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Abstract Submission for APA 2007 panel: Religious Language and Cosmology

Paper Title:

Refining the Human Heart: Cosmology and the Transformation of Self in Ibn Gabirol

Abstract:

Reflecting upon philosophical writing as a veritable act of creation, Solomon Ibn Gabirol (the 11th century Jewish Neoplatonist) reflects poetically on his own act of divine craftsmanship:

...when there was [nothing but] the Foundation and root of all being / –
the Essence and its Embroidery conscripted together by Him,
He brought into being the Noun and the Verb, and with them / – a third
term, linking the two together;
Know that...these three were compiled / from the twenty-two...
...In like manner I too have crafted the words before you...

Drawing upon a particular Jewish mystical tradition of God's own act of creation as an act of literary conscription (out of the 22 letters of the Hebrew alphabet), Ibn Gabirol, as master cosmologist, here offers a self-aware reflection upon his own divine craft. As a composer of cosmologies, Ibn Gabirol sees himself as a creator not only of words but of worlds: in creating maps of the heavens and philosophical ontologies, Ibn Gabirol, I argue, creates not a topography of some place-beyond-place, but a world of meaning in which humans might find themselves anew.

In this paper, and using examples from the pages of Ibn Gabirol's particular cosmology and ontology-of-matter, I examine how cosmology is not best understood as a literal map of the heavens, but as a unique and vibrant picture in which the careful reader might encounter deep and foundational ways of living – deep and foundational ways of being a better version of herself. In the case of Ibn Gabirol, I particularly focus upon the Buberian and Levinasian idea of receptivity – a key idea for human existence, the instilling of which into the reader, I argue, lies at the heart of Ibn Gabirol's cosmological

endeavor in which – deviating some from the more standard Plotinian cosmos – he painstakingly charts out layers and layers of matter at the core of the real.

Along the course of my examination, I draw upon primary materials from Ibn Gabirol's Hebrew poetry and Arabic (into Latin) philosophical work, the Fons Vitae (or, Fountain of Life). I trace Ibn Gabirol's idea of matter to its Ps. Empedoclean roots, and I argue for how this cosmological notion of matter (usually, as in many Greek systems, a symbol of negation, privation, and even evil) is actually, in the unique context of Ibn Gabirol's cosmology, a marker of cosmic love and divine desire – both as the highest (and not, as in other conceptions of matter, the lowest) moments of existence itself. I show further how in this revelation, Ibn Gabirol, mindful of the creational and life-changing impact of philosophical (and in particular, cosmological) writing, offers readers a picture of existence in and through which they might live themselves anew, alive now to a new experience of the pulsing core of self-and-cosmos in a moment of receptivity-to-Other.

In addition to primary materials in Ibn Gabirol, I draw in this paper upon Pierre Hadot's insights about philosophy as a way of life, Elliot Wolfson's work on the importance of image and imagination in medieval Jewish thought, and Henry Corbin's notion of the philosophically vibrant symbol as site for transformative experience.