

‘The Disciples of the Wise Increase Peace in the World’: The Use of Traditional Scholarship to Build Bridges and Mend Rifts

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1. Rambam, Introduction to *Perek Helek*

The first group is the largest one... They understand the teachings of the sages only in their literal sense, in spite of the fact that some of their teachings when taken literally, seem so fantastic and irrational that if one were to repeat them literally, even to the uneducated, let alone sophisticated scholars, their amazement would prompt them to ask how anyone in the world could believe such things true, much less edifying. The members of this group are poor in knowledge. One can only regret their folly. Their very effort to honor and to exalt the sages in accordance with their own meager understanding actually humiliates them. As God lives, this group destroys the glory of the Torah of God and says the opposite of what it intended. For He said in His perfect Torah, “The nation is a wise and understanding people” (Deut. 4:6)...

The second group is also a numerous one. It, too, consists of persons who, having read or heard the words of the sages, understand them according to their simple literal sense and believe that the sages intended nothing else than what may be learned from their literal interpretation. Inevitably, they ultimately declare the sages to be fools, hold them up to contempt, and slander what does not deserve to be slandered... The members of this group are so pretentiously stupid that they can never attain genuine wisdom... This is an accursed group, because they attempt to refute men of established greatness whose wisdom has been demonstrated to competent men of science...

There is a third group. Its members are so few in number that it is hardly appropriate to call them a group... This group consists of men to whom the greatness of our sages is clear... They know that the sages did not speak nonsense, and it is clear to them that the words of the sages contain both an obvious and a hidden meaning. Thus, whenever the sages spoke of things that seem impossible, they were employing the style of riddle and parable which is the method of truly great thinkers...

2. R. Joseph ibn Aknin, *Hitgalut ha-Sodot ve-Hofa'at ha-Me'orot*, ed. Abraham S. Halkin (Jerusalem: Mekitzei Nirdamim, 1964), pp. 493-495

Rabbi Mazliah b. Albazek the rabbinic judge of Saklia told [Shemuel Ha-Nagid] when he came from Baghdad... that one day in [Rabbi Hai Gaon's] yeshivah they studied the verse, "let my head not refuse such choice oil" (Ps. 141:5), and those present debated its meaning. Rabbi Hai of blessed memory told Rabbi Mazliah to go to the Catholic Patriarch and ask him what he knew about this verse, and this upset [Rabbi Mazliah]. When [Rabbi Hai] saw that Rabbi Mazliah was upset, he rebuked him, "Our saintly predecessors who are our guides solicited information on language and interpretation from many religious communities—and even of shepherds, as is well known!"

3. Rambam, *Introduction to Commentary on Perek Helek*

When a person affirms all these Principles, and clarifies his faith in them, he becomes part of the Jewish People. It is a mitzvah to love him, have mercy on him, and show him all the love and brotherhood that God has instructed us to show our fellow Jews. Even if he has transgressed out of desire and the overpowering influence of his base nature, he will be punished accordingly but he will have a share in the World to Come. But one who denies any of these Principles has excluded himself from the Jewish People and denied the essence [of Judaism]. He is called a heretic, an *epikoros*, and "one who has cut off the seedlings." It is a mitzvah to hate and destroy such a person, as it says (Psalm 139:21), "Those who hate You, God, I shall hate."

4. Rambam, *Laws of Repentance 3:7*

Five categories of heretics are called *minim*: (1) One who says that there is no God nor is there a spiritual ruler of the creation. (2) One who accepts that the creation has spiritual rulers but insists that there are two or more spiritual rulers. (3) One who believes that there is only one God who rules nature, but He has a body and a likeness...

Ra'avad: Why did [Rambam] call such a person a heretic? Several greater and better rabbis than he thought [that God does have a body and likeness] based on what they see in biblical verses and even more so from rabbinic teachings that can confuse the thoughts.

5. Mishnah *Sanhedrin 37a*

Furthermore, [man was created alone] for the sake of peace among men, that one might not say to his fellow, 'My father was greater than yours.'