp and comprehend. The Greeks granted Hermes the privilege of revealing language and writing, which people applied to the understanding of the meaning and conveying it to others. This mythological tradition that relates to Hermes corresponds to the words of our Sages: "The Torah is spoken in the language of men."[[2]](#footnote-2)

"Discipline is no single discipline of hermeneutics, but rather various methodological, theoretical, and hermeneutical trends.[[3]](#footnote-3) The root of the word 'hermeneutics' comes from the Greek verb “Hermẻneuein,” which translates to “to interpret.” The noun form, “hermẻneia,” means “explanation.” The various forms of the word 'Hermẻneuein' suggest a process of turning the non-understandable into understandable. How does the process of interpretation work? Interpretation is an elucidation that contains additional explanations by the interpreter (“the explainer”). Commentary or interpretation goes beyond mere elucidation. They expand the text to ultimately arrive at something more succinct, which is the meaningful core of the text. The commentary leads to a certain transformation because it introduces elements absent from the usual elucidation. Commentary mediates between the text and the reader; it alters or adds something that was not initially in the text to make it easier for the reader to understand the text without interpretation. Is interpretation a necessary condition for a “good reading” of literary, religious, philosophical, legal and other texts? Or perhaps interpretation limits the text in that each interpreter believes there is only one correct and true reading? Perhaps there could there be several “good readings?” From this perspective, not just hermeneutics, but also commentary, goes beyond mere elucidation.

1. Ofrat, Gideon. The Jewish Derrida. *Preface.* Syracuse University Press, 1 June 2001. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. These words were said by R. Eliezer ben Azaria, but are mainly cited in the name of R. Ishmael. The parable is quoted in many places, among others: Sifri Bamdbar, section 112, Sanhedrin Sed: 2, Baruchot Lev: 2 and there we noted many parallels. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The hermeneutical approaches in the years of Friedrich D. E. Schleiermacher from the 19th century (theoretical hermeneutics), Wilhelm Dilthey his biographer, Paul Ricoeur (phenomenological hermeneutics) and Gadamer. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)