



## Ibn Gabirol's Theology of Desire: Matter and Method in Jewish Medieval Platonism

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This approach on its own makes an invaluable and theoretically rigorous contribution to religious feminism, and literature and theology. However, *Sex Sin and Ourselves* extends beyond an examination of women's writing and autobiography to tackle key themes in feminist theology: selfhood, sexuality, sin, sacrifice, and suffering. For instance, Fisk's discussion of autonomy and relationality highlights feminist theology's idealised claims to hold "selves in relation" (87), a tension illustrated by her confession: "for all my feminist principles, I tend to see myself through the eyes of others ... I still wonder if I will ever be able to love another person ... and not let myself dissolve" (86–87). Fisk offers clarification in Roberts' and Maitland's fiction, drawing on Julia Kristeva's psychoanalytic account to argue their writing points to a maternal "origin myth." This maternal imagery denotes the need for connection and separation, recognising the "difficulties in our unique and particular relations with others" (103). When discussing "Suffering, Sacrifice and Sin," Fisk brings her emotional and physical (sometimes self-inflicted) wounds to argue that in feminist theology's concern with "defeating suffering ... overcoming the damage of patriarchal violence" (113) it has looked too quickly away from pain. Instead (and I am struck by the clarity of this phrase) Fisk wants to find ways "of identifying with the suffering body of Christ that acknowledges that suffering is how things are, rather than how they ought to be" (114). In response, Fisk mines Maitland's work to find images of Christ that witness joy and the embodied reality of suffering, and personal and social sin. When contemplating "Sex and the Sacred," Fisk suggests that feminist theology has been too innocent. At the same time as it values the spiritual aspects of desire, it neglects the way the erotic is "marked by patterns of domination and submission" (145) — a contradiction Fisk introduces through an encounter with the music of P.J. Harvey. Fisk's use of life-writing woven with her readings of women's writings, and her reliance on metaphor, do not offer fixed solutions to the questions she raises. Instead, narrative methodologies open feminist theology's discussion of *Sex, Sin and Ourselves* to rich probing, by rooting these themes meaningfully in the personal.

Her stories are raw — covering relationships, family, friends, health, and well-being, music, bodily self-harm, childhood memories, and her relationship with the God of the Christian faith, and the institution of Christianity — and have a soaring honesty rarely heard in academic writing. This integrity is maintained as Fisk speaks in an intimate voice throughout the analysis and argumentation. She therefore keeps her promise to herself and her readers that she is not "speaking for everybody," and acknowledges that one's location is not something that should "be a rushed apology, placed at the beginning of a piece of academic work, and not referred to again" (16). While religious feminisms have valorised the use of women's experience as a source, and occasionally authors have written of their own journey, this has not generally gone "hand in hand with detailed autobiographical reflection" (3). I am guilty of this: I often declare aspects of my identity, listing biographical markers or sharing the odd personal experience in introductions or in a methodology. But despite my feminist commitment to reflexivity, I tend to leave it at that. After reading this book, I am not sure this is good enough.

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**Ibn Gabirol's Theology of Desire: Matter and Method in Jewish Medieval Platonism.** BY SARAH PESSIN (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 269, £60/\$99 hbk, ISBN 978-1-107-03221-7.

The book "Ibn Gabirol's Theology of Desire: Matter and Method in Jewish Medieval Neoplatonism" (Cambridge 2013) offers some important reflections by Sarah Pessin regarding the text and the philosophical contents of Solomon Ibn Gabirol's *Font of Life*. The study provides an in-depth analysis of Ibn Gabirol's metaphysics and a new interpretation of his theology.

The fundamental problem that Pessin deals with is the absence of the original Arabic text by Gabirol: the only sources of Gabirol's *Font of Life* are a twelfth-century Latin translation and a thirteenth-century Hebrew epitome. To these two texts one can add a few Arabic excerpts of the Gabirolian work, which constitute the core of Pessin's reading of Gabirol's metaphysics. The common interpretation of the philosophical features presented in the *Font of Life*, based on the Latin translation, incurs some fundamental problems of coherence, especially regarding his position concerning divine will and his ontology, based on universal hylomorphism. Pessin aims to clarify those problematic aspects, showing how this supposed inconsistency is to be ascribed to the Latin translators' misinterpretation and "Aristotelization" of Gabirol's thought and text, which in themselves are strongly tied to Greek and Arabic Neoplatonism.

Pessin's argument is based on the textual comparison of the Latin text with the Arabic fragments of the original work. Pessin demonstrates that the Latin term *voluntas* is an approximate translation of the Arabic *al-irada*, whose meaning is both "will" and "desire." Gundissalinus' translation of *al-irada* as *voluntas* implies an overinterpretation, due to the significance of this term for the Augustinian philosophical tradition. This semantic slippage is seen as the origin of the medieval discussion of Ibn Gabirol's doctrine of divine will, and it is accompanied by a further crucial misunderstanding: that of the Gabirolian concept of matter. Pessin's analysis shows how the original text by Gabirol uses two terms in reference to matter: the Arabic *al-hayula* and *al-'unsur*. Especially regarding the latter, Pessin underlines the Latin translator's Aristotelization of the text, translating *al-'unsur al-auwal* as *materia prima*, while the proper meaning would be "grounding element." This second overinterpretation leads Latin philosophers to read Gabirol's ontology as a universal hylomorphism.

Once these terminological shifts are identified, Pessin passes on to the theoretical analysis of the metaphysical features illustrated in the *Font of Life*. These features should be interpreted in reference to one of the most important sources for Gabirol: pseudo-Empedocles' *Book of Five Substances*. Even if this treatise has not survived, through the excerpts presented by Shahrastani, Pessin shows the consistency between Gabirol's concept of grounding element and pseudo-Empedocles' metaphysics. Thanks to this clarification, the author can connect Gabirol's prioritization of matter to his discussion of divine *irada*.

From this point of view, the first doctrinal core that Pessin analyses and deconstructs is the doctrine of divine will itself. Gabirol's position on divine will traditionally should imply a radical rejection of any kind of cosmogonic emanation, in favour of a voluntaristic theology. This traditional perspective utterly changes with the hermeneutics of *al-irada* as desire rather than will. This divine desire, philosophically explained as a vertical relation between causes, is the keystone of a theology based on the desiderative tension of every creature toward God, as well as the desire of God himself to give birth to the creatures' being. There is no need to say that this desiderative tension has no sexual or sensual implication: on the contrary, God's desiderative will and the desire that can be detected on the creatures, are the opposed terms of an ontogenic relation, whose base is love, i.e. the grounding element on which the existence is built. Thanks to this structural bond between being and love, and cause and desire, God's creation corresponds, in Pessin's reading, to a complete emanative process, without entailing a mechanist theology since it is a process wholly based on divine *irada*.

In fact, this emanative scheme corresponds to a progressive manifestation of God's desire, through the vertical causations of matters and forms or, in coherence with Pessin's hermeneutics, of lower and higher substances, where form is always a causal manifestation of matter. Thanks to these considerations, Pessin affirms that the notion of Gabirol's universal hylomorphism arises from a deep misunderstanding of his text by the Latin translators and philosophers: the correct interpretation of the passages regarding matter, form, and their compound should be related, in Pessin's opinion, to the Proclean triadic dynamic of remaining (matter), procession (hylomorphic compound), and reversion (form). Thus, the ontological roots of every being are provided by a grounding element, that constitutes its essence, and an active element that is the form.

In order to further demonstrate her hypothesis, Pessin analyses Gundissalinus' and J. Schlanger's hermeneutics of two passages from the *Font of Life*. Regarding the former, through the comparison with Falaquera's epitome, Pessin shows a passage where the Latin translator allegedly modifies the original text in his translation, regarding the existence of matter without form. Schanger's hermeneutics is then rejected by the author, since it seems to be theoretically vitiated by a Philonian misinterpretation.

The study ends with an overall analysis of Gabirol's Neoplatonism, of which are underlined the importance of metaphor as a peculiar explanatory method in his work, his apophatic tendency regarding cosmology and ontology, and the wider relevance ascribed to *praxis* instead of *theoresis*. This theoretical treatment is accompanied by an interesting appendix where Pessin examines Gabirol's main sources with a view to their ontologies of matter in their philosophical context.

Pessin's work crucially contributes to a deeper understanding of Ibn Gabirol's theology. The new hypotheses presented by the author are numerous, and provide a whole new hermeneutics of Gabirolian philosophy and theology. On the one hand, Pessin's thesis, on the one hand builds a new account of Gabirol's cosmogony and ontology that solves many problems and tensions detectable in the Latin text: this is the case with regards to the emanative process as a desiderative ontological progression, avoiding by this any kind of mechanist causation. On the other hand, this hermeneutics is based on the assumption of an overall misinterpretation of the text by both the Latin translators, the Latin philosophers, and at least one Jewish philosopher, Abraham Ibn Daud. From this point of view, many key hypotheses proposed by Pessin have far-reaching consequences, whose impact needs to be checked carefully in light of the various and often contradictory features of the *Font of Life*. Indeed, Pessin's work opens new perspectives on Gabirol's philosophy and its pseudo-Empedoclean roots regarding the key concepts of divine desire and love as grounding element. In this way, the "theology of desire" that arises from Pessin's reading of Ibn Gabirol is a revolutionary interpretation that raises new fundamental issues regarding the overall Latin reception of Arabic and Hebrew philosophy.

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**Queering Migrations: Towards, From, Beyond Asia.** By HUGO CÓRDOVA QUERO, JOSEPH N. GOH AND MICHAEL SEPIDOZA CAMPOS, EDs (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 268, £65/\$95 hbk, ISBN 978-1-137-44772-2.

This collection is a refreshing foray into a critical engagement of the intersection of migration and "Queerness." Unlike many other books that discuss queerness almost exclusively in relation to sexuality, sexual orientation, and sexual identity, the articles instead complexify the debates by demonstrating their interwoven character to issues related to the construction of ethnic and racialized identities. All these multiple intersecting forces and factors are heightened to new critical understanding when positioned within the discussion of migration. As often occurs with discussions on queerness, the reader can expect that the content will relate almost explicitly to issues of LGBTIQ communities and their reconfiguration of sexual identity, gender, and challenges to heteronormative socioscaples. Instead, this book disrupts pervasive ideas of sexual identity and sexual stereotypes and insists there are no fixed paradigms to understand sexual identity. The authors challenge both heteronormativity and dominant "normative" perspectives of queerness. There are too many factors at play. "Queerness" here lies in its non-specificity. It refers "not to one way of being but to a range of transgressive possibilities that encompass and surpass LGBTIQ, opening a global gay ecumene and disparate subjectivities." (100). I suspect this partly relates to the inherent ambiguity in the title, as the collection itself is an exercise in "queering."