

Joseph Albo on the Will



Overview

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The Problem

The *Sefer*

Summary

Joseph Albo (ca. 1380–1444)

- Born in Aragon (Spain); died in Castile
- studied under Hasdai Crescas in Saragossa
- active role in public polemics
- philosopher and spiritual leader, also preacher and physician; speaks Hebrew, Spanish, and Latin (and perhaps Arabic)
- his best known work is the *Sefer ha-'Ikkarim*.



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- religious prosecution – economic measures, social legislation, pogroms, etc.; forced conversions, martyrs. . .
- overall deterioration of the community
- division between Jewish thinkers on theological and social issues
 - followers of Maimonides (“rationalists”) vs. his opponents (“conservatives”)

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Influences



Moses Maimonides
(1138–1204)



Gersonides (1288–1344)



Hasdai Crescas
(1340–1410)

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The Problem of Free Will in Jewish Philosophy

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Problem of foreknowledge; cf. Boethius!

- 1 **Maimonides**: Aristotelian influence; also probably Boethius; reconcilability of foreknowledge and freedom
- 2 **Gersonides**: human freedom is important; limited divine foreknowledge
- 3 **Crescas**: freedom and foreknowledge are irreconcilable; we can't give up foreknowledge → determinism
- 4 **Albo**: return to reconcilability; analysis of the meaning of free choice.

The *Sefer* (publ. 1485)

Goals:

- general apologetics for Judaism and refutation of Christianity
- addresses the concern of the relation between Judaic faith and (Aristotelian) philosophy

Largely exegetical work; emphasis on Biblical examples (Binding of Isaac, Hardening of Pharaoh's Heart, the Book of Job).

Extremely influential in the subsequent centuries (the first Jewish philosophical book to reach the printing press!).



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Multiple kinds of repentance:

- ① From love
- ② From fear
 - ① From fear of God's punishment
 - ② From fear of God

All of these are free acts, and (2.1) does not merit any reward.
But what is freedom, then?

Praise and blame only applies to acts done freely. (What about mixed acts?)

Free Acts

“It seems therefore that we should define a voluntary act as follows: Any act a person does which, at the time of doing it, he desires and prefers to something else, and which, after it is done, he desires to maintain, i. e. desires it to have been done, must be classified as voluntary, even though at the beginning there is some element of compulsion” (p. 6).

3 conditions of free choice:

- 1 there are alternatives
- 2 the choice is made knowingly
- 3 the choice is maintained after it's done

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Some Test Cases



Hardening of the
Pharaoh's heart



Binding of Isaac



Book of Job

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Concepts of Freedom

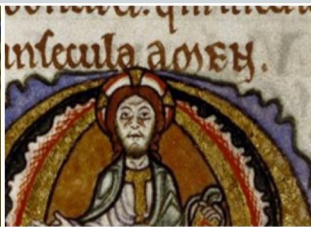
- **Augustine**: free will is a power for opposites (FCW 2.18, 3.1)
- **Boethius**: rational creatures must have choice, but need not be able to do otherwise.
- **Anselm (OFC)**: “Freedom of choice is the power to preserve rectitude of will for the sake of rectitude itself.” (OFC 3, p. 36).
- **Al-Ghazali**: free will is what can discriminate and choose between altogether similar things.
- **Aquinas**: free will is rational deliberation about the best means to a desired end.
- **Henry**: the will is free because it moves itself.
- **Scotus**: the will is free because it can will otherwise *even when it wills*.
- **Marguerite**: we are free when we don't have a will!
- **Albo**: our choice is free if (1) we choose among alternatives, (2) knowingly, and (3) desire to maintain the act.

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Free Will in Medieval Philosophy

- complicated!
- strong theological tradition + new philosophy/science
 - **What to do with it?**
 - 1 **Arabic world:** Avicenna (Ibn Sina) vs. Al-Ghazali
 - 2 **Christian world:** strong Aristotelians (Aquinas) vs. “conservative theologians” (Henry?); condemnations in Paris
 - 3 **Jewish world:** Maimonides vs. Crescas
- They share the conviction that we have a faculty of free will by which we make choices (again, this is something very new, as compared to Aristotle!).
- They are all concerned with the problem of how this free will is possible – worries about theological determinism.

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