Hasdai Crescas: Grounds for Assertions about God and the Philosophical Use of Scripture

Miri Fenton
University of Cambridge

Dominant interpretations of Wittgenstein’s later writings on religion set up a false binary between the religious assertions that occur within a religious ‘form of life’ and philosophical assertions that operate within ordinary language.\(^1\) Though much ink has been spilled over how to define Wittgenstein’s ‘form of life,’\(^2\) dominant interpretations centre on his claim that “to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life.”\(^3\) By contrast I propose to expand the Wittgensteian model of the religious ‘form of life’ developed most explicitly in his “Lectures on Religious Belief,” where the ‘form of life’ might be considered the social, linguistic, psychological and behavioural outcomes of holding an “unshakeable belief,” which shows itself “by regulating for all in his life.”\(^4\) By mobilising resources from his later writings I hope to account for the unique place of scripture in the language of religious assertions.

I argue that scriptural exegesis bridges the gap between religious and philosophical assertions, allowing the religious ‘form of life’ to enter into philosophical language. This new model is supported and resourced by the writings of the medieval Jewish philosopher Hasdai Crescas (1340–1411),\(^5\) some of whose arguments require scriptural exegesis to make philosophical assertions. Crescas’s arguments demonstrate the possibility of philosophical assertions about God existing within a religious ‘form of life.’

In his “Lectures on Religious Belief” (1938), Wittgenstein did not directly address scripture or its role in delimiting the assertions about God made by religious people.\(^6\) This may be why the potential structural place of scripture in assertions made by the religious believer has been overlooked by mainstream interpreters of Wittgenstein.\(^7\) When religious believers make an assertion that references scripture, they invoke a text that they treat in a unique way, approaching it differently from ordinary texts. The use of scripture in assertions by religious believers does not conform to the conventions of ordinary human language; scripture does not function in the same way as language in ‘science.’\(^8\) However, scripture is written in language.\(^9\)

---

6. This paper will only deal with making an assertion about God, not with assertions about the existence of God.
9. Though it is beyond the scope of this limited paper to discuss the complex relationships between belief about the origins of scripture and the way that scripture is mobilised in philosophical discourse, regardless of these relationships, scripture is written in language that at once might be endowed with
So religious believers’ use of scripture occurs in ordinary human language, but their citations do not follow Wittgenstein’s conventions for using and interpreting ordinary language.

Wittgenstein here distinguishes between ‘sentences’ and ‘religious statements.’ Different connections between identical words can transform a ‘sentence’ into a ‘religious statement’ when that statement expresses a particular sort of belief. The pattern of these beliefs is not grounded like those expressed in ‘sentences’ that operate within the system of ordinary human language, which can be evidenced and argued against. In fact, trying to evidence “religious statements…would destroy the whole business.” As in the famous example of the “Last Judgement,” Wittgenstein imagines someone who has “what you might call an unshakable belief,” commenting, “It will show not by reasoning or by appeal to ordinary grounds for belief, but rather by regulating for all in his life.” In Wittgenstein’s later writing, the idea of a ‘form of life’ comes to describe the context for religious statements containing beliefs that are outside the realm of statements made in non-religious ordinary human language: “It appears to me,” wrote Wittgenstein in 1947, “as though a religious belief could only be something like passionately committing oneself to a system of coordinates. Hence, although it’s belief, it is really a way of living, or a way of judging life.”

Mainstream interpretations of Wittgenstein rightly show that religious statements are different from ordinary assertions, but they incline towards making the two sorts of assertions mutually exclusive. Though Hillary Putnam concedes that “understanding the words of a religious person properly is inseparable from understanding a religious form of life,” he also claims that this religious ‘form of life’ is about “understanding a human being” and is outside Wittgensteinian “semantic theory.” Similarly, Patrick Sherry attempts to consider “the facts which form the background of religion,” including understanding “how religious concepts are formed” and “their place in a religious way of life,” without attending to the nature of religious statements made by believers.

On these readings, Wittgenstein’s ‘form of life’ sets up an unbridgeable gap between asserting a religious belief and a philosophical belief. Religious beliefs are asserted within the framework of a religious ‘form of life,’ whereas it must be possible to assert philosophical belief outside this ‘form of life.’ This interpretation creates a binary wherein it would be impossible for a religious believer to make a philosophical assertion about God and still be operating within their religious ‘form of life.’ Such an assertion would not be properly philosophical but would instead be a statement of religious belief.

However, this reading belies important aspects of Wittgenstein’s later writings. In a telling passage from Culture and Value, Wittgenstein says:

> Christianity is not based on a historical truth, but presents us with a [historical] narrative and says: now believe! But not believe this report with the belief that is appropriate to a historical report,—but rather: believe, through thick and thin and you can do this only as the outcome of a life. Here you have a message!—don’t

religious significance, but can also be interpreted in terms of ordinary language by someone without the framework of a religious ‘form of life.’ Cf. fn.19.

10 “Lectures on Religious Belief,” 58.
11 “Lectures on Religious Belief,” 56.
14 Putnam, Renewing Philosophy, 154. Putnam agrees that this “understanding” must include “words and pictures,” but precisely by excluding semantic content he necessarily overlooks the role of scripture.
15 Sherry, Religion, Truth and Language Games, 18.
treat it as you would another historical message! Make a quite different place for it in your life.—There is no paradox about that!16

For Wittgenstein, a Christian believer is defined by the place of a ‘historical narrative’ in their ‘form of life,’ not by believing in the historical truth of the Christian narrative.

As religious belief in a ‘historical narrative’ is outside the normal realm of historical beliefs, the word “believe” is doing different work in two different contexts: I believe in one way that the French revolution happened, and in another that Christ rose from the dead.17 These instances of belief are fundamentally different: the first is strictly historical, empirical, and the second is religious. Though both beliefs are asserted in ordinary language, Wittgenstein is clear that the criteria for interpreting the meaning behind the statements must be different: “Would I say there is insufficient evidence if he says: ‘I believe…’? I can’t treat these words as I normally treat ‘I believe so and so’. It would be entirely beside the point.”18

To read Wittgenstein faithfully, we must recognise the fundamental role played by scripture in asserting beliefs within a ‘form of life.’ Scripture contains the basic elements of ‘historical narrative’ for the Christian and Jewish traditions, which is foundational to the religious ‘form of life.’ More importantly, believers approach scripture as though its assertions are different from those made in ordinary language, even though a non-believer could read the same text without endowing it with any significance.19 Scripture has an omnisignificance that allows believers to subject it to closer reading than scientific, empirical, or philosophical assertions. Indeed, believing Christians must privilege scripture in their ‘form of life’: “Here we have a belief in historic facts different from a belief in ordinary historic facts…they are not treated as historical, empirical, propositions.”20

So scripture’s omnisignificance is not only a result of its role in structuring the historical narrative of religious belief, but is also a result of how scripture is used by religious believers in making philosophical assertions.21 Believers’ use of scripture is mediated by exegesis, wherein believers explain beliefs derived from scripture in ordinary language. This translates the narrative of belief into ordinary language, allowing believers to make philosophical assertions about God within their religious ‘form of life.’ Scriptural exegesis can therefore bridge the theoretical gap between asserting a religious belief within a religious ‘form of life’ and asserting a philosophical belief outside this ‘form of life.’ To understand the religious

16 Wittgenstein, Culture and Value, 32e.
17 On the binary implicit in Putnam and Sherry, it would be impossible to interpret the latter statement philosophically, in line with Wittgenstein’s semantic theory; rather, it would be bracketed as an expression of a religious ‘form of life.’ However, my belief about the French revolution might be interrogated philosophically, as it does not operate within a religious pretext. It is beyond the scope of this short paper to delineate different sorts of philosophical assertions within a religious form of life, though this would be an important development in this reading of Wittgenstein’s model.
18 “Lectures on Religious Belief,” 62.
20 “Lectures on Religious Belief,” 57.
21 Omnisignificance is defined as “the basic assumption…that the slightest details of the biblical text have a meaning that is both comprehensible and significant” by James Kugel in The Idea of Biblical Poetry: Parallelism and its History (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 103.
‘form of life’ fully, we must include the exegetical practices that bring scripture into philosophical discourse.

To move beyond an interpretation of Wittgenstein’s religious ‘form of life’ that constructs a binary between religious and philosophical assertions, it will be instructive to work through an historical example of how scripture is mediated by exegetical practice. Though scripture is deployed in a plethora of ways in the Jewish and Christian traditions, the medieval Jewish philosopher Hasdai Crescas acts as a useful example of a religious thinker who uses scripture to make philosophical assertions about God.

In Or Hashem (The Light of the Lord), Crescas advances three sorts of arguments. First, there are philosophical arguments formed exclusively by following axioms to their rational ends in a conscious attempt to mirror Aristotelian physics and metaphysics, which Crescas terms ‘rational speculation’. This implies that Crescas does not necessarily need to use scripture in order to come to philosophical conclusions about God. The second category is that of purely exegetical arguments. Here Crescas makes arguments wherein both the premises and conclusions are contained within the exegesis of scriptural verses. This implies that making assertions about God on the basis of scripture does not require additional corollary philosophical proofs. There are also instances of these two sorts of argument being deployed in parallel or successively to illustrate the same philosophical point. These first two categories might mirror the binary between philosophical assertions and religious assertions. However, the third category of Crescas’s arguments cannot be accounted for by this mainstream model of Wittgenstein’s religious ‘form of life.’

In the third category of argument, Crescas uses scriptural exegesis in the process of making a philosophical assertion about God. This implies that there are assertions Crescas cannot make without deploying arguments from both exegesis and philosophy. In doing so, Crescas bridges the gap between religious and philosophical assertions—both are integral to expressing his religious beliefs. Not only are many of his philosophical questions prompted by canonical texts, but exegesis also acts as proof of philosophical assertions. To apply our Wittgensteinian model, then, there must be a way for Crescas to bridge the gap within his religious ‘form of life’ between religious and philosophical assertions, or this third category of argument would be either unnecessary or impossible.

22 Or Hashem was “composed over many years [from 1391] and completed in 1410” (Harvey, Physics and Metaphysics, xi).


24 Harvey, Physics and Metaphysics, 126.

25 The most important of these arguments is Crescas’s exegesis interpreting the covering of the sukkah allegorically: “As the body is the vehicle for the soul which is the form of man and shelters him, the covering (sikukh) is the essence of the sukkah and shelters him. Thus the Torah commanded that it be made of material which grows from the ground to indicate submission and that it not be subject to defilement in order to alert us concerning the purity of our souls” (Or Hashem, 2.6.2), cited and contextualised in Frank Talmage, Apples of Gold: The Inner Meaning of Sacred Texts in Medieval Judaism, (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1999), 133.

26 An example can be found at Or Hashem, II.6.1. References to Or Hashem that take this form are to the Hebrew edition listed in the bibliography.

27 Though Harvey’s analysis of the content of the arguments philosophically is unparalleled in the literature, he does not attend to to the formal properties of the arguments that illustrate the way in which Crescas uses scripture to make specific assertions about God.
I will illustrate this third sort of argument with reference to two stages of Crescas’s argument “concerning [the] love and joy” of God, advanced in Or Hashem Book 1, Part 3, Chapter 5, though there are many others that might have been drawn upon. First Crescas demonstrates that God is capable of joy, and then that God’s capacity for pleasure (of which joy is a part) is greater than man’s. These arguments will be addressed in turn.

In a series of arguments leading up to this section, Crescas frames God as “active will” in a move that Hava Tirosh-Samuelson characterises as “voluntarist.”28 He contrasts the Maimonidean God with scripture and “dicta of our Rabbis.”29 Though Maimonides claims that “every passion must be negated of God…since it is something corporeal,” this is contradicted “in the Hagiographa [as] it says: ‘Let the Lord rejoice in His works’ [Psalms 104:31].”30 As “this attribution [of joy to God] is found in may Scriptural texts and Rabbinic exegeses,” Crescas’s argument implies the question of how it is possible to hold a Maimonidean position in light of scriptural passages that seem to contradict it.

Raising this question is dependent on scripture functioning structurally in a different way from ordinary human language. If a contemporary of Crescas had asserted that God rejoices in his works, this would have formed insufficient basis on which to question a rigorously attested philosophical view. Crescas, however, brings scripture into direct conflict with philosophical assertions that he opposes in order to initiate a series of philosophical arguments wherein he disproves those assertions. This is made possible structurally by scriptural exegesis of the Psalms that underpins Crescas’s initial challenge. By using scripture in this way, Crescas endows it with a role in language that is distinct from other philosophical assertions. Scriptural exegesis is thus essential to the foundation of his philosophical assertions.

Crescas then deploys exegesis and philosophy interdependently to support his claim that joy is attributed to God in scriptures:

For inasmuch as the knowledge of contraries is one,31 if we attribute to Him sadness, as it is said “And He was sad at His Heart” [Genesis 6:6], “They made sad His holy spirit” [Isaiah 63:10], and “I will be with him in trouble” [Psalms 91:15], according to the way the Rabbis interpreted this verse,32 then we should also attribute to Him joy.33

By referencing the Aristotelian principle that “the knowledge of contraries is one,”34 Crescas is able to deploy scriptural references to God’s sadness to prove his joy. As we can know from scripture that sadness is attributed to God, so too must we be able to attribute joy, the contrary of sadness, to God, because of this Aristotelian principle.

This passage demonstrates two important points about the relationship between Crescas’s exegetical practices and philosophical arguments in making religious assertions about God: first, since principles derived from scripture, such as God’s sadness, can be subjected to philosophical principles regarding their interpolation, exegesis allows scripture to

---

29 Or Hashem 1.3.5; Cf. Harvey, Physics and Metaphysics, 119.
30 Ibid.
32 To say that a human action “saddens” God would mean that it is evil or rebellious according to the Babylonian Talmud, Masechet Hagiga 5b. See Harvey, Physics and Metaphysics, 119.
33 Harvey, Physics and Metaphysics, 119.
34 See footnote 29 above. The scope of this paper does not permit an exploration of Crescas’s adoption of this Aristotelian principle.
participate in philosophical assertions made in ordinary language. Second, we can intuit that Crescas did not think that exegesis of one verse of scripture was sufficient to ground his philosophical assertion, but, when several passages from scripture are invoked to the same philosophical end, a much stronger case is made. His scriptural exegesis is dependent on this philosophical principle, and this principle allows him to use a wider range of scriptural texts to buttress his exegetical assertion. Exegesis and philosophy interact without collapsing into either side of a binary between religious and philosophical assertions, or stymying the content of the assertion altogether. Philosophy and exegesis are not incommensurable, but are both integral to making some of Crescas’ assertions about God. So, a model for a religious ‘form of life’ that incorporates both is necessary.

Later in the same chapter, Crescas discusses the relative capacities for love possessed by God and people. Crescas argues that the more perfect an entity is, the greater its capacities—and the better it is, the more loving it is. Given that God is more perfect than people, God must also be more loving than the people he loves. Crescas proves this by exegesis of the specific words used to describe God’s love as opposed to the love of the forefathers. He draws on the two different words for love in scripture: ahabah, meaning “love,” and hesheq, meaning “passionate love.”

...[We] find that with regard to God’s love of the patriarchs Scripture uses the term hesheq, as it said “Yet the Lord did passionately love [hashaq] thy fathers” [Deuteronomy 10:15], but with regard to their [the fathers’] love for Him we find merely the term ahabah, as it is said “Abraham my loving friend [ohabi]” [Isaiah 41:8]. Scripture did not say hosqi [‘my passionately loving friend’], in order to teach us this distinction.

Instead of assuming that hesheq and ahabah are merely synonyms for love, the omnisignificance of scripture allows Crescas to pick up on these subtle distinctions in word choice to draw out philosophical assertions through exegesis. Because Crescas views scripture as outside ordinary human language, it can act as proof of the reality of God’s nature, allowing exegesis to enter into this philosophical assertion. That a small textual detail can be used as proof of a philosophical assertion demonstrates the extent to which scriptural exegesis underpins some philosophical arguments, which are then advanced exclusively in ordinary human language without reference to scripture. This implies that even if his philosophical assertion could be argued without scriptural exegesis, scripture demonstrates something that philosophy alone cannot. This relationship between philosophical assertion and exegetical practice allows Crescas to make assertions about God’s capacity for love, which in turn allows him to advance his anti-Maimonidean notion of what Tirosh-Samuelson claims is a “voluntarist” God.

---

35 Harvey, Physics and Metaphysics, 111.
36 The “fathers” here implicitly represent the capacity of people in general.
37 Harvey, Physics and Metaphysics, 123. The etymology and different possible meanings of these two Hebrew words in scholarly literature are not our concern here; we are concerned with way in which Crescas exegetically deploys this distinction.
38 Harvey, Physics and Metaphysics, 123. The “distinction” is between God’s passionate love [hesheq] and the fathers’ love [ahabah]. The same exegesis with additional scriptural reference for ahabah is also found in Or Hashem II.6.1.
39 Crescas argues for this idea of God in opposition to Maimonidean ‘intellectualism.’ See Tirosh-Samuelson, Happiness in Premodern Judaism: Virtue, Knowledge, and Well-Being, 390. It would be
Scriptural exegesis bridges the gap between Crescas’s philosophical and religious assertions. Indeed, assertions about God are neither exclusively philosophical nor solely religious. Rather, Crescas exemplifies how our new model of Wittgenstein’s religious ‘form of life,’ which takes account of the significance of scriptural exegesis, might operate in making assertions about God. The scope of this paper is too limited to explore the different sorts of scriptural exegesis available in the Jewish and Christian traditions and the different ways in which they might combine with philosophical assertions in constituting various religious ‘forms of life.”

It is clear, however, that at least for Crescas’s ‘form of life,’ it is not only belief in a particular historical narrative, but the practice of scriptural exegesis that grounds his assertions about God. It would be interesting to expand this initial investigation by taking into account later Medieval communal and interpersonal reading practices that mobilise scripture in to advance philosophical assertions within a religious ‘form of life.’ Wittgenstein asserts that “Life can educate you to ‘believing in God.’” Scriptural exegesis allows this belief to be asserted.

Interesting to compare Crescas’s use of scripture to Maimonides’s exegesis in The Guide to the Perplexed, chapter 54.

40 Exploring different sorts of midrash would be an interesting extension of this paper. However, dominant models in scholarship speak to rabbinic midrash as opposed to medieval exegesis and so were not considered in this paper. For examples, see Daniel Boyarin, Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Jay Harris, How Do we Know This: Midrash and the Fragmentation of Modern Judaism (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995); and Steven Fraade, “Rabbinic Polysemy and Pluralism Revisited: Between Praxis and Thematisation,” AJS Review 31 (2007):1-40.

41 Wittgenstein, Culture and Value, 97e.
Bibliography


Harris, Jay. *How Do we Know This: Midrash and the Fragmentation of Modern Judaism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995).


Jacobs, Louis. We Have Reason to Believe. (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 1995).


_____.


_____.


_____.


_____.
