

# Where is Paradise? The Psychological Foundations of the Idea of Afterlife in Medieval Islamic and Jewish Thought

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## Introduction

Maimonides was accused of heresy almost immediately after his death in 1204. His books were burnt by the “orthodox” members of the Jewish community in Spain, who claimed that Maimonides did not believe in the doctrine of bodily resurrection. Al-Ghazali (d. 1111) levelled the same charge against the Muslim philosophers, namely, al-Farabi and Avicenna, in his book *The Incoherence of the Philosophers*. Both Avicenna and Maimonides considered the state of ultimate happiness as the eternal bliss of the soul which leaves the body untouched, and they viewed it as the union between the individual and the active intellect.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper I would like to establish that the controversy concerning bodily resurrection which occurred in the 12<sup>th</sup>–13<sup>th</sup> centuries, was prefigured in both Jewish and Islamic thinkers of the 10<sup>th</sup> century. In my demonstration I will rely on four sources: 1) Saadya Gaon’s *Book of Beliefs and Convictions*;<sup>2</sup> 2) Al-Qirqisānī’s *Book of Lights and Watchtowers*;<sup>3</sup> 3) *The Epistles of the Sincere Brethren*;<sup>4</sup> and the treatise written by Elkhanan ben Abraham, entitled *The Foundation of the World*.<sup>5</sup>

I will argue that in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, two basic models were dominant in both the Jewish and Islamic reflections on Paradise (i.e. the ultimate undisturbed happiness of the human soul). The first model regards paradise as a physical realm created in the future wherein body and soul are rewarded together; the second model considers it as a purely spiritual realm which co-exists with the visible world, although in a manner

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1 The most recent article comparing the notion of paradise in the works of Avicenna and Maimonides is that of Stroumsa, S., “True Felicity”: Paradise in the Thought of Avicenna and Maimonides, in: *Medieval Encounters* 4, 1998, Brill, Leiden-Boston-Köln, 51–75.

2 *Kitāb al-Amānāt wa-’l-’I’tiqādāt* [Judeo-Arabic text with Hebrew translation]. Qafih, Y. (ed.), Jerusalem 1970.

3 *Kitāb al-Anwār wa-’l-Marāqib*. Code of Karaite Law, by Ya’qūb al-Qirqisānī, edited from Manuscripts in the State Public Library in Leningrad and the British Museum at London, Nemoy, L. (ed.), New York 1940.

4 *Rasā’il Ikhwān aṣ-Ṣafā’ wa-Khillān al-wafā’*. Paris-Beyrouth 1995.

5 Elkhanan ben Abraham, *The Foundation of the World* [Yesöd ‘Olam]. In: Kaufmann, D., *Studien über Salomon Ibn Gabirol*. Budapest 1899.

that is inaccessible to most. The first model can be characterized as cosmological, since it implies a whole new creation at the end of time; whereas the second one can be described as psychological, given the fact that it affects the individual soul as a kind of illumination, and does not imply visible physical changes. Otherwise said, the Jewish and Muslim thinkers, theologians and philosophers discussed the topic of the afterlife in two basic manners: (1) using temporal-spatial categories in terms of an *afterlife*, and (2) in terms of a purely spiritual realm which co-exists with the physical world, i.e. in terms of an *otherworld*.

The two pairs of words used in Arabic and in Hebrew reflect this duality. The first opposition, that of the visible and invisible realms (Arabic: *‘ālam al-šāhid*, *‘ālam al-ġayb*, Hebrew: *nir’eh*, *nistar* ‘visible and hidden (realm)’) is based on a distinction of an epistemological nature, which entails the fact that human knowledge is limited. Thus, the invisible world refers to things and events remote and unknowable in terms of space and time. The realm of future, i.e. the time which is hidden or the world of angels, can be described as both “hidden or invisible”, given the fact that both are inaccessible to our knowledge.

The second distinction, that between ‘this world’ and ‘the hereafter’ (Arabic: *dunyā*, *ākhirā*, Hebrew: *ha-‘olam ha-ze*, *ha-‘olam ha-bā’* ‘this world and the world to come’), is of an ontological nature. In Arabic, these terms have both temporal and spatial implications: ‘this world below and the one that is beyond it, hereafter’. The Hebrew equivalents, on the other hand, reflect a purely temporal distinction: ‘this world and the world to come’.

### The Notion of *Afterlife* in Saadya’s Book of Beliefs and Convictions

This first masterpiece of Jewish rational theology (*kalām*), composed in 933, devotes three treatises to the topic of afterlife. Treatise 7, ‘Concerning the Resurrection of the Dead in This World’ (*fī ihyā’ al-mawtā fī dār ad-dunyā*, 218–236), has survived in two versions. The Medieval Hebrew translation of Yudah ibn Tibbon<sup>6</sup> can be traced back to a version differing from that of the extant Judeo-Arabic manuscripts. This treatise concerns the demonstration of the necessity of the resurrection of the dead at the time of Israel’s redemption. Herein, Saadya also outlines the laws according to which the Biblical text needs to be interpreted, and he proves that the Bible contains explicit indications of the doctrine of bodily resurrection which must be understood in a non-allegorical sense.

The 8<sup>th</sup> treatise (*fī-’l-furqān*, ‘About [the Notion of] Redemption’, 237–260) considers the topic of redemption. It enumerates the Scriptural passages dealing with the duration of the exile and the promises made concerning Israel’s redemption. In Saadya’s view, history will proceed in one of two directions, dependant upon the repentance or non-repentance of Israel: if Israel repents, the Messiah descended from

6 *Sēfer ha-Emunōt we-ha-De’ōt*. Leipzig 1859, 132–146.

David will redeem the people for all their sufferings in the past. In the event that the foreordained term of the exile is completed, and Israel has not repented, God will send the Messiah descended from Joseph, who will lead the Israelites in war against the nations and be slain, whereupon great misfortunes will come upon the Jewish nation. At the end of the fifteenth chapter, arguments are enumerated against the Christians who claim that the Messiah had appeared in the days of the Second Temple.

The 9<sup>th</sup> treatise (*fī- 'th-thawāb wa- 'l- 'iqāb fī dār al-ākhirā*, 'About Reward and Punishment in the World to Come', 261–296) concerns the nature of reward and punishment in the world to come. After having established the inevitability of the existence of a hereafter in which men will be requited for their conduct on earth, Saadya depicts in detail the world to come. This treatise tackles the notions of place and time in the hereafter, the differences of gradation among the righteous and the wicked, and the corresponding gradation of their reward and punishment.

For Saadya, the differentiation between the notions of [worldly] *redemption* (Arabic *furqān*, Hebrew *yešū 'a*) and *resurrection* in the hereafter (Arabic *iḥyā' al-mawtā*, Hebrew *teḥiyat ha-mētim*) appears to be of paramount importance. He notes that certain people confuse the two concepts, and thus asserted the necessity to give them appropriate definitions. In his view, *redemption* refers to the positive end of human history, i.e., the Messianic Age brought about by the repentance of Israel. Its eventual occurrence is established on the basis of prophecies and it is seen as parallel to the 'first redemption' (the deliverance of the people of Israel from Egypt).

*Resurrection*, on the other hand, implies the occurrence of a "new creation" wherein God recreates all humans by reuniting their souls and bodies. According to the opinion of both Jewish and Muslim rationalist thinkers, the *resurrection* of the bodies appears to be an absolutely necessary event, in the sense that the justice of God necessitates the recompensation of the apparent injustices in this world. Between these two groups though, there is one noteworthy difference: amongst the Jewish thinkers, the act of the *redemption* appears to be necessary only in the case where the people of Israel repent their sins and return to God. Without this repentance, and as opposed to the ushering in of the Messianic Age, a series of catastrophes and apocalyptic scenes are predicted which would put a violent end to the existing world.

According to Saadya, the Messianic Age implies neither a radically new creation, nor the introduction of a "new space" and of a "new time". It simply means a kind of a Paradise on earth, the return of the Jews to the Biblical land, the rebuilding of the Temple, the existence of widespread prophecy inside the Jewish nation, and the visible appearance of the Divine Light (*šekhīnah*).

The two most significant features of the afterlife are its occurrence in the undefined future and its being understood in terms of a perfect recompensation for the human deeds committed in the past. Thus, the 'afterlife' appears to function as a continuation and completion of the life in this world. The notion of time underlying both this world and the hereafter exhibits two main characteristics in Saadya's thought: (1) it is linear and (2) it is connected to bodily existence.

(1) Time as such is composed of three periods: past, present and future. As the present is shorter than any moment of time, it is best represented as a point.<sup>7</sup> The present is in a constant forward motion, in such a way that “every day that elapses of the time of the revolution of the sphere constitutes an increase in past time and a diminution of the time to come”.<sup>8</sup> (2) The very definition of time is connected to physical existence: it is defined as ‘the duration of existing things’ (*baqā’ al-mawǧūdāt*),<sup>9</sup> or as the ‘period of the duration of the bodies’ (*muddat baqā’ al-aǧsām*).<sup>10</sup> Time is also finite, at least concerning its beginning: it did not exist prior to the creation of the world.

The two characteristics of time described above will prevail in the period of the hereafter as well: it will be linear and since the bodies of humans will be recreated in an unperishable form, it will be of an eternal duration. In a general way, we may state that the afterlife is represented by Saadya as a perfect replica of this world, perfect in the sense that the elements will be recreated in an indestructible form.

The notions of place and time are interconnected in Saadya in such a manner that time always refers to the duration of the existence of a certain body which occupies a certain place. In the infinite period of the hereafter, this interconnection will remain the unchanged. Thus, while the elements constituting the world will be radically altered, time, as such, will remain an auxiliary notion, i.e., that which measures their existence.

### The Concept of *Afterlife* in Ya‘qūb al-Qirqisānī

Ya‘qūb al-Qirqisānī, the most prominent Karaite thinker of the 10<sup>th</sup> century, composed his main work in 936, three years after Saadya completed the *Book of Beliefs and Convictions*. The *Book of Lights and Watchtowers* (*Kitāb al-Anwār wa-’l-Marāqib*) is a comprehensive code of the Karaite law. A large part of this book survived and was published in four volumes by Nemoy. In the second volume a large passage of about 70 pages treats the topic of the afterlife. Given the fact that both Saadya and al-Qirqisānī are considered to be leading rationalist thinkers of their time, a comparison of their respective thought systems might be fruitful.

In general, it can be said that al-Qirqisānī’s basic tone in the *Book of Lights* is much more exegetical in nature than that of Saadya. This may be due to the fact that al-Qirqisānī belonged to the group of the Karaites, a purificationist movement inside Judaism, which disregarded the religious importance of the oral post-Biblical tradition and suggested rather that each believer should read and comment on the text of the Bible.

<sup>7</sup> *Book of Beliefs and Convictions*, 38.

<sup>8</sup> *Book of Beliefs and Convictions*, 63.

<sup>9</sup> *Book of Beliefs and Convictions*, 73.

<sup>10</sup> *Book of Beliefs and Convictions*, 106–107.

At the beginning of the passage dealing with the topic of the afterlife, al-Qirḳisānī remarks that both the Torah and the works of the great philosophers, e.g., Aristotle, needed commentaries. Just as the text of the Pentateuch was commented upon by the prophets, so Aristotle was introduced by Alexander Aphrodisias, Porphyry and by John the Grammarian.<sup>11</sup> This remark of al-Qirḳisānī suggests that in the subsequent part of his book he presents us with his view on the notion of afterlife which, on the one hand, is justified by the text of the Bible and, on the other hand, by analogical conclusions (*qiyās*). For instance, one of his arguments for the existence of a hereafter is similar to that of a rationalist approach to the problem: he asserts that the existence of a hereafter, wherein each soul gets its recompensation, can be justified by the apparent fact that the life of the wicked person may be longer and more pleasant than that of the pious.<sup>12</sup>

Al-Qirḳisānī also argues for the existence of the hereafter based on the exegesis of the text of Genesis which describes Paradise (*ḡanna*). Significantly, according to this passage, God did not demolish the Garden of Eden after the first couple was expelled from it. Moreover, the fact that God placed guardian angels at the gate of the garden means that one day it will be repopulated.<sup>13</sup> According to al-Qirḳisānī, the *Garden of Eden* is the place of eternal life which no mortal may enter. But as God does nothing in vain, that the garden is prepared and ready, although well guarded, implies that at some point in the future immortal people will dwell it. Conversely, according to Saadya, the place of the pious in the afterlife is called *Garden of Eden* only in an allegorical way.

The most important difference between the eschatology of Saadya and that of al-Qirḳisānī appears to be the fact that for Saadya the realm of the hereafter can be described as one endless period of time; whereas for al-Qirḳisānī, after the resurrection of the bodies, the hereafter consists of two distinct periods. While both periods can be termed the ‘hereafter’ (*ākhirā*), they are significantly different. During the first phase, bodies and souls will be reunited and punished and rewarded together; in the second period, which follows the collapse of the physical realm, only God and the souls of the virtuous remain in a timeless, eternal state:

The recompensation of the individuals happens in two ways, both of which [occur] in the hereafter. The first [recompensation] takes place after the return of the souls (*arwāḥ*) to their bodies, in Paradise or in Hell, as we have explained above. This period will last until the end of the time ordained to the world, at which time all the bodies will be destroyed, as will be the space and time which are connected to the bodies. The second [recompensation] consists of the eternal survival of the souls belonging to the above mentioned bodies in a timeless state (*baqā’ fī-’d-dahr*) which is not cut by motion and will never end,

<sup>11</sup> *Book of Lights and Watchtowers*, 223.

<sup>12</sup> For example, in the Book of Beliefs and Convictions, Saadya argues that all the apparent injustices on God’s part in this world necessitate recompense in the afterlife (262–263).

<sup>13</sup> *Book of Lights and Watchtowers*, 224–225.

since it is one single eternal potential (*quwwa wāḥida sarmadīyya*). There the righteous [souls] will join the order of angels and become one of them and will dwell with the heavenly host. And they will enjoy the most perfect happiness by the proximity of their Creator, be He praised and exalted.<sup>14</sup>

Thus, in agreement with Saadya, al-Qirḡisānī states that the injustice in the visible world necessitates some kind of a recompensation which will take place in the afterlife. This recompensation is twofold: (1) after the resurrection, body and soul participate together in the joy of Paradise, or in the sufferings of hell (*ḡahannam*); then, (2) after the collapse of all time and space, the souls of the virtuous will remain with God for ever in a timeless, motionless manner.

Al-Qirḡisānī notes that the “place (*makān*) in the hereafter will be the same, but the notion of time (*zamān*) will be different from that in this world”.<sup>15</sup> What does he mean by this? The ‘sameness’ of the place undoubtedly refers to his understanding of the *Garden of Eden*, the place of Paradise, as a real and concrete geographical locus which will exist after the resurrection in the same manner as now. Time, on the other hand, will be different from what it is now, since it will be eternal. The assumption that the recompensation of God is perfect (*tamm*) means that it is eternal and not temporal.<sup>16</sup> Arguably, al-Qirḡisānī makes use of a different notion of eternity than that of Saadya. As opposed to Saadya’s notion of eternity as an everlasting duration of linear time, al-Qirḡisānī speaks about an eternal, timeless bliss. According to Saadya then, eternity can be understood in terms of mere quantity, i.e., the infinity of linear time; conversely, for al-Qirḡisānī eternity implies a qualitative change in the notion of time.

In light of this, it is clear why al-Qirḡisānī refers to that period in the hereafter where bodies and souls are reunited as the ‘interim period’ *al-martaba al-wustā*.<sup>17</sup> According to him, it is nothing but a preparation for the ultimate spiritual world (*‘ālam rūḡānī*, *‘ālam al-arwāḡ*) or for what can be denoted as the ‘otherworld’. In the spiritual world or ‘otherworld’, neither body, change, nor temporality will exist and the soul of the upright will enjoy the proximity of God in a timeless manner. This eternal spiritual bliss, however, cannot be reached during one’s lifetime according to al-Qirḡisānī. It will occur only after the destruction of the physical world when, after the cessation of all motion, the angelic souls (*arwāḡ malakīyya*) of the true believers will enjoy timeless redemption (*furqān*) and joy (*farāḡ*).<sup>18</sup> According to al-Qirḡisānī, this timeless notion of eternity is described in the text of Psalm 102 and in Isa 51:6.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> *Book of Lights and Watchtowers*, 241.

<sup>15</sup> *Book of Lights and Watchtowers*, 226.

<sup>16</sup> *Book of Lights and Watchtowers*, 227.

<sup>17</sup> *Book of Lights and Watchtowers*, 257.

<sup>18</sup> *Book of Lights and Watchtowers*, 238.

<sup>19</sup> Raise your eyes to the heavens/.../ for the heavens will vanish like smoke/.../ but my salvation will last for ever. *Book of Lights*, 239.

This immaterial world of eternal bliss is totally absent in Saadya's thought. For Saadya, the being of humans without time and bodily existence is inconceivable.

### Another Model: Philosophical Techniques for reaching Paradise

This spaceless and timeless spiritual world of eternal bliss, as described by al-Qirqisānī is not entirely unlike another model of the hereafter. In opposition to the notion of the *'afterlife'* which implies the continuation of a linear time-sequence, this timeless state of eternity may be referred to as the *'otherworld'*, as noted above. With a modern terminology one could refer to it as a kind of 'mental state' in which the mind of the thinker resides, or as a type of intellectual bliss attained by the philosopher. Dissimilar to the notion of the 'afterlife' of the rationalists, this 'otherworld' is uncreated and in religious terms can be described as 'the proximity of God' (*qurb allāh*) or as a 'spiritual world' (*'ālam rūhānī*).

In the Middle Ages, this representation of the hereafter as the 'otherworld' was peculiar to the 'philosophers' (*falāsifa*) who stated that the hereafter does not succeed this world in a temporal way, but exists simultaneously with it. Generally speaking, it is inaccessible to humans with the exception of those whose souls are so purified that they have the ability to reside in this purely spiritual realm while still living in the body. In fact, the ultimate aim of human existence is to reach this stage of loftiness where one no longer belongs to the everchanging world. This understanding of eternal bliss is the standard description of the ultimate happiness of the soul in Neo-Platonism and in Neo-Platonized Aristotelianism, which is the basic approach of medieval Jewish and Islamic philosophy.

In opposition to the first model of the hereafter (that of Saadya's and of the so-called 'interim period' of al-Qirqisānī, wherein bodily resurrection plays an important role), this second model, that of the purely spiritual 'otherworld', displays the following characteristics: (1) It exhibits a kind of *elitism* as opposed to the egalitarianism of the first model. Only the few whose souls are purified are able to reach this spiritual realm. (2) The 'otherworld' can be reached by *individuals*. Thus, its attainment does not take place in the form of a universal judgment on the last day. (3) It is by a kind of internal illumination, which occurs in the soul separated from the body, that people gain access to the 'otherworld'. Thus, it is *psychological-spiritual* and not physical or cosmological in nature. (4) Finally, and as noted above, neither linear time nor time in general plays a role in the attainment of this purely spiritual or intellectual bliss. Rather, this model is best characterized as *atemporal*, as opposed to temporal which is a mark of the first model.

### ‘Afterlife’ as ‘Otherworld’ in the Epistles of the Sincere Brethren

‘The Sincere Brethren and the Loyal Friends’ (*Ikhwān aṣ-Ṣafā’ wa-Khillan al-Wafā’*) was a secret society in the 10<sup>th</sup> century in Basra and Baghdad. Most of their epistles are written in the first person plural, and they appear to have functioned as a type of secret society, that of the ‘elect’. Their 52 epistles are structured around one topic, the ‘vision of God’, which is the source of everlasting felicity. They can be characterized as having a ‘gnosticizing’ nature, but they offer much more than a quick way to salvation via a special type of knowledge. In fact, the Brethren attempt to build a bridge between the philosophical sciences of late Hellenism and the young Islamic culture.

In the third section of the epistles which treat the topic of the ultimate aim of all knowledge (Epistles 28–41), an entire epistle (Epistle 38) is devoted to the problem of eschatology. The core of their theory is encapsulated in the following passage: “And know, my brother, that the word ‘resurrection’ (*ba’ath*) has a complex meaning in the Arabic language and can be used in three ways. In the first place it means to ‘send’ (*arsala*), as God says: ‘And Allah sent Messengers’,<sup>20</sup> in the meaning that ‘He sent them’ (*arsalahum*). The second meaning refers to the resurrection of the dead corpses from the graves and to the coming alive (*naṣr*) of the bodies from the dust, as it is promised to the unbelievers and to those who reject God: ‘When we die and become dust and bones, could we really be raised up again?’<sup>21</sup> and God, exalted be He, said: ‘say thou: yea’. Another [the third] meaning refers to the resurrection of the ignorant soul from the slumber of negligence and to her revival from the death of ignorance, as God, praised be He, mentioned: ‘Can he who was dead, to whom we gave life, and a light whereby he can walk amongst men, be like him who is in the depths of darkness, from which he can never come out?’<sup>22</sup> or as the Exalted [God] says: ‘Then we raised you up after your death, Ye had the chance to be grateful’;<sup>23</sup> and as God said to Muhammad, praise be upon him,: ‘soon will thy Lord raise thee to a station of praise and glory’<sup>24, 25</sup>

Herein, and in the first instance, the Brethren explain the literal meaning of the word ‘resurrection’ (*ba’ath, qiyāma*). Next, they assert that in its second and third senses, it refers to the historical-cosmological and individual-psychological realms, respectively. Thus, on the first and more superficial level resurrection connotes a future event, i.e., when the heaven and earth collapse and all beings will be judged according to their deeds. In the second and allegorical sense, the notion of resurrection

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<sup>20</sup> *Qur’an*, 2: 213.

<sup>21</sup> *Qur’an*, 23: 82.

<sup>22</sup> *Qur’an*, 6: 122.

<sup>23</sup> *Qur’an*, 2: 56.

<sup>24</sup> *Qur’an*, 17: 79.

<sup>25</sup> *Epistle* 38, 246.



intends the enlightenment or illumination of the individual soul, that is, when it sees the real nature of things, not their bodily cover, but their spiritual essences.

In this passage then, we find the two models used to describe the hereafter: the physical-cosmological model of the ‘afterlife’ and that of the psychological-spiritual model of the ‘otherworld’. As outlined above, al-Qirḡisānī also makes use of both models. However, there exists a major difference between his view and that of the Brethren: for al-Qirḡisānī, the two models follow each other in a temporal succession; whereas in the view of the Brethren, the two models coexist. According to al-Qirḡisānī, the collapse and destruction of the physical world precedes the formation of the purely spiritual ‘otherworld’ in a temporal manner. For the Brethren, on the other hand, the two models function as the expression of the views of the general population and of the elect: the rationalists (*al-muwahḥida*) and those who have an understanding of the notion of the afterlife based on simple belief or on intellectual endeavours adopt the first model; whereas the ‘elite’, i.e., those few who have had a direct experience of the ‘hereafter’ (*afḍal al-‘ulamā’*, or *awliyā’ allāh*), understand it in terms of an ‘otherworld’.

The ‘otherworld’ is described as the luminous, purely spiritual world of the soul. This world, situated in the heavens, among the stars (*‘ālam al-aflāk wa-sa‘at as-samawāt*), is identified with Paradise as depicted in the Qur’an.<sup>26</sup> The ‘otherworld’ experience of Paradise belong to a gnostic elite. Those whose souls are awakened from the ‘slumber of negligence’ (*nawm al-ḡafla*) see God everywhere with their internal vision in a timeless and spaceless manner.

“And know, my brother, that those who expect (*muntazirūn*) the world to come can be divided into two groups: one of them expects its happening in the future, when the heavens and the earth collapse. These people do not know but the sensible things (*al-maḥsūsāt*) and the corporeal substances (*al-ḡismānīyyāt*), and they do not see but the apparent state of things (*mā zahara*). The other group, on the other hand, expects it as an illumination, a manifestation and as a clear knowledge (*kaṣḡan wa-bayānan wa-ittilā‘an ‘alayhā*). And these people know the intelligibles (*al-ma‘qūla*), the spiritual substances (*al-ḡawāhir ar-rūḡānīyya*), and the states of the soul (*al-ḡālāt an-nafṡānīyya*).”<sup>27</sup>

This basic two layered stance offers an opportunity for the Brethren to incorporate two traditions which otherwise would exclude each other: (1) the cosmological-temporal understanding of the ‘afterlife’ which is expressed by the rationalists and is based upon a literal reading of both the Qur’an and the Bible; and (2) the

<sup>26</sup> Epistle 38, 244.

<sup>27</sup> Epistle 38, 241.

psychological notion of the invisible spiritual realm, in terms of ‘otherworld’, which is hidden, immaterial, uncreated and attainable only for exceptionally purified souls.<sup>28</sup>

### *Elkhanan ben Abraham*

The fourth view on the notion of the ‘afterlife’ to be examined is that of Elkhanan ben Abraham, a Neo-Platonic Jewish philosopher from 14<sup>th</sup> century Spain. Little is known of his life and works as there remains only one extant treatise entitled ‘The Foundation of the World’. The text is mystical in nature and univocally negates the future aspect of the afterlife. He claims to follow the Empedoclean<sup>29</sup> tradition in asserting that: “...Indeed, who thinks that there is a gap between the destruction of this world and the beginning of the hereafter, by saying this, commits a mistake. On the contrary, the one is linked to the other...”<sup>30</sup>

In comparison with the three thinkers examined above, this opinion appears to be the most extreme. Unlike the Sincere Brethren, Elkhanan ben Abraham refuses the notion of the ‘afterlife’ which is supported on the basis of the testimony of the Scripture. Rather, he argues that the ‘otherworld’ is attained only through the return of the individual soul and intellect to God, and their continuous contemplation of the divine essence as He pours his light on the soul, thereby unifying the individual soul with the divine intellect.<sup>31</sup>

The contemplation of one’s soul detached from all corporeal pollution is the manner by which the soul reaches the divine world. Thus, the dualism of body and soul or of the physical and the spiritual realms plays a decisive role in his thought: “...We have the duty to examine our soul which resides in us and to observe its nature. But this does not mean the investigation of the soul situated in a body full of desires and of perverse inclinations.... The soul, after its renouncement of these vices, becomes pure in this body, and it is so as if it were not there [in the body], and detached from it.”<sup>32</sup>

This extremist model regarding the otherworld as mental state did not begin with Elkhanan ben Abraham, although he appears to present the clearest formulation of it. Yudah ibn Gabirol (1058–1070), the leading Neo-Platonic thinker of Judaism, presents a similar view of the ‘otherworld’, though without overtly negating the validity of the model of the ‘afterlife’ based on Biblical exegesis.

28 Although this concept of the ‘otherworld’ prevails in Neo-Platonic authors, the motif of the so-called ‘heavenly trips’ (purely spiritual journeys to the divine realm) equally exists in the Jewish and Islamic traditions untouched by Neo-Platonic thought, e.g., the story of *isra*’ in Islam, and the *ma’ asē merkabhah* literature in Judaism.

29 The most recent monograph on Pseudo-Empedocles is that of De Smet, D., *Empedocles Arabus, Une lecture neoplatonicienne tardive*. Brussels 1998.

30 *Yesōd ‘Olam*, paragraph 22, 220.

31 *Yesōd ‘Olam*, paragraph 22, 220..

32 *Yesōd ‘Olam*, paragraph 39, 230.

The otherworld is timeless in the same way as the ‘spiritual world’ in the Sincere Brethren, and stands in a sharp opposition to the visible material world. Elkhanan ben Abraham argues that the very existence of time generated by the constant changes in the physical world means trouble and suffering: “...we can state that felicity, joy and happiness are in the eternity and this implies a world without time and without instants. But in this world this is not the situation...”<sup>33</sup>

The history of both Jewish and Islamic thought exhibits a constant tension between the two models. The temporal-cosmological representation of the hereafter has always been the mainstream version used by the theologians, while the purely spiritual model has been attributed to a relatively small numbers of mystics and philosophers. In a purely philosophical way, we may argue that this duality in the representation of the notion of the ‘hereafter’ corresponds to the existence of two traditions in which the notion of time is understood, not only in Judaism and in Islam, but in a general way: (1) the understanding of time as linear, flowing from past to future, which implies the existence of one single reality, and (2) the concept of a multi-layered time, in the sense that beyond the linear time marked by the constant changes of the physical world there exists a realm of motionless eternity.

In the last part of this paper, I would like to argue that the understanding of afterlife/otherworld of our medieval authors is related to their understanding of the nature of the soul. Those, who define the soul as the form, or the perfection of the human body, will adhere to the understanding of the hereafter in terms of a physical-temporal unity. Those, on the other hand, who define the soul as ‘its own spiritual world’ will describe the hereafter as the timeless spiritual realm of ultimate felicity.

## The Psychological Foundations of the Concepts of ‘Afterlife’ and ‘Otherworld’

### *Saadya*

The human soul created simultaneously with the completion of the form of man,<sup>34</sup> is the place where the process of cognition, and thus the establishment and the absorption of convictions, occurs.<sup>35</sup> It is endowed with intellect (*‘aql*) and wisdom (*ḥikma*), and therefore is charged with the observance of divine commandments.<sup>36</sup> In treatise 6 of

<sup>33</sup> *Yesōd ‘Olam*, paragraph 11, 214.

<sup>34</sup> *ma’ kamāl šūrat al-insān* (Book of Beliefs and Convictions, 199).

<sup>35</sup> On the highest level of the process of cognition the soul becomes united with the truth it absorbs: “When a person has achieved the knowledge (*ma’rifā*) of this lofty subject by means of rational speculation (*bi-ṭarīq an-naẓar*) and the proof of miracles and marvels..., his soul believes it as true and it is mingled with his spirit and becomes an inmate of his innermost recesses” (*Book of Beliefs and Convictions*, 111).

<sup>36</sup> *Book of Beliefs and Convictions*, 262. Moreover, the concept of the Creator is implanted in the soul as immediate knowledge (*ma’qūl*), although intellectual speculation is necessary for its articulation and understanding. (*Book of Beliefs and Convictions*, 111).

the *Book of Beliefs and Convictions*, which is consecrated to the notion of the soul, Saadya draws a clear comparison between the difficulties encountered during the inquiry into the science of the soul, into that of the creation ex nihilo, and into that of the knowledge of the real nature of the Creator.<sup>37</sup> The rational faculty (*tamyīz*), which is the center of the tripartite soul, performs the act of cognition through its essence, however, it needs a material tool for its appearance and function.<sup>38</sup>

In the *Book of Beliefs and Convictions* Saadya overtly asserts that the soul and the body constitute a single agent.<sup>39</sup> The Talmudic parable of the two watchmen, one of them lame, the other blind,<sup>40</sup> serves as a proof for this assertion. Thus, the body serves as a necessary instrument for the performance of both good and bad deeds and both are equally subjected to eternal reward and punishment.

### Al-Qirqisānī

According to the view of al-Qirqisānī the soul (*rūḥ*) can by no means be considered as an accident of the body, rather it is a living substance (*ḡawḥar ḥayya*), which can be described as eternal.<sup>41</sup> He insists that in the hereafter they have to be punished, or rewarded together, since in this world as well they exist in a united form.<sup>42</sup> Thus, certain souls will dwell in the bundle of life (*sirar al-ḥayat*) in the highest heavens, in the proximity of God, while other souls will be wandering about (*ḡawwāl*).<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, as we have mentioned above, the hereafter according to him consists of two periods: first divine recompensation takes place in a physical manner in the *Garden of Eden*, which is a concrete geographical place. But after the collapse of heaven and earth and the ultimate destruction of the categories of space and time, the soul of the virtuous will remain with God in the same manner as the angelic souls (*arwāḥ malakīyya*), thus in a pure spiritual state.<sup>44</sup>

In spite of some minor differences, Saadya's model of the soul is not completely dissimilar from that of al-Qirqisānī. Both authors are labelled as rationalist as far as

37 *Book of Beliefs and Convictions*, 197.

38 *Book of Beliefs and Convictions*, 208 Although the soul is stronger and more subtle than the body, it requires the latter as a means of execution in obedience to the commands of God, for the increase of its bliss. In the hereafter they will be punished and rewarded together, since the soul, like the element of fire, needs to be conjoined with another element in order to appear (*Book of Beliefs and Convictions*, 205).

39 *Book of Beliefs and Convictions*, 209.

40 According to the story a king who had an orchard stationed two watchmen, one a lame man and the other a blind man in the orchard. The two guardians decided to steal from the fruits of the orchard, but the blind was unable to see the fruits, while the lame was unable to reach them. Finally, they succeeded, while the lame stood on the shoulder of the blind. The king, after having discovered their deed punished both of them equally, since they performed the misdeed in cooperation (Sanh.91a).

41 *Book of Lights and Watchtowers*, 227.

42 *Book of Lights and Watchtowers*, 228.

43 *Book of Lights and Watchtowers*, 240.

44 *Book of Lights and Watchtowers*, 241.

they exhibit a vivid interest in the role of sensual experience. The difference they display when they touch upon the topic of the hereafter correspond to the differences between their respective psychologies: al-Qirqisānī emphasizes more the dualistic nature of the soul and its ability to experience felicity and pain while detached from the body, while Saadya univocally negates the possibility of the disembodied soul to feel sorrow and pain.

### The Sincere Brethren

The main difference between the psychology of those who line up with the spiritual ‘otherworld’ model of the hereafter and those who believe in the material temporal model is that the first group attributes a paramount significance to the introspection of the soul. In fact, they claim that the Creator and the soul share the same nature, thus, the knowledge of the Divine can be realized exclusively by the knowledge of the soul.

The Delphic maxim<sup>45</sup> is frequently and extensively quoted in the Epistles: “who knows himself knows his Lord”;<sup>46</sup> “the first degree in divine sciences is the knowledge of the substance of the soul”;<sup>47</sup> or, “the beginning of all real science stands in man’s knowledge of his soul”.<sup>48</sup> In fact, the human soul contains all the knowledge of the world<sup>49</sup> and, at the same time, the soul is the closest subject to man.<sup>50</sup> The one who does not know his soul is like the one who feeds someone else while he is hungry,<sup>51</sup> and if he is not cognizant of the substance of the soul it is equal to unbelief.<sup>52</sup> Moreover, the knowledge of his soul enables man to measure all sensible objects (*maḥsūsāt*) and to infer (*yastadill*) on all the intelligible notions (*ma‘qūlāt*) in both worlds.<sup>53</sup> The smartness of the soul and the purity of its substance are the bases of all knowledge,<sup>54</sup> and at a certain point the soul may gain an insight into its essence and thus know its own substance.<sup>55</sup>

45 On the Delphic maxim in Medieval Jewish and Arabic philosophy see the article of Altmann, A., The Delphic Maxim in Medieval Islam and Judaism, In: Altmann, A. (ed), *Biblical and Other Studies*. Cambridge (Ma) 1963, 196–232.

46 *man ‘arafa naḥsahu fa-qad ‘arafa rabbahu* (Epistle 40, 375), or “the more one knows his soul the more he knows his Lord” (Epistle 48, 193).

47 *awwal darağat al-‘ulūm al-ilāhīyya ma‘rifat ġawhar an-naḥs* (Epistle 2, 76).

48 *ifitāḥ ġamī‘ al-‘ulūm al-ḥaqīqīyya huwa fī ma‘rifā al-insān naḥsahu* (Epistle 29, 34), also Epistle 26, 462.

49 *al-‘ulūm kulluhā fī-‘n-naḥs bi-‘l-quwwa fa-idhā fakkarat bi-dhātihā wa-‘arafathā sārāt al-‘ulūm kulluhā fīhā bi-‘l-fī‘l* ‘potentially, all knowledge is in the soul and if the soul thinks of its essence, and gets to know it, all the knowledge contained in it becomes actual’ (Epistle 24, 416).

50 *naḥs al-insān aqrab ilayhi min kull qarīb* (Epistle 48, 193).

51 Epistle 23, 378.

52 Epistle 29, 61.

53 Epistle 32, 188.

54 *dhakā‘ an-naḥs wa-ṣafā‘ ġawharihā wa-hiya-l-aṣl fī ġamī‘ al-ma‘arīf* (Epistle 46, 63).

55 *an-naḥs taṣṭabšir dhātahā wa-ta‘raf ġawharahā* (Epistle 48, 185).

The *Brethren* negate the view of the materialists (*ḡismīyyūn*), according to whom the soul is made by nature (*min fi'l aṭ-ṭabī'a*) and that of most of the Muslim rationalists, who hold that it is the direct result of an act of the Creator (*min fi'l al-bārī*).<sup>56</sup> In the opinion of the *Brethren*, the soul occupies an intermediary position: vis-a-vis its internal faculties it stands in connection with the Creator, the angels, and with immaterial forms, whereas in virtue of its external senses it is linked to the material (*huyūlā*), to nature (*ṭabī'a*) and to bodies (*aḡsām*).<sup>57</sup> Elsewhere they assert that the soul has two sides: the one turning towards the intellect, which is represented by the sun, and the other turning towards nature, which is illustrated by the moon.<sup>58</sup>

### *Elkhanan ben Abraham*

The treatise entitled *The Foundation of the World* (*Yesōd 'Olam*), the only work attributed to Elkhanan ben Abraham is only 37 pages long. However, it provides sufficient proof that the author appears to be more gnosticizing and much more a dualist in nature concerning the connection between soul and body than the *Sincere Brethren*. While the *Brethren* fully accept the external sensual and rational activities of the soul, Elkhanan ben Abraham univocally discredits them. In his view the soul has a simple option: either it observes its own luminous and radiant substance which is 'its own world', or it becomes intermingled with the physical world and thereby lost in it.<sup>59</sup>

As a result of the inward orientation of the soul, it perceives itself to contain the wholeness of space: "...the soul is not situated in a defined moment and in a concrete space, but rather the space is situated in it, while it is larger and vaster than the space. The proof for this is the dream: when one dreams he sees the spiritual beings and his own soul joining that other world..."<sup>60</sup>

It is a characteristic tenet of the thought of Elkhanan ben Abraham and of the Neo-Platonizing and mystical authors as well that the luminous spiritual world attained by the introspection of the soul plays the same role as the concept of the 'afterlife' in the more externally oriented rationalists and orthodox theologians. The apparent injustice, pain and suffering of this world is counterebalanced and corrected in an other realm. This realm is described by the rationalists in temporal and physical terms as 'afterlife', while the Neo-Platonic authors describe it in spatial terms as located in the soul and being identical to it.

"...There [in the other world], the space and the object situated in the space are the one and the same. This means that the soul is radiant and its world consists of simple

<sup>56</sup> *Epistle* 23, 394–395.

<sup>57</sup> *Epistle* 24, 415.

<sup>58</sup> *Epistle* 49, 215.

<sup>59</sup> *Yesōd 'Olam*, paragraph 38, 230.

<sup>60</sup> *Yesōd 'Olam*, paragraph 17, 218.

light as far as it is directed towards this other world. In its world there is neither time, nor motion. And since there is no time and no motion there, there is no change from one thing to the other either, and the fact that there is no change there implies that it [the soul] is both space and substance, given the fact that the soul and its world are one single existent...<sup>61</sup>

At this point, the notion of eternity loses its temporality, it is no more the continuation of the physical time, but it becomes the motionless entirely spiritual realm which is represented by al-Qirqisānī as the state of the existents after the collapse of the physical world, and by the *Sincere Brethren* as the view of the elected about the concept of the hereafter.

## Conclusion

In this paper I argued that the two models applied in the representation of the hereafter correspond to the two orientations the soul may take in Muslim and Jewish medieval thought. Namely, in case if the soul is represented as having an outward orientation focusing on the external world, the notion of the 'hereafter' will be described as physical and temporal, whereas, in case if the soul is engaged in the observation of its own substance, the 'hereafter' is depicted as purely spiritual and timeless. To put it in other words, the apparent opposition between the two imageries applied in the description of the hereafter can be solved by the fact that while describing the 'hereafter', the soul applies the same language as it applies in its more direct investigations. Thus, in case if the soul is directed towards the external world of the accidents, it is in the terms used for the description of the physical world that it describes the 'hereafter' as well, whereas, in case if the soul's dominant activity is introspection, it tends to represent the 'hereafter' as being a non-temporal, purely spiritual realm.

I have also attempted to prove that in the works of both Maimonides and Avicenna, the differences from one work to the other in describing the 'hereafter' reflect a problem which already existed in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Undoubtedly, they were familiar with both traditions described above and with the tensions existing between them. It is likely that both philosophers recognized that the purely spiritual, timeless view of the 'otherworld' is highly elitist in nature and that as such it could not represent a general outline for all the members of the community. They were, no doubt, also aware of the fact that the purely inward orientation of the soul entails ethical difficulties as it overlooks interpersonal relations. Therefore, while in the case of certain individuals it may serve as a viable method to attain the 'hereafter', it does not represent a general model for an entire community.

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<sup>61</sup> *Yesōd 'Olam*, paragraph 25, 222.