ELIEZER EILBURG

THE TEN QUESTIONS AND MEMOIR OF A RENAISSANCE JEWISH SKEPTIC



JOSEPH DAVIS

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Joseph M. Davis

with

Magdaléna Jánošiková

HEBREW UNION COLLEGE PRESS

HEBREW UNION COLLEGE PRESS
©2020 Hebrew Union College Press
Set in ITC Legacy Pro by Raphaël Freeman MISTD, Renana Typesetting
Printed in the United States of America
Cover design by Paul Neff Design LLC
Cover image: HUC Ms 901. Sefer Evronot. Klau Library.
Hebrew Union College-Jewish Institute of Religion, Cincinnati, Ohio

Names: Eilburg, Eliezer, active 1570, author. | Davis, Joseph M. (Joseph Maurice), 1960- editor, translator. | Magdaléna Jánošiková, editor. | Container of (work): Eilburg, Eliezer, active 1570. Ten questions. | Container of (work): Eilburg, Eliezer, active 1570. Notebook of the collector.
Title: Eliezer Eilburg : the Ten questions and Memoir of a Renaissance Jewish Skeptic / Joseph Davis with Magdaléna Jánošiková.
Other titles: Ten questions. | Notebook of the collector. | Memoir of a Renaissance Jew.
Description: Cincinnati : Hebrew Union College Press, [2018] | Includes original Hebrew text of two of Eilburg's works and English translation of those works.
Identifiers: LCCN 2018039034 | ISBN 9780878201679 (hardcover)
Subjects: LCSH: Jewish philosophy--16th century. | Jewish philosophers. | Bible. Old Testament--Criticism, interpretation, etc. | Judaism--History--Medieval and early modern period, 425-1789. | Faith and reason--Judaism. | Eilburg, Eliezer, fl. 1570.
Classification: LCC B5800 .E35 2018 | DDC 181/.06--dc23
LC record available at https://lccn.loc.gov/2018039034

In memory of my parents
with love and skepticism



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מבוא למחברת המאסף: זכרונות אליעזר איילברג סא

Acknowledgments

I first encountered Eliezer Eilburg's manuscripts in the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary about thirty years ago, in 1989, when I was writing my dissertation. I have been living with Eilburg, on and off, ever since, and there are many people to whom I am very grateful for their help with this project in its different stages.

I thank the editors of Hebrew Union College Press. I especially wish to offer my heartfelt thanks to Sonja Rethy, who edited the book and whose persistence and excellent advice over many years has brought this project to fruition. It was she who first suggested that these two works of Eilburg be published together as a book, and from the beginning of the project to the end, I have been fortunate to have her help. I also thank Edward Goldman, my teacher Richard Sarason, David Aaron, and Angela Erisman, as well as Paul Neff, who designed the cover. Thanks also go to Herbert Basser, whose keen eye saved me from many errors. An earlier version of one section of this book, the Hebrew text of Eilburg's Ten Questions, appeared in the *Hebrew Union College Annual* 80 (2009). My thanks to the editors for allowing it to appear here again, and I wish to thank Kelby Bowers for his help with that article.

I have spoken about Eilburg in a number of different settings. I would like to thank Bernard Cooperman and the Jewish Studies Program of the University of Maryland, who offered me an academic home in 1993–1994, and commented on an early version of my thoughts on Eilburg. I also thank Matt Goldish and the other participants in the so-called "Shadow Seminar" at the Katz Center for Advanced Jewish Studies at the University of Pennsylvania in

February 2014, as well as Dean Bell, Yohanan Petrovsky-Shtern and the other participants in the Eleventh Early Modern Workshop at Northwestern University in August 2014.

Some of the work for this book was completed while I was a fellow at Harvard's Center for Jewish Studies in spring 2008, and I'd like to particularly thank Shaye Cohen, Rachel Greenblatt, Jay Harris, and my teacher Bernard Septimus, as well as the other faculty, fellows, and staff of the CJS. I worked on this project again when I was an adjunct fellow at the Katz Center for Advanced Jewish Studies at the University of Pennsylvania in 2013–2014, and I am grateful for the encouragement and help of David Ruderman, the staff and librarians of the Katz CAJS, and the other fellows. I am grateful to Tamás Visi, Joanna Weinberg, and Eitan Fishbane for their help and encouragement.

I am deeply grateful to the administration, staff, and all the faculty of Gratz College, who have supported my research on Eilburg for many years. I specially thank Marsha Bryan Edelman, Rela Geffen, and the librarians of Gratz College's Tuttleman Library, including particularly Nancy Nitzberg. I thank Joy Goldstein, then the president of the college, and Dr. Richard Scaldini, interim dean of the college in 2013–2014, for the sabbatical in spring 2015 which allowed me to work on this project.

My teacher, the late Isadore Twersky, encouraged me initially to study medieval and early modern Ashkenazic Jews and their interactions with medieval Jewish philosophy, of which Eilburg's Ten Questions is such a striking example. More broadly, he encouraged me, and all of his students, to study and write Jewish intellectual biography. My teacher Bernard Septimus encouraged me to translate these texts. Translation, as he remarked, forces the scholar to resolve the meaning of each part of the text; there is no hiding.

I would also like to thank the librarians of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary, especially the librarians of the Rare Book Room, and specifically the ever gracious Dr. Jerry Schwarzbard, who has helped me with this project since 1989. Both Hebrew texts are published here by courtesy of the Library of the Jewish Theological Seminary.

Special thanks are due to my co-translator, Magdaléna Jánošiková,

without whom this project would never have been completed. Magdaléna wrote the first draft of the translation of the the first half of The Ten Questions, and the first half of Eilburg's autobiographical writings.

Finally, I am very grateful to my wife Susan and my children Leon, Miranda, and Ruthie, some of whom have lived with Eilburg all their lives, and all of whom have helped me in so many different ways.

INTRODUCTION

A Renaissance Skeptic

One hundred years before Spinoza and two hundred years before Moses Mendelssohn, during the century of Erasmus, Shakespeare, and Montaigne, a number of Jewish scholars expressed new skepticism regarding the Bible and religion and explored new ways of writing about the self. One of the outstanding examples of this new type of Jewish Renaissance skeptic was Eliezer Eilburg (fl. 1570).[1] Two of Eilburg's works are presented in this volume. The first work, *The Ten Questions*, is one of the most radical statements of Jewish unbelief before the modern era.[2] The second work, an account of

1 On Eilburg, see Joseph M. Davis, "The *Ten Questions* of Eliezer Eilburg and the Problem of Jewish Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 91 (2001): 293–336; Tamás Visi, "Die Rebellion des Elieser Eilburg gegen die rabbinische Tradition: Eine Episode in der intellektuellen Geschichte des mährischen Judentums," *Judaica Bohemiae* 46, Supplementum (2011): 11–32; *idem*, "Remembering and Forgetting Idolatry: Maimonides, Narboni, and Eliezer Eilburg on the Biblical Past," in *The Making of Memory in the Middle Ages*, ed. Lucie Doležalová (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 415–38; Magdaléna Jánošiková, "Eliezer Eilburg: Criticism of Miracles." Master's thesis. Palacký University in Olomouc, 2012; *idem*, "Eliezer Eilburg and the Art of Composition." Master's thesis. Oxford University, 2014; *idem*, "Composing Hebrew Medical Literature in the Sixteenth Century: Medicine in the Life and Work of Eliezer Eilburg." PhD diss., Queen Mary's College of the University of London, 2019. Eilburg is also mentioned in a solitary footnote in Gershom Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism* (New York: Schocken, 1960), 387 n. 14. Eilburg is called Eilenburg or Eulenburg by certain modern scholars, including Scholem, and in certain reference tools. He signs his name consistently "Eilburg."

2 Jewish Theological Seminary MS microfilm no. 2323, fol. 45a–77a. The annotated Hebrew transcription included here was initially published, together with an English introduction, by Joseph Davis in the *Hebrew Union College Annual* 80 (2009): 173–244. Only minor corrections have been made here to the Hebrew edition and notes as they appeared in *HUCA*. Alexander Marx published a detailed list of the contents of the manuscript in "Samuel ibn Motot und al-Bataljusi," *Zeitschrift für hebräische Bibliographie* 10 (1906): 178, but notice the hand-written corrections on the

Eilburg's life, gives a vivid portrait of the author, and of Jewish life in mid-sixteenth-century Europe.[3]

The Ten Questions, as its name suggests, is a series of ten questions; the questions are addressed to one of the greatest rabbis of Eilburg's generation, Maharal of Prague, who was then serving as a rabbi in the town of Austerlitz in Moravia, and also to two of his lesser-known colleagues, Rabbi Jacob of Kromau and Rabbi Isaac of Sternberg.[4] *The Ten Questions* is most remarkable for Eilburg's skeptical and critical approach to the Bible, which foreshadows later critical trends, but which was extremely far-reaching for his own time. The combined radicalism and rationalism of Eilburg's *Ten Questions* went beyond any known document written by any of his Jewish predecessors or contemporaries. Only a few sixteenth-century documents, none of them Jewish – such as the roster of the skeptical views attributed to the famous playwright Christopher Marlowe, or the writings of the French heretic and skeptic Noël Journet – express similar views.[5]

copy bound together with the manuscript. The Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts has very recently made a digital copy of the entire MS 2323 available online.

3 The document is part of Jewish Theological Seminary (JTS) MS microfilm no. 2324. The first-person texts that are published here comprise fol. 89a–92b, 94a–95a, 99a–99b, and 100a of the text. It has never previously been published, nor has the translation. The manuscript as a whole includes a variety of kabbalistic works copied by Eilburg; see the detailed list of contents by the booksellers Lipa Schwager and David Fränkel (Husiatyn, Ukraine; catalogue 39), bound with the manuscript, and also the list in the catalogue of the Jewish National Library's Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts. The Institute of Microfilmed Hebrew Manuscripts has made a digital copy of the entire MS 2324 available online. See also the discussion of the manuscript, as well as the codicological analysis of another of Eilburg's manuscript miscellanies, MS Oxford-Bodleian Opp. 636, in Jánošiková, "Eliezer Eilburg and the Art of Composition," 13–23. Eilburg is also the copyist of several other extant manuscripts, including notably Jewish Theological Seminary MS 2692, a miscellany of Hebrew medical texts. Eilburg's MS Oxford-Bodleian Opp. 636 is part of the famous Oppenheim collection, so its provenance can be traced to the eighteenth century. The manuscript focuses on Hebrew poetry, and has both substantive and codicological connections to our manuscript. A full list of Eilburg's extant manuscripts is in the bibliography.

4 Visi argues very convincingly for the identity of Eilburg's "Judah of Austerlitz" and Judah Loew ben Bezalel in "Die Rebellion des Elieser Eilburg," 19–24. Austerlitz is today Slavkov, and Kromau is Moravský Krumlov. Sternberg is Šternberk. All three towns are in Moravia, in today's Czech Republic.

5 On skepticism and so-called atheism in the sixteenth century, see Lucien Febvre,

Eilburg was not a philosophical skeptic, that is, he was not a thinker whose philosophy led him to doubt the ability of the human mind to attain knowledge, nor did he doubt the ability of human language to express true ideas. The sixteenth century saw a revival of philosophical skepticism, for example in Montaigne's *Essays* and Francisco Sanches's *That Nothing Can be Known* (*Quod Nihil Scitur*).[6] But Eilburg was convinced that a great deal can be known; he was not a Pyrrhonist or an empiricist. He differed in these respects from Jewish thinkers – both in his own day and later in the seventeenth century – such as Judah Moscato the rabbi of Mantua (d. 1590), and the Venetian rabbi Simone Luzzatto (d. 1663).[7] Eilburg was rather an Aristotelian and a rationalist. Nevertheless, in the common meaning of the term he should be called a skeptic. The whole rhetorical strategy of *The Ten Questions* is skeptical, and the work consists of a relentless philosophical questioning of Jewish religious principles and of the Bible.

Le problème de l'incroyance au XVIe siècle: la religion de Rabelais (Paris: Michel, 1942); Eng. tr.: Lucien Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief in the Sixteenth Century*, trans. Beatrice Gottlieb (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982); François Berriot, *Athéisme et athéistes au XVIe siècle en France,* 2 vols. (Lille: Atelier des thèses, 1984); Michael Hunter and David Wootton, eds., *Atheism from the Reformation to the Enlightenment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992); Richard Popkin, *The History of Scepticism: From Savonarola to Bayle* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003); Gianni Paganini and José R. Maia Neto, eds., *Renaissance Scepticisms* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009). On popular skepticism and atheism, see Federico Barbierato, *The Inquisitor in the Hat Shop: Inquisition, Forbidden Books and Unbelief in Early Modern Venice* (Farnham, UK: Ashgate, 2012); Stuart Schwartz, *All Can Be Saved: Religious Tolerance and Salvation in the Iberian Atlantic World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2008); Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms: The Cosmos of a Sixteenth-Century Miller*, trans. John Tedeschi and Anne Tedeschi (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980). On the accusations against Marlowe (the so-called "Baines Note"), see Constance Brown Kuriyama, *Christopher Marlowe: A Renaissance Life* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002). On Journet, see Alain Mothu, "Deux 'jeunes éventés': Geoffroy Vallée et Noël Journet," in *Les Dossiers de Gribl: Libertinage, athéisme, irréligion: Essais et bibliographie* (online at dossiers.review.org). Richard Popkin sometimes seems to reserve the term "skeptic" for readers and followers of the Roman skeptic philosopher Sextus Empiricus. Eilburg had not encountered Empiricus.

6 On Sanches, see, e.g., Richard Popkin, *History of Scepticism*, 38–43.

7 Giuseppe Veltri, "Principles of Jewish Skeptical Thought: The Cases of Judah Moscato and Simone Luzzatto," in *Rabbi Judah Moscato and the Jewish Intellectual World in Mantua in the 16th–17th Centuries*, ed. Giuseppe Veltri and Gianfranco Miletto (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2012), 15–36.

The two great pillars of medieval thought were Reason and Revelation – Aristotle and Scripture. Eilburg was not a skeptic of Reason but of Revelation. Although Eilburg's ten questions touch on many topics, they focus on a single issue: Why believe in the Bible? At the midpoint of the sixteenth century, a generation after Luther, in a time of religious war and Reformation, this was surely a pressing question for Jews as well as for Christians. Eilburg argues eloquently against the doctrine of Jewish chosenness, and sometimes mocks the rabbis and Talmud study. But his skepticism is directed above all at Scripture. Scripture – the Torah – Eilburg argues, is neither true as history nor reliable as promise; and, as law, it is no longer useful, if indeed it was ever very useful. Its theological claims are mainly untrue, its heroes are flawed, and its stories are often unedifying. Rabbinic methods of interpretation, he argues, do not solve these problems, but for the most part only add to them. The Torah's claim to divine authorship cannot be sustained, and its original text may be lost.

Skepticism of certain religious doctrines, including, for example, bodily resurrection and even *ex nihilo* Creation, was common among medieval Jewish philosophers after Maimonides. Eilburg, however, sharpened and intensified the skeptical heritage of medieval Jewish philosophy. Although he deployed the existing arsenal of medieval philosophical arguments against the Bible, he also went beyond his predecessors in his explicit challenges to the Bible's fundamental reliability, whether as a record of past events, as a code of law, or as a guide to morals. He also went further than any of his predecessors in challenging the authenticity of the biblical text itself, questioning not only the dogma of its letter-perfection and its freedom from scribal errors, but also the date of its composition and its authorship by Moses. Even Eilburg never suggested that the entire Torah could be post-Mosaic, but he did suggest that Moses might have written additional sections of the Torah that have been lost, and that major sections might have been added to the Torah after Moses's time.

Who was Eliezer Eilburg? As he tells his readers in his account of his life, he was by birth a German Jew, a native of Braunschweig ("Brunswick") in central Germany. Eliezer (or Lazarus) was a banker, as his father Abraham had been. His grandfather, Akiva (in some

documents, Akyn) was also a Braunschweig banker. In 1537, Eliezer made a loan of two thousand florins to Joachim II, the elector of Brandenburg.[8]

In 1547, Eilburg and his family were expelled from Braunschweig, together with the rest of the Jewish community. Eilburg blamed Luther; Luther's writings had done a great deal to stoke anti-Jewish feelings in the city, and to make the case for the expulsion of Jews. Eilburg mentions Luther explicitly as "the impure monk," making a mocking Hebrew play on Luther's name.[9] Eilburg and his wife and children moved to Poland, but his business affairs did not flourish there, and, perhaps in order escape his debts, Eilburg moved on to Italy. In Italy, he reports that he studied medicine privately from Hebrew medical textbooks and Jewish mentors.[10] A colophon – for Eilburg was a diligent copyist of manuscripts, and quite a few have survived – places him in Ferrara in the 1550s.[11]

His life after his first stay in Italy continued to be peripatetic. He may have practiced medicine, although he had no university degree.[12] In his memoir, he complains of imprisonment in the Silesian town of Oels (today, Oleśnica, Poland), perhaps on account of his debts; it appears that he was there for several years, from 1553 to 1555. In 1564, we find him celebrating his daughter's wedding in the western

8 See Hans-Heinrich Ebeling, *Die Juden in Braunschweig: Rechts-, Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte von den Anfängen der jüdischen Gemeinde bis zur Emanzipation (1282–1848)* (Braunschweig: Waisenhaus, 1987), 75; also cf. ibid., 17, 66, 95; Rotraud Ries, *Jüdisches Leben in Niedersachsen im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert* (Hannover: Hahn, 1994), 81–82, 417, 512.

9 Eilburg puns on both Luther's first name and his surname, calling him מרט לא טהור (*maret lo tahor*, "impure monk").

10 There is archival evidence of Eilburg's time in Poland, which will be published separately by M. Jánošiková.

11 In MS 2324, fol. 5a, and again in MS 2692 fol. 32b–33a, he mentions being in Ferrara.

12 One should not assume that it was uncommon at the time for Jewish physicians to practice without medical degrees. "Prior to the Thirty Years War (1618–1648), the number of Jewish university graduates was too low to trigger a major transformation of [Jewish] medical culture across Europe. University fees were three times higher for Jewish students, cooperation with university nations was weak, living expenses high, and town halls continued to issue the licenses of practice without insisting on a university degree." Magdaléna Jánošiková, unpublished lecture, "Books and Their Medical Practitioners: What Can Hebrew and Yiddish Medical Manuscripts Teach Us About Sixteenth-Century Physicians in 'Ashkenaz'?"

Polish Jewish community of Lesla (today, Inowrocław). In 1567, he was in Neisse (Nysa) in Silesia, in prison once more.[13] By 1568 Eilburg had returned to Italy. A contract copied onto an empty page of the manuscript that includes *The Ten Questions* places him, in 1568, in the village of San Salvatore Monferrato, in the Piedmont area, earning a small salary as a tutor in a Jewish household.[14]

Eilburg's account of his life also gives details of several dream visions, which included two angelic visitors who imparted kabbalistic mysteries to him. Eilburg had studied kabbalah, as well as medicine and medieval philosophy, in Italy, and then throughout his travels – all from Hebrew texts. Among kabbalists, he especially esteemed the famous thirteenth-century prophetic visionary Abraham Abulafia, and his vision narratives echo themes of Abulafian kabbalah. There is no record of Eilburg's whereabouts after 1568. In his memoir, he expresses the desire to follow in the path of his mother and brother and immigrate to the land of Israel; it is possible that he did so.[15]

Eilburg depicts himself as an exile, a prisoner, a physician, and a visionary. In one passage, he portrays himself as the victim of a wicked fraud and corrupt rabbinic judges. In another extraordinary passage, he recounts a dream in which he is visited by the ghost of his mother. In a short anecdote, his knowledge of Hebrew wins him a welcome at a Christian monastery. He remembers the experience of being an adult student, struggling to master the vocabulary of Jewish philosophy and kabbalah.

13 MS 2323, fol. 83a, cited by Marx: see above, n. 2. (The citation in Davis, "The *Ten Questions*," *Jewish Quarterly Review* (2001), p. 297 n. 18 is incorrect.)

14 The contract, which is in JTS MS 2323, fol., 149b, appears in this volume as an appendix. Also note the date in the colophon in MS 2323, fol. 31a: הספר הזה … מצאתי בישוב לומברדאה העתקתי בידי שנת והקריב"ה לעולה לפ"ק, "I found this book in Lombardy and copied it in the Hebrew year 1567/1568." One of Eilburg's manuscripts, MS Oxford-Bodleian Opp. 636, was reviewed by the censors in Mantua in 1597.

15 Eilburg expresses the desire to go to the land of Israel in the introduction to *The Ten Questions*, fol. 46a. One should also mention Israel Museum MS 180/63, which is a set of drawings of the Tabernacle and its implements, signed by Eilburg, based on earlier drawings attributed to Joel ben Simeon (see *Studies in Bibliography and Booklore* 9 [1970]: 93). The MS includes the note: על ידי הכותב אליעזר בן אברהם אייליבורג ז"ל ומקום מנוחתו בא בא"י שם ח"י [חמדת ה'], "copied by Eliezer bar Abraham Eilburg, of blessed memory [i.e., his father's memory should be blessed], and his resting place is in the land of Israel, there in the pleasant land of the Lord."

Kabbalah is barely mentioned in *The Ten Questions*, and it is hard to explain how the stringent skepticism of that work could be reconciled to a kabbalistic approach to Judaism. But, by the end of the sixteenth century there were hardly any significant Jewish thinkers who were not, in one way or another, kabbalists. This included those who were inclined toward rationalist philosophy, or even deeply committed to it. By the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, kabbalistic belief would actually come to be regarded by many Jewish authorities as mandatory, and rejection of kabbalah as heretical.[16] Eilburg's study of kabbalah was entirely typical of his time and place. Eilburg's skepticism, like that of many Renaissance figures, made him an eclectic; doubt opens the door to many types of belief: Eilburg believed in Aristotelian philosophy and in Galenic medicine, but he also believed in astrology and astrological medicine, in magic – particularly astral magic – and in kabbalah as well.[17]

The years of the late 1560s and early 1570s, when Eilburg wrote his *Ten Questions* and finished his last autobiographical writings, mark a sort of a watershed, or caesura, in European culture in that century.[18] The titanic figures of the early part of the century – men such as Erasmus, Michelangelo, and Martin Luther – had died and passed from the scene. The great authors of the end of the century, such as Montaigne, Cervantes, and Shakespeare, had not yet begun their careers as writers. In spirit, Eilburg perhaps resembles the latter generation more than the former: like them, he was a skeptic, and something of a chameleon. He presents himself in many guises: a banker and also a bankrupt, a poet, a prisoner, a physician, a kabbalistic visionary but also a skeptic. He was a Talmud tutor, a copyist and scribe, and also even a plagiarist.[19]

16 Davis, "Drawing the Line" (below n. 20), 167–69. See also Boaz Huss, "*Sefer ha-Zohar* as a Canonical, Sacred, and Holy Text: Changing Perspectives on the Book of Splendor between the Thirteenth and Eighteenth Centuries," *Journal of Jewish Thought and Philosophy* 7 (1998): 257–307.

17 Toward the end of the first question, he even suggests that he is open to belief in the magical powers of Christian and Muslim saints and even Christian, and presumably, Muslim Scripture.

18 For orientation to the recent historiography of the Renaissance, see William Caferro, *Contesting the Renaissance* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2011).

19 Eilburg does not stress his manifold professions as Leon Modena would in his

Was Eilburg a heretic? Eilburg himself took up this precise question in the last section of *The Ten Questions*.[20] Naturally, he denied that he was a heretic, arguing that his doubts were innocent, and that there was room within Judaism for his skepticism. In his own estimation, Eilburg was the very opposite of a heretic; he was a penitent who had come to Jewish learning late in life and after many troubles, whose eyes had been opened through the study of medicine and philosophy, and who had merited angelic visions and kabbalistic dreams – not a heretic, therefore, but half way toward a prophet, a man whose learning greatly surpassed that of the rabbis of small towns in Moravia, and whose wisdom, in his own estimation, surpassed even that of a scholar such as Maharal. However, if Eilburg did actually send *The Ten Questions* to Maharal and his rabbinic colleagues, and if they read the manuscript, they may well have concluded that the author was indeed a heretic. For many rabbis of the period, denial of *ex nihilo* Creation was not merely a heresy, but an arch-heresy, the source of all other heresies.[21] Jewish law, as it was interpreted in the sixteenth century, did not allow Jews to deny fundamental principles of their religion. It did not even permit them to question the teachings of Judaism publicly, and frowned even upon the private harboring of doubts. Judaism in the sixteenth century, unlike Christianity, had no public process to identify or to root out heretics, and there is no suggestion in any of Eilburg's writings, or anywhere else, that he was ever persecuted

seventeenth-century autobiography, and he was in general less successful and less talented than Modena. Nonetheless, like Modena, Eilburg does present himself as what would later be called a "Renaissance man," in something like Burckhardt's sense of the term (as Moseley argues concerning Modena, *Being for Myself Alone: Origins of Jewish Autobiography* [Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005], 136–68).

20 On Jewish definitions of heresy and sinful doubt in the early modern period, especially among Ashkenazic (Yiddish-speaking) Jews, see Joseph M. Davis, "Drawing the Line: Definitions of Heresy in Medieval and Early Modern Ashkenazic Judaism," in *Rabbinic Culture and Its Critics*, ed. Daniel Frank and Matt Goldish (Wayne State University Press, 2008), 161–94. See Eilburg's ninth and tenth questions for his discussion of the issue.

21 On Jewish interpretations of the doctrine of Creation in the sixteenth century, see Brian Ogren, *The Beginning of the World in Renaissance Jewish Thought: Ma'aseh Bereshit in Italian Jewish Philosophy and Kabbalah 1492–1535* (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2016). Cf. n. 120 below.

for his opinions, or that anyone made a direct accusation of heresy against him. His imprisonments seem to have been for bankruptcy and unpaid debts, not because of his unorthodox thoughts. Eilburg did not reject Judaism, nor was he rejected by the Jewish community; he was no Spinoza. His works are directed to audiences of Jews, and argue for the improvement of Judaism, not for its abandonment.

The Ten Questions

This volume consists of annotated Hebrew transcriptions and English translations of two texts by Eilburg. The first text, called *The Ten Questions,* is one of the most radical statements of Jewish skepticism authored during the sixteenth century.[22] Extant in one autograph manuscript, it is published here in its entirety. *The Ten Questions* was written about 1568. Into it, Eilburg threw all the religious doubts he had been accumulating (he writes) for years. He cast it as a Hebrew letter addressed to the three rabbis in Moravia, preeminent among them Rabbi Judah Loew ben Bezalel, later called Maharal of Prague.[23] Eilburg's *Ten Questions* includes far more than ten questions. The document is organized into ten arguments or essays of differing length, as follows:[24]

1) **Is the Torah divinely revealed?** The first question (fol. 47a–58b) is by far the longest and the most complex.[25] Eilburg goes directly to the heart of the matter: Why believe in the Torah? The question

22 See above n. 2.

23 See above n. 4.

24 For further discussion of each of the ten questions, including earlier parallels, see Davis in *Jewish Quarterly Review* 91 (2001): 300–320; Davis in *Hebrew Union College Annual* 80 (2009): 175–79. The preface to *The Ten Questions* is on a different paper, and in a different hand, than the rest of the work. It was apparently copied on a different occasion, and by a different sixteenth-century scribe, that is, not by Eilburg himself. However, the overwhelmingly close connections between the preface and the rest of the work make it clear that Eilburg was the author of this section as well, although not its copyist. The entire work is a clean copy and not a first draft.

25 Eilburg's first question is analyzed in detail in Jánošiková, "Eliezer Eilburg: Criticism of Miracles." During the sixteenth century, the question of whether religion depends on faith in miracles was also discussed by Erasmus among many others. See Febvre, *The Problem of Unbelief*, 221–34.

considers what evidence or arguments could possibly support Judaism's claim that the Torah is divinely revealed. Eilburg rigorously examines many possible types of evidence and argues against each one as a support for the Torah. He denies, first, that a religion can base itself on faith alone, without any sort of proof or sign. The Bible, he argues, does not depict the Israelites accepting the Torah on the basis of pure faith, and he believes it is impossible that any religion should begin by simply demanding faith. The Bible, rather, shows that the Israelites were convinced by miracles. Eilburg argues, however, that miracles cannot be confirmed – partly because they cannot be distinguished from magic. Miracles, he argues, whether performed by magicians or by prophets (although they can help win over followers) do not stand up to close scrutiny as the proof of the truth of a religion. He argues next that prophecy also cannot serve as a proper basis for belief in Scripture. He argues strongly, *inter alia*, that prophets have no super-rational knowledge, that they have no greater knowledge of the future than do astrologers, that many of the stories of the Bible may not have happened literally, or happened at all, and that the Torah is not different in essence from the scriptures of other religions. Eilburg also criticizes the rationalist view that prophets and Scripture are confirmed by the philosophical excellence of their teachings and the political excellence of their laws. In place of this moderate religious rationalism, he suggests the more radical Averroistic view that prophecies and Scripture are not philosophically valuable or even consistently true at all. Rather, their content is intended to encourage moral behavior and social prosperity. Eilburg strongly hints, thus, that the Torah is not a divinely revealed text at all, but only a humanly authored one. Much of Eilburg's first question echoes the discussion of this topic by Averroes (Ibn Rushd) in his *Kitab al-Kashf 'an Manahij al-Adilla* (*Book of the Exposition of Methods of Proof*).[26]

2) In the second question (fol. 58b–60a), Eilburg continues to assess the moral or political value of the Bible. He points out the **contradictions among certain biblical laws**, and he particularly focuses

26 See Ibrahim Najjar, trans., *Faith and Reason in Islam: Averroes' Exposition of Religious Arguments* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

on the commandment to make the two cherubim in Exodus 25:18–21, which seems to controvert the law against making idols. He also questions the behavior of certain biblical characters, a topic he will return to in the eighth question. Abraham and Jacob, for example, had marriages that are prohibited by the laws of incest, and other biblical characters, such as Moses himself, married non-Jews. Quoting from Maimonides' discussion of the origins of the Temple rituals (*Guide of the Perplexed*, III, 37), Eilburg indicates that biblical laws and customs were historically conditioned and maintained continuity with earlier pagan customs and rites.[27]

3) The third question (fol. 60b–66b) is a wide-ranging attack on many aspects of **Jewish particularism and belief in Jewish chosenness**. Eilburg particularly questions the view that Jews go to Heaven but that the great majority of the human species goes to Hell or Gehinnom, a doctrine that implies, he argues, either that God is cruel or that He is arbitrary. Eilburg denies Jewish racial superiority, pointing to converts such as Onkelos and Rabbi Akiva. He asserts that other nations, such as the Greeks, the Arabs, and the people of India, are as wise as the Jews.[28]

4) The fourth question (fol. 66b–69b) attacks beliefs about **the continuity between Bible Judaism and Judaism in the present day**. Within a sixteenth-century context, this is perhaps the most radical of all the ten questions. It returns to the question of historical changes in the practice of Judaism, a question already raised implicitly in the first two questions. Eilburg argues that there is no substantial continuity between biblical Israel and the Jews of his time.

27 Eilburg's first and second questions are discussed in Visi, "Remembering and Forgetting Idolatry," *passim*.

28 In Jewish tradition, Rabbi Akiva is not usually regarded as having been a convert, but as a descendant of converts, which would also be sufficient to make the point. See Maimonides' introduction to the *Mishneh Torah*. Abraham Zacuto claims in *Sefer Yuḥasin* that Rabbi Akiva himself was a convert (London: Hebrew Antiquarian Society, 1857), 36. On the Jewish doctrine of chosenness in the sixteenth century, see Jacob Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance* (New York: Behrman House, 1961) 131–55; Moshe Idel, "Particularism and Universalism in Kabbalah 1480–1650" (below n. 146). Maharal argued for the existence of a metaphysical difference between Jews and non-Jews that is not entirely overcome by conversion.

He denies, as Spinoza would a century later, that present-day Jews are a chosen people. Eilburg points to the many differences between Jewish observance as set down in the Bible, and Jewish observance in his own time. The vast changes in Jewish law between the biblical era and the present day render moot, he argues, the relatively few similarities and continuities in law and behavior. He also questions the assumption that Jewish beliefs have remained constant, and points to the theological arguments among Jews in his day as evidence that, although everyone interprets the Bible in accordance with their own theological preferences, no one has a sure claim to preserving intact the beliefs of the biblical period. He particularly questions claims that the Bible originally meant what the Talmud claims it means. "I might almost say that … the sages of the Talmud," he writes, "created for us a new religion and a different Torah that spins on the axis of the Torah of Moses, but is not the same as it." [29]

5) The fifth question (fol. 69b–70a), a very short one, concerns the talmudic claim (b. Sanhedrin 71a) that **certain mitzvot were never put into practice**. As Eilburg argues, this would seem to imply a certain lack of prescience on the part of the Lawgiver. Eilburg does not offer a resolution to this problem, and it is not entirely clear what point he is trying to make. Is he challenging belief in aggadic dicta such as this one? Or is he, to the contrary, using the talmudic citation to challenge belief in the perfect wisdom of scriptural law? Perhaps the purpose of the question is to point out, in line with question four, the differences in practice between biblical law and rabbinic law.

6) The sixth question (fol. 70a–71b) consists of arguments against the **Resurrection of the Dead**. Some of the arguments are taken from Averroes. Eilburg attempts to show that physical resurrection is not only a natural impossibility, but a logical absurdity. It was also his view that Maimonides did not believe in physical resurrection.[30]

29 The fourth question is discussed in Visi, "Remembering and Forgetting Idolatry," 436.

30 Compare Averroes, *Tahafut al-Tahafut: The Incoherence of the Incoherence*, trans. Simon van den Bergh (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1954), 580–88. Eilburg discusses the question of resurrection again in the broader context of the relation of the

7) The seventh question (fol. 72a–b) questions the dogma that our **text of the Torah** is the exact text that was written by Moses. Eilburg goes further than any of his Jewish predecessors or contemporaries in pursuing this attack, arguing that it is possible that there have been major changes in the text over the course of the centuries. This question closely parallels much longer discussions in Azariah de' Rossi's *Light of the Eyes*, and may be based on them.[31] Eilburg argues that scribal errors and doubtful readings are common in manuscripts of all ancient texts, for instance, the Talmud. Like de' Rossi, he points to variant readings in the Bible, such as the differences between the *ketiv* and *qeri*, and *tiqqunei soferim* (scribal corrections), as well as to differences between the received Hebrew text and ancient translations such as the Septuagint. He also touches on the differences between ancient Hebrew script and the later "Ashuri" script, the subject of a long discussion by de' Rossi. Eilburg also points out the disappearance of many of the ancient Israelite books referred to in the Bible and elsewhere, and points as well to the story of the discovery of the scroll of Torah in the time of King Josiah (2 Kings 22–23). If the whole Torah could be lost temporarily, Eilburg argues, why couldn't parts of it have been lost permanently, and why couldn't new sections have been added to it? Eilburg's treatment of these topics does not suggest any original research beyond that undertaken by de' Rossi. He does, however, argue explicitly for the radical implications of these topics, which de' Rossi tries to minimize, and he interweaves them into a wider and more embracing critique of Jewish dogmatism.

8) The eighth question (fol. 73a–74a) returns to **the reprehensible behavior of certain biblical characters**. Eilburg expresses wonder and confusion (again, as in the second question, but now in stronger terms) at the behavior of Jacob in marrying his two wives, and the behavior of other biblical characters such as Judah and Tamar (Genesis 38). The patriarchs, Eilburg argues, are depicted in the Bible as engaged in the pursuit of wealth and women, and never as pursuing any intellectual or spiritual goals. He asks why such stories

body and soul in JTS MS 2324, fol. 112b–120a. There too he hints at an Averroist understanding: the doctrine of resurrection is necessary to maintain public virtue.

31 See the discussion of Eilburg and de' Rossi, below.

were included in the Torah, since they seem to teach "no knowledge or true beliefs or virtue." The eighth question, like the fifth, points in two directions at once. First, it attacks the midrashic portrayal of biblical heroes as sinless or nearly sinless, and points to the differences between the simple sense (*peshat*) of Scripture and midrashic interpretation, a controversial point in Eilburg's day. The question also casts doubt on the dogmatic conception of Torah as a book whose every word teaches "true beliefs and virtue." The question echoes Maimonides' discussion of this point in the *Guide of the Perplexed* (III, 50–51), but expresses the problem in much stronger terms than Maimonides does, and without providing the resolution that Maimonides suggests there.[32]

9) The ninth question (fol. 74a–75b) concerns the doctrine of **Creation**. Eilburg asks why we cannot interpret the story of Creation allegorically. He argues that Maimonides did not believe in Creation, but rather in the Aristotelian teaching that the world is eternal. The discussion centers on chapter 25 of part two of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, where Maimonides seems to argue that the Creation story ought not to be interpreted allegorically. Eilburg argues that Maimonides' arguments there are unconvincing and inconsistent. Although the eternity of the world cannot be proven absolutely, neither, Eilburg asserts, can the existence of an incorporeal God. Maimonides demands that all verses suggesting the corporeality of God be interpreted away from their apparent literal meaning. To be consistent, Eilburg argues, Maimonides should also approve of the allegorical interpretation of Creation.

10) The tenth question (fol. 75b–77a) also concerns the doctrine of Creation. Eilburg argues that belief in ***ex nihilo* Creation is not a necessary dogma of Judaism**, and that it is not implied by any of Maimonides' Thirteen Principles of Judaism. Specifically, he argues

32 The attack on the morality of biblical heroes also tends to undercut the particularistic Jewish claims that are the target of Eilburg's third question. The same line of attack appears in sixteenth-century Christian polemics against rabbinic midrash. On the later career of this sort of criticism, see Norman Torrey, "Voltaire and [Matthew] Tindal: The Moral Argument," in his *Voltaire and the English Deists* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1930), 104–29.

that Maimonides' fourth principle, the principle that God precedes the world, means only that God "precedes" the world ontologically, not that He created it temporally.[33] Eilburg appends to the question a short argument that Maimonides, like Averroes, did not believe in individual immortality. He concludes the book by suggesting that Maimonides, on these topics and others, contradicted himself deliberately in order to obfuscate and hide his true beliefs.

The Ten Questions was not an influential document. Indeed, it is not known whether Eilburg ever in fact sent the document to the three Moravian rabbis, nor indeed whether he ever showed it to anyone at all. Such openly heretical views could be extremely dangerous in the sixteenth century, as the fate of Noël Journet, who was burned at the stake, suggests.[34] As is so often the case with Hebrew manuscripts, there is no definite evidence that anyone read *The Ten Questions* between the sixteenth century and the twentieth.[35] Eilburg is one of a number of sixteenth-century Jewish scholars and writers who in hindsight seem precociously modern, but who inspired no real successors in the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries.[36]

Spinoza, for example, certainly never read *The Ten Questions*, and it is also almost certain that he never met anyone who had. Nevertheless, in hindsight, Eilburg's *Ten Questions* foreshadows much of Spinoza's critique of religion, nearly a century before Spinoza's work was written. It is impossible not to notice that many of Eilburg's questions

33 On the differing interpretations of Maimonides' fourth principle, and the place of the doctrine of Creation in Maimonides' Thirteen Principles, see Menachem Kellner, *Dogma in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Oxford: Littman Library, 1986), 54–57.

34 Neither Christian authorities, nor the Inquisition, nor Jewish communal authorities persecuted heretics within the Jewish community in the same murderous way that Christian heretics were treated. However, both as a matter of law, and as a practical matter, Jews were not permitted to profess "atheistic" heresies, and it was dangerous to do so. On Journet, see above n. 5.

35 It is possible that the author of the anonymous *Qol Sakhal* (*The Voice of a Fool*, a critique of rabbinic Judaism often attributed to Leon Modena) had read *The Ten Questions*, or at least the fourth question. There are some suggestive verbal parallels. The possibility that Maharal read *The Ten Questions* is discussed below.

36 Cf. Talya Fishman, *Shaking the Pillars of Exile: 'Voice of a Fool,' an Early Modern Jewish Critique of Rabbinic Culture* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1997), 63–66 on "roads not taken." An example in a different vein is Judah Leone Sommo, whose pioneering Hebrew comedies found no successors for more than a century. See Ahuva Belkin, ed., *Leone de' Sommi and the Performing Arts* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1997).

recur in Spinoza's writings. Spinoza rejected Jewish particularism, rejected miracles, and believed in an eternal universe. He, too, pointed out errors in the Masoretic text, and stressed the distance between biblical and later Judaism.[37]

The Last Jewish Averroist

Most of the material in *The Ten Questions* derives from the heritage of medieval Jewish rationalism, in particular, from Jewish Averroism. Ever since the Maimonidean Controversies of the thirteenth century, it was well known that the rationalists were skeptical of conventional medieval views of reward and punishment such as Heaven and Hell (that is, Gehinnom), resurrection, and life after death, and that they were skeptical of certain biblical stories and miracles as well. Medieval Jewish rationalists were also openly skeptical of midrashic traditions or interpreted them non-literally. They were also explicitly in favor of non-literal interpretations of many biblical passages. God is described in the Bible in anthropomorphic terms, and sometimes even in grossly physical ones. All these attributes and descriptions must be interpreted rationally and not literally: this is the major and best-known theme of Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*.[38] But medieval Jewish rationalists were sometimes suspected of being more broadly skeptical of the Bible and Judaism. They did reject some aspects of Jewish particularism, most notably, the notion that Jewish tradition is the sole source of wisdom; and they were sometimes (rather unfairly) accused of rejecting Jewish particularism altogether – even of either consciously or unwittingly

37 See generally Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken, 1965). Spinoza argues against the doctrine of Creation in his *Short Treatise* 1.2.5. The other arguments are all in the *Theological-Political Tractatus,* chs. 3, 6, 9, 12, and 18. Although many details of Spinoza's philosophy are argued over by his interpreters, these claims are made very clearly and explicitly. Note also Richard Popkin, "Spinoza and Bible Scholarship," in *The Cambridge Companion to Spinoza*, ed. Don Garrett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 383–407.

38 Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* has been published in many editions and many translations. Unless otherwise noted, passages from the *Guide* will be quoted either from the translation of Shlomo Pines (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1963), or from the earlier translation by Michael Friedlaender (second edition, London: Routledge, 1904). Eilburg knew no Arabic and read the *Guide*, as well as many other works of medieval philosophy, in medieval Hebrew translations.

encouraging Jews to convert to other religions. Eilburg's collection of doubts in *The Ten Questions* reviewed all these themes of medieval Jewish rationalism: the critique of an anthropomorphic and hence material conception of God, the rejection of literal belief in midrashim, the skepticism regarding miracles and reward and punishment, and the critique of Jewish particularism. But he also went further, as did many of Maimonides' followers and commentators in the later Middle Ages. Eilburg pointed, as did they, to Maimonides' discussion of contradictions and pedagogic sleight of hand in the Introduction to the *Guide*, and he recommended the radical line of interpretation of Maimonides that in our own day is associated with Leo Strauss.[39]

Eilburg reviewed but also sharpened Maimonides' comments on biblical laws. In his own day, Maimonides courted controversy by suggesting that many biblical rituals, including the institution of animal sacrifice itself, were best understood as reactions to specific ancient pagan rituals. Eilburg, following some of the commentaries on the *Guide*, turned that around – the biblical rituals were not so much reactions against pagan rituals as continuations of them. Biblical rituals, in this interpretation, were based on the same beliefs in astral magic that Maimonides discusses in his explanation of pagan religion in the *Guide*. Although Maimonides disparages and even polemicizes against magical beliefs, astrology, and astral magic, these late medieval Jewish rationalists saw this as a mere pretense on his part. Maimonides' secret opinion, they believed, was that terrestrial events are astrologically determined, and that magic and astral magic

39 The classic modern statement of the radical interpretation of Maimonides is Leo Strauss, "The Literary Character of the *Guide for the Perplexed*," in his *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1952), 38–94. The distinction between conservative and radical Maimonideanism in the Middle Ages is worked out well in Aviezer Ravitzky, "סתרי תורתו של מורה הנבוכים: הפרשנות בדורותיו ובדורינו," *Meḥqerei Yerushalayim beMaḥshevet Yisra'el* 5 (1986): 23–69, esp. 39–40, and in greater detail in Lawrence Kaplan, "Rationalism and Rabbinic Culture in Sixteenth-Century Eastern Europe: R. Mordecai Jaffe's *Levush Pinat Yikrat*." PhD diss., Harvard University, 1975. Ravitzky also differentiates helpfully between present-day Straussianism and the radical Maimonideanism of the Middle Ages. Cf. also Ravitzky, "Samuel ibn Tibbon and the Esoteric Character of the *Guide of the Perplexed*," *Association for Jewish Studies Review* 6 (1981): 87–123.

are effective – and this was their own belief as well. They combined Aristotelian rationalism with belief in astrology and magic.[40]

Many Jewish philosophers in the late Middle Ages were also considerably influenced by Averroes, and claimed that the secret teachings of Maimonides agreed in the main with Averroes (and hence also, in their view, with Aristotle). A triad of teachings was particularly significant to this interpretation. These were the rejection of *ex nihilo* Creation (that is, acceptance of the Eternity of the World); a naturalistic understanding of the human soul and skepticism toward any otherworldly reward or existence; and, most notably, a theory that the purpose and nature of Scripture is political. Each of these themes appears in Eilburg's *Ten Questions*. Eilburg also refers explicitly to Averroes, and it appears that he had read at least two of Averroes' works, both in Hebrew translation: *Tahafut al-Tahafut* (*Incoherence of the Incoherence*, his refutation of al-Ghazzali), and *Kitab al-Kashf*.

Eilburg's Averroism, however, was severely out of step with the Jewish intellectual trends of his day. Judaism was changing in a great many ways in Eilburg's time, but it was certainly not trending in the direction of increased rationalism. Rather, it was tending more and more to insist on dogmatic principles and on literal belief in midrashim, to say nothing of belief in Scripture. Jewish theology in the later sixteenth century also took an increasingly conservative turn, as Jewish thinkers moved away from Aristotelianism. By the end of the century, Jewish Averroism had disappeared as an acceptable version of Jewish belief.[41] Eilburg should perhaps be seen as the

40 Eilburg's belief in astral magic, and this interpretation of Maimonides, is contextualized in Visi, "Remembering and Forgetting Idolatry." Further on the medieval Jewish context, see Dov Schwartz, *Studies in Astral Magic in Medieval Jewish Thought* (Leiden: Brill, 2005). Compare nn. 139–40 below.

41 See particularly the survey of sixteenth-century Jewish thinkers in Herbert Davidson, "Medieval Jewish Philosophy in the Sixteenth Century," in *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century,* ed. Bernard Cooperman (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1983), 106–45. Decline in the study of Aristotle by Italian Jews of the later sixteenth century is discussed by Robert Bonfil in his *Rabbis and Jewish Communities in Renaissance Italy*, trans. Jonathan Chapman (Oxford: Littman Library, 1990), 275–78. The conservative trend in sixteenth-century Jewish thought manifested itself in Bible exegesis as well as theology: note particularly the growing identification of *peshat* and *derash* ("literal" and "homiletical" modes of interpretation), a trend that inevitably favored the latter over the former, and that led to exegesis that was

very last Jewish Averroist – the final heir of almost four centuries of Jewish Averroism.[42]

The Medieval Forerunners of Bible Criticism

Medieval Jewish and Christian thinkers, with extremely few exceptions, refrained from any explicit debunking of the Bible. In the context of inter-religious polemic, it is true, Islamic thinkers, most notably Ibn Hazm, did criticize the Bible, and argued that it was not an authentic Scripture – that it had been revised and tampered with by later hands. Islamic writers sometimes blamed Ezra the Scribe for the forgery. The Islamic polemic against the Bible also encouraged Islamic readers to search for biblical passages that contradicted one another, or that seemed outrageous to morality or to reason. Still, Islamic polemic did not need a strong or detailed theory of the formation of the Bible, and, in any case, the Islamic doctrine that the Qur'an is a truly supernatural book discouraged this line of thinking from proceeding too far.[43] Moreover, traditional Jewish and Christian interpreters – that is, the ancient rabbis and the Church Fathers – had, of course, already addressed many of the problems of

increasingly solicitous of the authority of the Talmud's interpretation of the Bible and of Rashi's Torah commentary. See, e.g., Shimon Shalem, "לחקר שיטות הפירוש והדרש של רבי משה אלשיך" [The Exegetical and Homiletical Method of R. Moses Alsheikh's Commentaries on the Bible]. *Sefunot* 5 (1961): 151–206. The Counter-Reformation context should be particularly noted.

42 On Jewish Averroism, see Alfred Ivry, "Remnants of Jewish Averroism in the Renaissance," in *Jewish Thought in the Sixteenth Century*, 243–65; Hava Tirosh-Rothschild, "Jewish Philosophy on the Eve of Modernity," in *The History of Jewish Philosophy*, ed. Daniel H. Frank and Oliver Leaman (London: Routledge, 1997), 517. "Averroist" is a vague term that was not used by these thinkers themselves, and certainly not by Eilburg. I am using it in the sense suggested by Charles B. Schmitt: "…a particular interpretation of Aristotle in which a secular, non-theological slant is given to several key issues in which Aristotelian philosophy seems to be in opposition to the dogmas of revealed religion. Included are such well-known questions as personal immortality, eternity of the world, and the so-called 'double truth.'" *L'Averroismo in Italia: Convegno internazionale* (*Roma, 18–20 Aprile, 1977*), 122.

43 See Hava Lazarus-Yafeh, *Intertwined Worlds: Medieval Islam and Bible Criticism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992). A similar search for contradictory or outrageous passages in midrash was later conducted by late medieval Christian polemicists as well. Note also William Adler, "The Jews as Falsifiers: Charges of Tendentious Emendation in Anti-Jewish Christian Polemic," in *Translations of Scripture,* ed. David Goldenberg (Philadelphia, PA: Annenberg Research Institute, 1990), 1–28.

contradictions in the Bible. The reconciling of contradictions, and the reinterpretation of difficult passages, was a venerable intellectual activity in both religions. Jewish texts from the Middle Ages also collect these same sorts of Bible problems, that is, contradictions, and verses that seem to outrage reason or morality. The *Questions* of Hiwi al-Balkhi and the so-called "שאלות עתיקות" (*She'elot 'Atiqot*, "Ancient Questions," attributed to a certain Isaac or Yitsḥaqi) both show a critical attitude. These texts were suppressed, however, and were not available to Jewish scholars during the later Middle Ages, nor to Eilburg. (*She'elot 'Atiqot* was rediscovered by Solomon Schechter in the Cairo Genizah.[44])

In a different context, some medieval Jewish Bible commentators showed inklings of a critical approach to the Bible text. Many distanced themselves from midrashic interpretations, and were willing to admit that biblical heroes were morally flawed. David Kimḥi made efforts to correct or improve the Masoretic text, thus admitting, at least implicitly, the possibility of scribal errors in the received text of the Bible. And a set of very famous passages in the commentary of Abraham ibn Ezra contains hints that not every word of the Torah was penned by Moses. These hints then were made much more explicit and far-reaching by several of the many medieval supercommentaries on Ibn Ezra's commentary, such as those of Eleazar ben Matityah and others.[45] In short, then, Bible critics of the early modern period could find earlier scholars whom they could claim as their predecessors. Spinoza, for example, referred back to Ibn Ezra.

But figures like Ibn Ezra and Kimḥi can hardly be cast as Bible skeptics. To the contrary, they evince a very clear faith in Scripture, and their readers easily accommodated their slight hesitations regarding the canonical claims of biblical revelation and letter-for-letter

44 See Solomon Schechter, "The Oldest Collection of Bible Difficulties, by a Jew," *Jewish Quarterly Review* 13 (1901): 345–77; Judah Rosenthal, "שאלות עתיקות בתנ"ך," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 21 (1948): 29–91; Uriel Simon, *אוזן מילין תבחן: מחקרים בדרכו הפרשנית של ר' אברהם אבן עזרא* (Ramat Gan: Bar-Ilan University Press, 2013), 275–76; Moshe Gil, *חיוי הבלכי* (Merhavia, Israel: Sifriat Poalim, 1965).

45 See, e.g., Menachem Cohen, "האידיאה בדבר קדושת הנוסח לאותיותיו וביקורת הטקסט" in *המקרא ואנחנו*, ed. Uriel Simon (Tel Aviv: Devir, 1979), 42–69; Simon, *אוזן מילין תבחן*, esp. 407–16, and cf. n. 47 below.

perfection. Other medieval Jewish rationalists were equally diffident in their attacks on Scripture. Whether they were convinced that Scripture has an inner, allegorical meaning that conforms to reason, or believed, like Averroes, that religious Scripture, be it the Qur'an or the Bible, serves a necessary political and social function in controlling the masses, they saw no advantage for themselves and none for their readers in attacking Scripture directly. Such an attack would be, of course, dangerous, since the religious authorities could hardly ignore it; but, worse than that, such an attack would be wicked and antisocial, threatening the stability of the political order. Moreover, stronger expressions of skepticism would have been, from their point of view, entirely unnecessary. Averroists often felt that they could essentially ignore Scripture, teach Aristotle, and be none the worse off; there was no need to criticize Scripture. Jacob Mantino (d. 1549), an Italian Jewish physician in the generation before Eilburg, for example, was presumably not simply a translator of Averroes (from Hebrew into Latin), but also a convinced Averroist and rationalist. However, if he had skeptical views of religion or Scripture, he kept them to himself, and hardly a breath of scandal attached to him throughout a very successful public career.[46] None of this background, therefore, prepares us for Eilburg's skeptical onslaught on the Bible in *The Ten Questions*.

Eilburg and Renaissance Historical Consciousness

Eilburg's skepticism of the Bible derived, at least in large measure, from his acute historical consciousness. The general context of this turn of thought is well known. Beginning roughly with Erasmus, philological and historical methods that had initially been developed for the study of classical texts were used to restore the original text of Scripture and to reconstruct the history of biblical events and the

46 On Mantino, see Cecil Roth, *The Jews in the Renaissance* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1956), 76–80; Charles B. Schmitt, "Renaissance Averroism Studied through the Venetian Editions of Aristotle-Averroes (with particular reference to the Giunta edition of 1550–2)," in *L'Averroismo in Italia: Atti dei Convegni Lincei 40: Convegno internazionale* (*Roma, 18–20 Aprile, 1977*), (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1979), 121–42.

biblical world.[47] A number of Eilburg's Jewish contemporaries shared this sharpened awareness of historical evidence, historical causation, and historical change, and applied it to biblical topics.[48] Abarbanel, at the very beginning of the sixteenth century, carefully discussed the (human) authorship of certain biblical books.[49] Elijah Levita and Azariah de' Rossi – to whom we shall return again below – both preceded Eilburg in applying this new mode of perception to the Bible text.[50] Eilburg's seventh question builds on these foundations, and takes them further. Here, Eilburg challenges Jewish traditions concerning the flawless transmission of the biblical text. Why should we believe, he asks, that the Bible has been passed along intact, letter for letter? How can we be sure that no portions of the original text have disappeared? Conversely, how can we be certain that no new material was added to any part of the Bible? In this question, as throughout

47 See generally, Magne Sæbø, ed., *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament: The History of its Interpretation*, vol. 2 (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008).

48 Eilburg's historical consciousness, and the contrast between him and his medieval rationalist predecessors, is discussed by Visi, "Remembering and Forgetting Idolatry," 433–35. For these three elements of "historical consciousness" see Peter Burke, *The Renaissance Sense of the Past* (London: Edward Arnold, 1969), 1. On the influence of historical thinking on sixteenth-century Jewish intellectual life in Italy, see, e.g., David Ruderman, "The Italian Renaissance and Jewish Thought," in *Renaissance Humanism: Foundations, Forms and Legacy*, *Volume 1*, ed. Albert Rabil (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988), 390–95; Arthur Lesley, "Jewish Adaptation of Humanist Concepts in Fifteenth- and Sixteenth-Century Italy," in *Renaissance Rereadings: Intertext and Context*, ed. Maryanne Cline Horowitz, Anne J. Cruz, and Wendy A. Furman (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 51–66; Bezalel Safran, "Leone da Modena's Historical Thinking," in *Jewish Thought in the Seventeenth Century*, ed. Isadore Twersky and Bernard Septimus (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 381–98; Abraham Melamed, "The Perception of Jewish History in Italian Jewish Thought of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries: A Re-examination." *Italia Judaica* 2 (1986): 139–70. See also n. 53 below on Azariah de' Rossi. Eilburg discusses questions of historical evidence in detail, mainly in the first question, and discusses historical change at many points. He is not very interested in questions of historical causation, beyond endorsing an astrological-magical theory in general. By contrast, Spinoza is intensely focused on the question of historical causation, both on a large scale (the question of free will) and on a small scale (the causation of specific historical events). Cf. Leo Strauss, *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*, 107.

49 Eric Lawee, "On the Threshold of the Renaissance: New Methods and Sensibilities in the Biblical Commentaries of Isaac Abarbanel," *Viator* 26 (1995): 293–306.

50 On Levita, see Jordan Penkower "עיון מחודש בספר מסורת המסורת לאליהו בחור: איחור הניקוד וביקורת ספר הזוהר," *Italia* 8 (1989): 7–73.

The Ten Questions, Eilburg's "question" is not merely one question or even a series of questions, but is actually a series of arguments against the conventional religious view. Here he summarizes the evidence he had that the Bible has not been transmitted perfectly. First, there is the alarming story of the loss and rediscovery of the "book of the law" in the time of King Josiah (2 Kings 22–23). Second, there are the other ancient Jewish books that have been lost. Third, the ancient translations of the Bible do not agree completely with the Masoretic text, and they fail to support the claim of the Hebrew text to exact authenticity. Traditions about Ezra and his role in the transmission of the Torah after the destruction of the Temple (including the deuterocanonical book of IV Ezra) also suggested to Eilburg that there is cause for doubt, and that perhaps Ezra changed the Torah's text.[51] And finally, a general rule, as Eilburg puts it, is that "there is not a single ancient book … into which many errors have not fallen."[52] Eilburg's seventh question thus clearly raises the question of textual transmission of the Bible – what would later be called "lower criticism." However, it also suggests the groundwork for a much more sweeping skepticism toward the Bible and its Mosaic and prophetic authorship. If some or much of the Bible consists of later interpolations, and if much of the original text may have disappeared or been lost, then the authorship of the original text is largely irrelevant. The Torah that was written by Moses is not necessarily the Torah that is in our possession. The original Mosaic text may be lost and irrecoverable.

Eilburg's fourth question reinforces and deepens these doubts. Formally speaking, the fourth question asks the almost innocent

51 On the development of the suspicion that Ezra and not Moses was responsible for the text of the Torah, see the careful study by Noel Malcolm, "Hobbes, Ezra, and The Bible: The History of a Subversive Idea," in his *Aspects of Hobbes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 383–431. He emphasizes the roles of Alfonso Tostatus (1400–1455) and Andreas Masius (1514–1573) in developing this theory and transmitting it to Hobbes and Spinoza. Note also the thirteenth-century super-commentary of Eleazar ben Matityah on Ibn Ezra's Torah commentary, in which Eleazar expresses his belief that Ezra the Scribe deleted pieces of the original Torah and edited other parts of it – a belief confirmed for Eleazar by angelic visions. See Visi, "Remembering and Forgetting Idolatry," 434 n. 55; Simon, *אוזן מילין תבחן*, 389, 427.

52 fol. 72b.

question of why and whether the Jews of Eilburg's day are deserving of the name "Israel." This question leads Eilburg, however, into an attack on the fundamental Jewish notion that Judaism is based on the Bible, or specifically on the Torah. Eilburg rigorously spells out the differences between the practices that are set out in the Bible and the practices of Judaism in his day, emphasizing the rabbinic origins of innovations such as the daily prayers. He denounces what he sees as the increasing stringency of rabbinic law as it developed through the ages. He points to evidence for the flexibility of Judaic practices in the time of the Bible, for example, Nehemiah 8:17, which suggests that the holiday of Sukkot was not celebrated during the entire period of the kings. He questions the continuity, not only of Jewish practice, but of Jewish beliefs as well, suggesting that all the versions of Jewish belief in his day, whether rabbinic, philosophical, or kabbalistic, are post-biblical. Importantly, Eilburg does not argue that Jews should attempt to recreate biblical religion, certainly not in the diaspora.

The contrast between Eilburg and his enemy Martin Luther is striking. Having discovered the distance between sixteenth-century Judaism and biblical Judaism, Eilburg does not recommend any Jewish reformation, any return *ad fontes*. Indeed, Eilburg denies that it would be useful to even try to observe biblical law in the diaspora. He asserts that biblical law was like a medicine whose prescription was formulated for use in one particular climate and one particular period of time. The attempt to use it in another setting might not be helpful; it might even be fatal. The reverse is also true. Diaspora Judaism, Eilburg argues, would in no way be suitable for Jews who were living in their own land again, free and self-ruling. Eilburg even goes so far as to hint that during the biblical period itself, biblical law may not have been politically very beneficial. This is extraordinary. For Averroists, the political and social usefulness of Scripture was practically axiomatic. Eilburg seems uncertain that Scripture possesses even that limited excellence.

Other potential avenues of Bible criticism are suggested in Eilburg's first question. Do the ancient histories, for example those written by the ancient Egyptians, confirm biblical history? Did the gentiles in the time of the Bible even believe that the biblical miracles

had taken place? The actions of the gentiles in the Bible seem to suggest that they were unaware of the great miracles that God had performed in Egypt and elsewhere. Thus, Eilburg reviews all the main themes of the critique of the Bible by the most rationalistic thinkers of medieval Judaism. Such a review, it should be stressed again, was an extremely radical step to take within the conservative Jewish culture of the later sixteenth century. Eilburg added to this review of medieval challenges a whole new set of questions which focused on problems of history, historical change, and historical evidence, challenges to the Bible that were largely foreign to the tradition of Jewish Averroism, as we have seen, and that reflected the new intellectual trends of the sixteenth century.

Eilburg and Azariah de' Rossi

Precisely because Eilburg was a secondary figure within the Jewish intellectual circles of his day, his doubts, thoughts, and protests were almost certainly not unique to himself, but were very likely also held by other of his contemporary Jews, who, more prudently than Eilburg, do not appear to have committed them to paper. One prominent Italian Jewish scholar who calls out for comparison to Eilburg, as noted earlier, is his contemporary Azariah de' Rossi.[53] De' Rossi has often been celebrated as a pioneer of Jewish historiography. In his magnum opus, *Light of the Eyes*, first published in Mantua in 1573, de' Rossi took a critical stance toward Jewish tradition. He made special efforts to correct Jewish chronology, and devoted many chapters to arguing against literal belief in midrashim. De' Rossi's *Light of the Eyes* was attacked fiercely: Maharal of Prague suggested rather intemperately that the book should be consigned to the flames.[54]

53 On de' Rossi, see generally Reuven Bonfil's introduction to his edition of de' Rossi's writings, *כתבי עזריה מן האדומים: מבחר פרקים מתוך ספר מאור עיניים וספר מצרף לכסף* (Jerusalem: Mossad Bialik, 1991), and Joanna Weinberg's many articles on Azariah, as well as the introduction to her translation of de' Rossi's *מאור עיניים*, *Light of the Eyes* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001).

54 See Lester Segal, *Historical Consciousness and Religious Tradition in Azariah de' Rossi's Me'or 'Einayim* (Philadelphia, PA: Jewish Publication Society, 1989); Giuseppe Veltri, "Maharal against Azariah de' Rossi: The Other Side of Scepticism," in *Rabbinic Theology and Jewish Intellectual History: The Great Rabbi Loew of Prague,* ed. Meir Seidler (London: Routledge, 2013), 65–76. Maharal's criticism ("fit to be burned") is at the