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Editor's Foreword

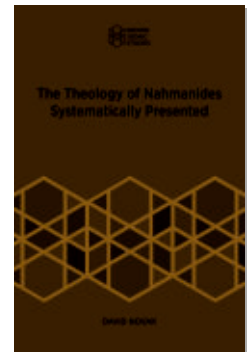
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Editor's Foreword

This volume is the second of the Studies in Medieval Judaism series within Brown Judaic Studies. The author, David Novak, one of the foremost living exponents of Jewish theology and social thought, here examines the ideas of Rabbi Moses ben Nahman (1194-1270), the Ramban, Nahmanides in the European literature. An exegete, epistemologist of Jewish history and experience, and pioneer of Kabbalistic reasoning, Nahmanides was the spokesperson of embattled Spanish Jewry at the ominous Barcelona disputation before King James of Aragon in 1263. He was the first major rabbi to treat resettlement of the Land of Israel as a Biblical commandment. Inspired by the ideal of the poet philosopher Judah Halevi, whose theories of Jewish history and destiny so influenced his own, Nahmanides left an increasingly anti-Jewish Spain and spent his final years in the Land of Israel.

Like many of his contemporaries, Nahmanides found himself in opposition to the bold rationalism of Maimonides (1135-1204). He was a Talmudist who found limitless scope in exploration of the canon that Maimonides saw not as an end in itself but as a guide to the material, moral and spiritual fulfillment of his people. The present book calls out frequent examples of Nahmanides' explicit and implicit criticism of Maimonidean positions. But in the controversy that surrounded Maimonides' halakhic and philosophic writings after his death, Nahmanides sought a moderating and conciliating role, urging dispassionate judgment, defending anti-Maimonists from the zeal of their detractors, while also supporting Maimonides' thesis that God transcends physicality against those who couched the extremity of their reaction to philosophy in affirmations of divine corporeality.

Nahmanides saw more clearly than many that even for those who might reach conclusions at variance with the themes to which Maimonides' thought had led him, it was Maimonides who laid out the problematics of Jewish philosophy most decisively and who framed the issues as all subsequent thinkers would have to confront them. Although his sympathies leaned strongly in the direction of history, revelation, and experience, as

counterweights to the rationalistic faith of the Rambam, Nahmanides was never an adversary of reason. His aim was to soften and supplement its claims from the rich store of prophetic experience and rabbinic thought. His exegetical impulses were pluralistic and open-minded; and his creative work in kabbalistic exegesis—above all, in promulgating and developing the ancient theme that the life of the commandments allows us to participate in the life of God, and indeed contributes to that life—springs from a wholesome and rationalistic desire to situate the commandments within a comprehensive cosmology, ontology and axiology. So there is no paradox in Joseph Sarachek's observation that, "It was a cabalist, Nahmanides, who saved Maimonides in the hectic days of 1232." Indeed, the Kabbalah itself is a vehicle of Maimonidean and more broadly neoplatonic philosophical themes.

What David Novak has done here is to survey the canon of Nahmanides' writings—commentaries, discourses, sermons, even the record made by the Ramban of his Barcelona disputation—to elicit the structure of a systematic theology. Nahmanides, admittedly, was no system builder. As Novak shows, he often subordinated perfect consistency to the nuances he discovered in a text. He willingly sacrificed the chance to enlarge some favorite speculative theme to the material message he found in tradition. In this he reveals that penchant for the empirical that he shares not only with Halevi but with Saadiah. Like both of them, he relies on an idea of experience that is not merely personal but also communal and thus can span the generations and even rein in the exuberance of reason.

Yet we see most clearly that Nahmanides is no obscurantist and indeed no anti-rationalist, when we observe him working with a text and finding in it multiple levels of meaning, preferring the subtler, not ignoring the more obvious and accessible, and never giving preference to the merely homiletic or the purely positive over the reading that might shed light on God's inner purposes. While he is not a system builder with a capital S, Nahmanides is a coherent thinker with a distinctive repertoire of themes and commitments that emerge powerfully from David Novak's thematically sensitive selection and careful translation, arrangement and discussion of the key passages of his work. Placement of Nahmanides' thoughts on a systematic footing reveals him as a major theologian, both creative and loyal to the tradition that inspires him. This book thus fulfills its author's aim when it guides not only historical scholars but contemporary thinkers along the pathways of a rich vein of Jewish theological insight, whose internal structure and integrity are all too readily overlooked by readers who encounter Nahmanides only in the exegesis of particular verses or in the dialectics of some historic debate. It shows us a Nahmanides still capable, after seven hundred years, of contributing vitally to Jewish theology as a living enterprise and a continuing adventure.

Lenn E. Goodman
Manoa Valley, September 1992