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Doubting Abraham Doubting God: The Call of Abraham in the Or Ha-Sekhel

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Abstract: Abraham ben Asher’s Or ha-Sekhel, an exposition of Genesis Rabba, was published in Venice in 1567. The author frequently interprets midrashim by listing and harmonising series of “doubts” or “questions” (sefekot or she’elot) that arise in the text. The present study analyses this mode of exegesis by examining Abraham ben Asher’s interpretation of the exposition of the Call of Abraham at Genesis Rabba 39:1. The midrash likens the biblical account (Genesis 12:1) to a wayfarer who, on seeing a burning building, asked whether anyone was in charge and was subsequently confronted by the owner. Thus Abraham asked whether anyone was in charge of the world and then received his divine mandate. Abraham ben Asher begins his interpretation with a startling observation: the midrash seems to imply that Abraham questioned the existence of God. In the harmonising interpretation that follows, Abraham ben Asher reassures the reader that the patriarch considered the nature of divine providence rather than God’s existence. Nevertheless, as this paper argues, he deliberately led his audience to entertain the notion that Abraham once lacked a proper understanding of monotheism. This serves a rhetorical purpose, capturing the reader’s interest in how the expositor will solve the problem he raised. By assailing readers with questions and then providing solutions, Abraham ben Asher also creates the impression that any uncertainties that may arise in the study of midrash will inevitably have satisfactory resolutions because the sages’ words can always be expounded so as to reveal harmonious and coherent interpretations.

The early modern Sephardi communities of the Ottoman Empire were hothouses of midrashic creativity. The fundamental importance of Rashi’s commentaries in the educational curriculum and for the study of the weekly Torah reading ensured that those literate in Hebrew cut their teeth on the copious midrashim he cites.1 Midrash also featured in the weekly sermons delivered by communal rabbis, who customarily expounded the appointed Torah portion in the light of a carefully chosen passage of

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agadah.² Books of midrash were printed for the very first time at the Hebrew presses of the Ottoman Empire, and scholars in Constantinople, Salonica and Safed composed and published commentaries to help readers understand them.³

The purpose of this paper is to examine an important method of studying and interpreting midrash in the sixteenth century Ottoman Empire as it is exemplified in the commentary on Genesis Rabba by Abraham ben Asher. A pupil of Joseph Karo, Abraham ben Asher was active as a scholar and communal rabbi in the post-expulsion Sephardi communities of Safed, Aleppo and Damascus. He conceived of his magnum opus, the Or ha-Sekhel ("the Light of the Intellect"), as a series of volumes containing the complete Midrash Rabba along with his extensive commentary. Only the first book, subtitled Ma’adenei Melekh ("the Delights of the King"), was ever printed. It contains the text of Genesis Rabba together with the medieval commentary mistakenly attributed to Rashi and Abraham ben Asher’s own interpretations. The author’s relative Judah Falcon brought the work to press in Venice in 1567. It was skilfully typeset in the “talmudic” format at the printing house of Giovanni Griffio, the midrashic text being surrounded by the two commentaries. Abraham ben Asher thereby provided his readers with a self-contained means of studying Genesis Rabba and a comprehensive guide to its interpretation.⁴

Abraham ben Asher frequently employed a popular homiletic mode of exposition, the resolution of specified “questions” (she’lot) and “doubts” (sefeqot). This exegetical technique was common in sixteenth-century Sephardi sermons and biblical commentaries, though Abraham ben Asher is the first known to have used it in a commentary on a midrash.⁵ These discourses begin with a barrage of questions in which the author applies the most stringent standards of linguistic consistency and thematic integrity to the text under discussion. This leads the reader to doubt whether it really makes sense. The tensions thus generated are heightened considerably when God or the patriarchs play a


⁴ The biography of Abraham ben Asher and the publication of the Or ha-Sekhel are discussed in detail in the author’s Commentary on Midrash in the Sixteenth Century: The Or ha-Sekhel of Abraham ben Asher (Oxford: OUP, forthcoming). See also Williams, “The Ingathering,” 359-69; Judah Theodor, “The Commentary on Genesis Rabba” [in Hebrew], in Festschrift zu Israel Lewy’s siebzigstem Geburtstag, ed. Marcus Brann and Ismar Elbogen (Breslau: Marcus, 1911), 132-54 (Hebrew section).

⁵ The biography of Abraham ben Asher and the publication of the Or ha-Sekhel are discussed in detail in the author’s Commentary on Midrash in the Sixteenth Century: The Or ha-Sekhel of Abraham ben Asher (Oxford: OUP, forthcoming). See also Williams, “The Ingathering,” 359-69; Judah Theodor, “The Commentary on Genesis Rabba” [in Hebrew], in Festschrift zu Israel Lewy’s siebzigstem Geburtstag, ed. Marcus Brann and Ismar Elbogen (Breslau: Marcus, 1911), 132-54 (Hebrew section).
role in the midrash and the reader begins to doubt the propriety of their motives, actions or thoughts. But, with consummate exegetical and rhetorical skill, Abraham ben Asher inevitably dispels these doubts in the ensuing discourse where he solves each of the problems he raised.\(^6\)

To illustrate the full potential of this technique to engage the reader’s interest in problem-solving exegetical quests, we will turn to a comment in which Abraham ben Asher questions the thoughts and motives of the patriarch Abraham himself. This is his discussion of the famous midrash on the Call of Abraham at the outset of Parashat Lekh Lekha in Genesis Rabba (39:1). The midrash is a *petiha* (proem) on Genesis 12:1, in which God commands Abraham to leave Ur of the Chaldeans: “Go from your land and your kinsfolk and your father’s house to the land that I will show you.”\(^7\) By means of *gezerah shavah* (exposition based upon lexical analogy), this verse is associated with Psalm 45:11-12, where a royal bride is likewise urged to forsake her “father’s house” at the desire of the King.\(^8\) The centrepiece of the midrash is a parable (*mashal*) in which Rabbi Isaac likens Abraham to a wayfarer who sees a burning building, wonders who is in charge of it, and is then confronted by the owner.\(^9\) We will first focus on the *mashal* itself and then turn to Abraham ben Asher’s interpretation.

The midrash reads:

“‘And the LORD said to Abram, ‘Go from your land [and your kinsfolk and your father’s house (*beit avikha*)] …’”\(^10\)

Rabbi Isaac opened his discourse: “Hear, O daughter, and see, incline your ear; forget your people and your father’s house (*beit avikh)*.”\(^11\)

Rabbi Isaac said: It is like a wayfarer who saw a building on fire (*birah doleket*). He said, “Might you say that this building has no one in charge (*manhig*)?”\(^12\) The owner (*baʿal*) of the building looked out (*hetsits*) at him and said to him, “I am the owner (*baʿal*) of the building.”

Thus, since Abraham our father was saying, “Might you say that this world has no one in charge (*manhig*)?” the Holy One, blessed be he, looked out at him and said to him, “I am the owner (*baʿal*) of the world.”

“The King will desire your beauty for he is your Lord.”\(^13\)

“The King will desire your beauty” – to make you beautiful in the world.

“So bow down to him.”\(^14\) Thus, “And the LORD said to Abram.”\(^15\)

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\(^7\) ווַיֹּאמֶר יי״ אֶל־אַבְרָם לֶךְ־לְךָ מֵאַרְצְךָ וּמִמּוֹלַדְתְךָ וּמִבֵית אָבִיךָ אֶל־הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶר אַרְאֶךָ

\(^8\) “Hear, O daughter, and see, incline your ear; forget your people and your father’s house so that the King may desire your beauty, for he is your Lord. So bow down to him.”


\(^10\) Cf. Ps. 45:11.

\(^11\) Perhaps a “steward” or “agent” working on behalf of the owner; see Mandel, “The Call,” 276.

\(^12\) Ps. 45:12.

\(^13\) Ps. 45:12.

\(^14\) Ps. 45:12.
As Paul Mandel has explained, this *mashal* has long been understood in the light of Maimonides’ famous account of Abraham’s deduction of the existence of a Prime Cause from the motion of the spheres. At the beginning of *Hilkhot Avodah Zarah* in the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides traced the origins of idolatry to the generation of Enosh who worshipped stars and spheres under the mistaken belief that God desired humans to venerate the bodies they had placed on high. From this fundamental misapprehension developed the more egregious error of worshipping images of the stars and spheres. The degenerating knowledge and worship of God was only halted by Abraham. Maimonides reformulated a range of aggadic texts, perhaps including the midrash under discussion, to depict him as a pioneer of monotheism who inferred the necessary existence of one God by a process of rational deduction. He described Abraham’s discovery as follows:

> When [Abraham] was weaned, he began to explore in his mind while he was still small, and he thought day and night, and he wondered, “How is it possible that this sphere could move like this without someone in charge and someone to rotate it, since it could not rotate itself.” …
>
> Thus he pondered in his mind until he attained the way of truth and understood the correct line of thought. He knew that there was one God who guides the celestial sphere and created everything, and among all that exists there is no God besides him.  

If understood in the light of Maimonides’ narrative, the *mashal* of the wayfarer is a parable of Abraham’s discovery of monotheism by means of a teleological argument. On seeing a building, the wayfarer inferred that someone must be responsible for its existence. This conclusion was confirmed when the owner appeared in person. Thus Abraham observed the ordering, direction and purpose of natural bodies and posited the existence of a Prime Cause, an inference confirmed when he received the divine mandate to leave Ur of the Chaldeans.

The Maimonidean understanding of the *mashal* was certainly known to Abraham ben Asher, who cites and evaluates it in his comment on this midrash. But Abraham ben Asher is also concerned by questions not addressed by this interpretation. Why exactly was the building on fire? Why did the wayfarer’s enquiry about someone in charge, an agent or a
manager, elicit a response from the owner? Answering these questions leads Abraham ben Asher to formulate an innovative interpretation that God commanded Abraham to extinguish the ‘fire of idolatry’ in the world.

Abraham ben Asher begins by assailing the reader with no less than thirteen doubts and questions. We will consider his discussion of just one. A problem that particularly vexed him was how the patriarcih could have asked, “Might you say that this world has no one in charge?” Could Abraham really have questioned the existence of God? The problem is not whether Abraham was an idolater before he discovered monotheism. It is that, at the crucial moment when he received the divine mandate to leave his homeland, Abraham seemed strangely unaware that God had been revealed to him on a previous occasion. Abraham ben Asher asks:

Since [Abraham] had been saved from the fiery furnace, what further sign or wonder did he need that the earth had someone in charge? How could he say, “Might you say that this world has no one in charge?”

Abraham ben Asher here refers to the narrative that Abraham was punished by the Chaldeans for his opposition to idolatry and thrown alive into a fiery furnace. This extrabiblical account, which pre-dates the rabbinic period, is associated with Abraham’s departure from Ur of the Chaldeans in Genesis Rabba because the word Ur can mean “flame” or “fire.” The fire of the Chaldeans thus refers to their furnace. That the Chaldeans possessed such a facility is well-known from the third chapter of Daniel, where their king Nebuchadnezzar seeks to incinerate Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. As recounted in Genesis Rabba 44:13, the rescue of Abraham from the furnace was even more remarkable than that of Daniel’s companions. While they were only rescued by the archangel Michael, it was God himself who saved Abraham.

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19 He refers to them here (as often) as ḥiddukim and kushyot.
Abraham ben Asher mentions this narrative because it raises an acute problem for the interpretation of the midrash under discussion, undermining the unique significance of Abraham’s apprehension of God in Genesis 12:1. If Abraham had already been miraculously saved from the furnace of the Chaldeans by divine fiat, why does the mashal now portray him as asking the most basic question about God: “Might you say that this world has no one in charge?” The patriarch’s certainty on this important point appears to have been shaken. When this midrash is considered in the light of the earlier narrative of the fiery furnace, therefore, Abraham emerges not as a pioneer philosopher of religion who deduced the existence of God from first principles. Instead he becomes a doubter who was once saved by divine intervention, but now questions the very existence and nature of God.

Abraham ben Asher only raises this question because he wishes to answer it. And a question with such startling implications only heightens the reader’s interest in how he will do so. He first considers whether the mashal really describes Abraham’s discovery of a Prime Cause, a discussion that hinges on the exact meaning of birah doleket. Did the wayfarer see a building that was on fire, or was it a building that was illuminated? If this latter, then the mashal means that Abraham saw the world “illuminated” by the sun, moon and stars. Just as candles must have been lit by someone, so Abraham deduced that the universe must have a Prime Cause. Abraham ben Asher’s explanation is reminiscent of Maimonides’ account in Hilkhot ‘Avodah Zarah:

Abraham saw the sun and the moon and the stars, the sun by day and the moon and stars by night. He said, “Surely someone must be setting them in motion – it would never be possible without someone in charge.”

But Abraham ben Asher rejects this Maimonidean interpretation because it does not accurately reflect the meaning of birah doleket. Rather than a building “illuminated” by candles, he argues, it must mean a building “on fire.” He associates this with the ongoing destruction of the world by idolatry by citing Isaiah 50:11, in which those who do not fear...
God or heed his servant are called “kindlers of fire” and “lighters of firebrands.” When Abraham recognised the danger of idolatry, he questioned not whether God exists, but rather why God did nothing to stop it. Abraham ben Asher explains:

[Abraham] said, Might you say that this world has no one in charge (manhig)? Even though it is said that the Holy One, blessed be he, does not supervise (mashgia) the sublunar world because of his grand exaltedness and his greatness, it is not right that he should leave this world that he created without someone in charge to supervise (yashgia) those who are lighting this fire, to frighten them and get rid of them, and to try to hire workers to put out the fire for their wages. This is to say that God should punish idolaters. He should command prominent people, reveal himself to them and tell them [both] to warn the children of the world not to worship idols and to make known the divinity of the Creator of the world.

Abraham ben Asher places the question about God’s providential care of the sublunar world into Abraham’s mouth, though phrasing it carefully so as to suggest that it was not his own view. “Some say that God doesn’t supervise the sublunar world,” thought Abraham. This is the opinion described by Maimonides in Book 3 of the Guide of the Perplexed, that “God’s providence ends at the sphere of the moon.” Maimonides attributed this view to Aristotle as formulated by Alexander of Aphrodisias, but asserted that it was contrary to “the opinion of our Law” which defends free will and the principle of divine retribution.

According to Abraham ben Asher, Abraham refuted this erroneous opinion by saying that God can and should appoint human leaders to take charge of the world and oppose idolatry. And when God subsequently revealed himself to Abraham saying, “I am the owner of the world,” his immanence in the sublunar world was demonstrated beyond any doubt. God owns it and governs it, and therefore appointed Abraham to extinguish the fire of idolatry.

By turning a question about God’s existence into a question about divine providence, Abraham ben Asher has exonerated his namesake from the most heinous philosophical error. Rather than doubting the existence of a Prime Cause, Abraham merely considered an incorrect opinion about divine providence. But Abraham ben Asher leaves no stone unturned and proceeds to defend the patriarch even from uncertainty in this regard, for

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25 They are commanded to “walk in the flame (ur) of your fire.” By citing this verse, Abraham ben Asher associates the idolatrous practices of Ur of the Chaldeans with the fire in the mashal under discussion.

26 "אין רצוי שיניח העולם הזה אמר תאמר שהעולם הזה בלא מנהיג אף על פי שנאמר שהקב׳ה אינו משגיח PLACEicismilk in the sublunar world because of his grand exaltedness and his greatness, it is not right that he should leave this world that he created without someone in charge to supervise (yashgia) those who are lighting this fire, to frighten them and get rid of them, and to try to hire workers to put out the fire for their wages. This is to say that God should punish idolaters. He should command prominent people, reveal himself to them and tell them [both] to warn the children of the world not to worship idols and to make known the divinity of the Creator of the world.

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27 Guide III:17. “The basis of [Aristotle’s] opinion is as follows: Everything that, according to what he saw, subsisted continuously without any corruption or change of proceeding at all – as, for instance, the states of the spheres – or that observed a certain orderly course, only deviating from it in anomalous cases – as, for instance, natural things – was said by him to subsist through governance; I mean to say that divine providence accompanied it. On the other hand, all that, according to what he saw, does not subsist continuously or adhere to a certain order – as for instance, the circumstances of individuals of every species of plants, animals, and man – are said by him to exist by chance and not through the governance of one who governs; he means thereby that they are not accompanied by divine providence, and he also holds that it is impossible that providence should accompany these circumstances.” Moses Maimonides, The Guide of the Perplexed, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 2:466.

28 Maimonides also rejected this view in favour of what he styles here as his own opinion: that “in this lowly world – I mean that which is beneath the sphere of the moon – divine providence watches only over the individuals belonging to the human species.” Guide III:17 (trans. Pines, 2:469-71).
how could Abraham have misunderstood the nature of divine providence after God had saved him from the fiery furnace?

Abraham ben Asher turns to the question of Abraham’s first prophetic apprehension of God and whether he attained it in the fiery furnace or later when he was commanded to leave his homeland. He points out that, in the mashal, the owner of the building “looked out” at Abraham and spoke to him. The verb used is “le-hatsits,” which Abraham ben Asher defines as “to peep through a chink” (metsits min ha-hor). He therefore suggests that Abraham only had a very slight apprehension of God at this stage:

This means that, since [Abraham] was still not prepared for prophecy, “[The Lord] did not appear to him …” (ve-khulei) as he appeared to him thereafter, but only as one peeping (metsits) through a chink …

This understanding of Abraham’s prophecy might be compared to that of Nachmanides, who classed divine revelations to Abraham preceding his arrival in the land of Canaan (in Genesis 12:7) as of the same category as “dreams of the night” or revelations “by means of the holy spirit” rather than as prophetic visions proper. So too for Abraham ben Asher, Abraham neither attained a full prophetic apprehension of God in the fiery furnace nor even when he was commanded to leave his homeland, but at a later point in time.

Though the patriarch pondered divine providence, therefore, he cannot be accused of uncertainty about the nature of a God who had already been prophetically revealed to him.

In the course of his exposition of this midrash, Abraham ben Asher leads the reader from the startling observation that the archetypal monotheist who had been saved by God from the fiery furnace appears to question the existence of a Prime Cause. Having

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29 Abraham ben Asher, Or ha-Sehel, f.81b. Abraham ben Asher’s conclusion is similar to that of Isaac Arama who focused on Genesis Rabbah 39:1 in his discussion of Leḥ Lekhā: “All the utterances mentioned and all the cases of the visions described in these stories [about the time] before he was called Abraham and before he was circumcised are all cases of the revelation of the Shekhinah and divine statement at a degree less than full prophecy. Instead, divine abundance went forth and was emanated upon [Abraham] at an ever increasing grade according to the [degree of] its fullness [that was added] to him, as we have said. Many utterances on a degree much lower than this had already occurred: ‘and God came to Abimelekh [in a dream of the night]’ [Gen. 20:5], ‘[and God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream of the night] and He said to him, “Keep yourself from speaking with Jacob”’ [Gen. 31:24], and several statements in the case of Hagar. But the greatest of them all is “and God spoke to the fish” (Jon. 2:11), as wrote the Rav, the teacher [Maimonides in the Guide for the Perplexed] in book 2, chapter 48. Isaac Arama, ‘Akedat Yitsḥak, ed. Haim Pollack (Pressburg: Kittsner, 1849), vol. I, f.119b. On Abraham’s circumcision, cf. Genesis Rabbah 48:2.

30 Indeed, Abraham ben Asher may directly cite Nachmanides’ commentary on Gen. 12:7 here (the verse reads “And the LORD appeared to Abram and said, ‘To your seed I will give this land.’ And he built an altar there to the Lord who had appeared to him.”). “[The Lord] did not appear to him … (ve-khulei)” appears to be a quotation, though no source is indicated. It may be Nachmanides’ comment, which reads: “For until now the Lord had not appeared to him and he had not made himself known to him in an appearance (mar ech) or in a vision (mahazeh). But ‘Go from your land’ was said to him in a dream of the night or by means of the holy spirit.” (Moses Nachmanides, Perushei ha-Torah, ed. Charles Chavel (Jerusalem: Mossad ha-Rav Kook, 1959-60), 1:78).

31 Abraham ben Asher, therefore, disagrees with Maimonides. In Guide II:41, Maimonides considers the mandate at Gen. 12:1 as the “fourth form” of prophecy in which the prophet does not mention that the revelation was through the agency of an angel or in a dream, but “simply says that God talked to him or told him: Act thus!” (trans. Pines, 2:386) Abraham ben Asher’s views are closer to those of Nachmanides.

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captured the reader’s interest, he skilfully interweaves details from the mashal with further aggadot about Abraham’s early life and familiar philosophical ideas known from Maimonides’ writings. Charting the course from problems to solutions, Abraham ben Asher guides the reader to a new interpretation of the midrash. Abraham did not question the existence of a Prime Cause, but pondered the errors of others regarding divine providence. He did not lapse into doubt after God was first revealed to him, but rather his prophetic apprehension gradually increased little by little.

Although the “doubts” that prompted this exposition were of Abraham ben Asher’s own devising, and the astute reader knows that he always resolves them in the end, he applies the technique of asking and answering questions to Genesis Rabba with a clear purpose. The litanies of doubts awaken the reader’s attention and curiosity, not primarily in whether the problems are soluble, but in how the expositor will go about the task.32 By scrutinising the minutiae of the midrashic text, Abraham ben Asher calls attention to details that might otherwise be overlooked and thereby uncovers new layers of meaning latent within the sages’ interpretations. By faithfully resolving each and every doubt and question, he creates and reinforces the impression that any uncertainties that may arise in the study of midrash will inevitably have satisfactory resolutions and that the rabbis’ words can always be expounded so as to reveal harmonious and coherent meanings.

But nevertheless, for just a moment, Abraham ben Asher leads the reader to entertain the notion that Abraham doubted the existence of the God who had been revealed to him. A discourse framed around doubts and resolutions allowed for the expression of such an idea. It also prompts the reader to embark on the quest to disprove it, safe in the knowledge that Abraham ben Asher will resolve any doubts about Abraham doubting God.

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Acknowledgement

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