

Interpretation

A JOURNAL OF POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY

Winter 2021

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Alexander Green, *Power and Progress: Joseph Ibn Kaspi and the Meaning of History*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2019, xix + 210 pp., \$95 (paper).

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A century after the death of Maimonides, Joseph Ibn Kaspi (1280–1345) traveled to Egypt to visit the descendants of the author of the *Guide of the Perplexed*. Ibn Kaspi had hoped to make additional discoveries and gain additional insights into Maimonides’s thought and the secrets of the *Guide*. After five months in Cairo, Ibn Kaspi came away disappointed: “I crossed to Egypt where I visited the College of that renowned and perfect sage, the Guide [i.e., Maimonides]. I found there the fourth and fifth generations of his holy seed, all of them righteous, but none of them devoted to science. In all the Orient there were no scholars.” There was no progress in the thought of Maimonides’s descendants; instead, Ibn Kaspi was struck by “their lack of knowledge of philosophy and the sciences” (142).

Ibn Kaspi was among the most prolific followers of Moses Maimonides (1138–1204). He authored over twenty volumes, mostly commentaries on the Hebrew Bible, as well as philosophical treatises and a Hebrew grammar. Modern scholarship has reduced Ibn Kaspi to a popularizer of Maimonides and dismissed his work as unoriginal and less penetrating than that of his teacher. In *Power and Progress*, Alex Green sets out to challenge that view. Following a suggestion by Shlomo Pines, Green argues that Ibn Kaspi had worked out an original and subtle view of history.¹ The thesis of his book

¹ See Shlomo Pines, “On the Probability of the Re-establishment of a Jewish State according to Ibn Kaspi and Spinoza” (1963). Green also cites Isadore Twersky’s “Joseph Ibn Kaspi: Portrait of a Medieval Jewish Intellectual” (1979). See Green, 6.

is that Ibn Kaspi extended and enhanced Maimonides's rather undeveloped philosophy of history to include the possibility of intellectual progress (11). Green's careful scholarship and the care with which he treats Ibn Kaspi's writings make his work interesting and valuable. He approaches each text as an occasion to learn from a master. This allows Ibn Kaspi to speak for himself and frees the reader to learn alongside of Prof. Green. Green, a professor of Jewish thought at SUNY Buffalo, is well suited to the task. His first book focused on another prominent fourteenth-century student of Maimonides, Ibn Kaspi's compatriot in Provence, Gersonides. Like Ibn Kaspi, Gersonides explored and extended Maimonides's philosophical thought and biblical analysis. Both men were particularly interested in Maimonides's account of the relation between philosophy and revelation.

Although the belief in progress is a fundamental tenet of the Enlightenment, skepticism about the relation between intellectual and social progress soon emerged in the thought of Rousseau. Long before the Enlightenment, however, Maimonides had raised serious doubts about the possibility of moral and intellectual progress because cultivating reason and acquiring knowledge is painstaking and slow (see *Guide* I 34; Green, 77). The preliminary studies alone are more than most students can master. As a result, humanity is always subject to constant backsliding into superstition and idolatry. Even if a few individuals can be guided out of the cave, the rest of humanity is unlikely to follow. Reason can do little to overcome the powerful passions that rule the lives of most people. Nor does divine revelation of a single God assure victory. To the contrary, the insecurity caused by the destruction of the Jewish commonwealth has further weakened the authority of reason. Rather than focus on progress, therefore, Maimonides urges us to return and to recover what has been lost. He wishes to teach us that the ultimate purpose of the Torah is to defeat idolatry and superstition.

Nonetheless, Maimonides's analysis does not foreclose the possibility of progress, particularly among the few. After all, if great sages such as Maimonides can still be reared and educated, then not all is lost. At the beginning of the *Guide*, Maimonides indicates that the truth remains available in the ancient books, but is hidden from view. The method for excavating this truth has gradually been lost or forgotten, a situation that he attempts to remedy. He writes that the ancient texts contain contradictions that are caused by carelessness, loose or imprecise speech, and so forth. However, some contradictions are caused by a desire to teach the few without harming the many.

The *Guide* is devoted to reinvigorating this tradition by exposing certain secrets without disclosing their full meaning.

The “paradox of secrecy,” in the words of Moshe Halbertal, is that it must reveal some secrets in order to hide others (58). If the goal of esotericism is only to conceal, it would remain silent. Green writes: “If a secret is too out in the open, it is no longer a secret since it is accessible to everyone; but if a secret is too hidden and restricted to only a few, it is also no longer a secret, since it no longer exists once they die.” Maimonides’s account of esotericism forces us to focus our attention on what is hidden from view, and why. Green’s book offers a fascinating answer to these questions by contrasting Maimonides’s teaching with Ibn Kaspi’s interpretation. Green presents a strong case on behalf of Ibn Kaspi but to his great credit as a teacher and scholar, he allows readers to draw their own conclusions by contrasting Maimonides’s reticence with Kaspi’s enthusiasm. The reader can decide whether Ibn Kaspi remains true to Maimonides’s teaching or whether his exposure of matters left hidden by Maimonides is an overreach, not to say a betrayal of his master.

Green guides us through several of the esoteric teachings of the *Guide*, including the account of the Chariot in the books of Isaiah, Ezekiel, and Zechariah (66–75). This story is particularly important for understanding the *Guide* because, according to Maimonides, the biblical account contains an account of philosophy and the metaphysics of Aristotle. One reason for obscuring the allegorical meaning of scripture is that “if Moses and the revelation of the Torah on Mount Sinai is purely an allegory, then who laid down the laws and why should we obey them?” (65). Green shows that Ibn Kaspi understands Maimonides to have been reluctant to expose the philosophical meaning of scripture because doing so would corrode its status and authority as law (75–76). Nonetheless, he wishes to demonstrate that scripture plays a critical role in the intellectual progress of humanity. To this end, he exposes the meaning of Maimonides’s hints and the view that Ezekiel’s prophecy was defective and inferior to Isaiah’s and Zechariah’s prophecy. For Ibn Kaspi, such defects in prophecy demonstrate intellectual progress even in scripture (90).

At the heart of the *Guide* is an even more complex riddle. Chapters II 13–31 of the *Guide* deal with the thorny question whether the world is eternal or created in time. Maimonides describes three opinions on the matter: that of the Torah, that of Plato, and that of Aristotle. The next section of the *Guide* (II 32–48) tackles the question of prophecy and its relation to the intellect and imagination. Again, Maimonides outlines three positions: the pagans’, the philosophers’, and the Torah’s. He then directs the reader to compare these

two sections of the *Guide* and identify the corresponding opinions. Scholars have disagreed ever since about Maimonides's teaching. Remarkably, as Green shows, contemporary scholars simply reiterate the various positions taken by their medieval predecessors (91). Green also guides us through Ibn Kaspi's exposition, which makes the case for the universe "as eternal and prophecy as a purely naturalistic phenomenon" (92). Again, Ibn Kaspi justifies the exposure of the secrets of the *Guide* as part of the ongoing progress of humanity toward the recognition of universal truths.

The final part of Green's analysis of Ibn Kaspi's account of progress focuses on his account of hermeneutics as a method for transmitting knowledge. The Bible, Ibn Kaspi asserts, deploys a variety of hermeneutical methods, including contradiction, dispersal, empty spaces, repetition, numerology, and suppression of selective details (see 107). Following Maimonides in the *Guide*, Ibn Kaspi argues that the purpose of such devices was to appeal to and educate simultaneously a variety of audiences, including pious contemporaries who held superstitious imaginings as well as subsequent generations. Consequently, scripture was forced to make concessions to popular understanding. Maimonides tells us as much but avoids explaining "how to decipher such contradictions in the Bible, leaving this, instead, as a conundrum for later interpreters to unravel" (117). For example, in the introduction to the *Guide*, Maimonides raises the question whether the Bible contains contradictions in order to protect nonphilosophical readers. Rather than respond directly, he suggests that the issue "is a matter for speculative study and investigation."

Such reticence is prudent and even necessary if the philosophic teachings contained in scripture pose a threat to the nonphilosophic audience. But in Ibn Kaspi's view, scripture creates the conditions for intellectual progress, including the philosophical education of humanity. This provides justification for speaking more explicitly about Maimonides's philosophical teachings even where they conflict with scripture. For example, Maimonides appears to endorse the popular view that God's determinism is compatible with human freedom and with it the compatibility of a variety of Plato's teachings with the Bible (*Guide* II 25; see Green, 124). Ibn Kaspi shows that this claim is undermined by Maimonides's subtle equation of Aristotle's teaching on human freedom with Plato's account. The exoteric message is determinism; the esoteric message is freedom of the mind, and it suggests that the philosopher and the prophet have both achieved natural perfection through their own efforts (125). Even the view that God intervenes miraculously in the world is a concession to the popular imagination.

Maimonides had also suggested that it is necessary to grasp the historical context of scripture in order to understand the meaning of its more obscure passages. In the *Guide*, Maimonides does allow that not everything in scripture can be explained as part of its eternal teaching. Here, knowledge of the historical context is useful. He suggests, for instance, that readers consult an ancient pagan writing called *The Nabatean Agriculture* if one wishes to understand fully how scripture responds to ancient idolatry. Not surprisingly, Ibn Kaspi goes further, arguing that to understand scripture, one must study the historical and social context of the prophet. Several contemporary scholars have seen this as a forerunner to modern biblical criticism and historicism (141). If this is the case, then Ibn Kaspi blazed a trail that led to another student of Maimonides, Spinoza, who writes in his *Theological Political Treatise* that the Bible is “faulty, truncated, adulterated, [and] not consistent with itself” (chap. 12). From here, it is a small step to the denial of Ibn Kaspi’s thesis altogether. As Spinoza writes: “Scripture does not contain grand theories or philosophical matters, but only very simple matters, which can be perceived even by the slowest” (chap. 13). In short, the case for progress leads to the rejection of revelation as the surest sign of progress.

Green’s analysis leads us to reconsider whether Ibn Kaspi has misunderstood the meaning of Maimonides’s esotericism because of his commitment to a doctrine of intellectual progress. Ibn Kaspi believed that intellectual progress means advancing Maimonides’s teaching by exposing certain doctrines that Maimonides left hidden or ambiguous. But resolving the ambiguities in the *Guide* advances our understanding only if these truths can be fully absorbed by the wider community. If not, then some matters must remain ambiguous or unresolved because they represent limits on political life. Green’s engaging study leads us to ponder the question whether Maimonides’s esotericism is meant to resolve or overcome these limits, or simply to identify permanent difficulties or tensions.