

Greenstein, Edward, "Medieval Bible Commentaries," in *Back to the Sources*, ed. Barry Holtz (New York: Summit Books, 1984), pp. 213-59, with bibliographical guide at end.

## ADDITIONAL SOURCE MATERIALS

- Pentateuch with . . . Rashi's Commentary*, 5 vols., trans. and annotated by M. Rosenbaum and A. M. Silbermann (London: Shapiro, Valentine & Co., 1946).
- Ramban (Nahmanides), *Commentary on the Torah*, ed. Charles Chavel, 5 vols. (New York: Shilo Publishing House, Inc., 1971-76): translation with extensive annotation.
- Jacobs Louis, *Jewish Biblical Exegesis* (New York: Behrman House, 1973). Contains passages with explanation from many medieval commentators.
- Ibn Ezra, Abraham, *Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch* (New York: Menorah Publishing Company, 1988 [Genesis], 1996 [Exodus]): translation with extensive annotation.

## Maimonides on Art and Charity

1180

THE following recommendations and prohibitions are taken from the *Mishneh Torah*, the famous law code published in Hebrew about 1180 by the great Maimonides.

The first selection deals with charity. The point of view expressed here is that of Maimonides, although it is based in large part on Talmudic precedents.

The second selection deals with the medieval attitude to the plastic arts. The second commandment states specifically (Exodus 20:4): "Thou shalt not make unto thee a graven image, nor any manner of likeness, of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth." It seems to have been this injunction which prejudiced the medieval Jew against the plastic arts. Statues and figures in earlier times had been associated with Greek and Roman idolatry, and during the Middle Ages sculpture was linked in the mind of the average Jew with Christian worship. However, it should be borne in mind that Maimonides' pronouncements were not accepted unconditionally by all Jews. Some rabbis were more strict, others more lenient in their views.

## I. GIFTS TO THE POOR

☞ There are eight degrees in the giving of charity, one higher than the other. The highest degree, than which there is nothing higher, is to take hold of a Jew who has been crushed and to give him a gift or a loan, or to enter into partnership with him, or to find work for him, and thus to put him on his feet so that he will not be dependent on his fellow-men. Concerning this it is said [Leviticus 25:35]: "Then shalt thou uphold him." Uphold him, so that he should not fall and become a dependant.

Lower in degree to this is the one who gives charity [in Hebrew, "righteousness"] to the poor, but does not know to whom he gives it, nor does the poor man know from whom he receives it. This is an unselfish meritorious act comparable to what was done in the

Chamber of the Secret in the Temple where the charitable would deposit [alms] secretly and the poor of better family would help themselves secretly. Related to this degree is the giving to the [public] alms-chest. One should not give to the alms-chest unless he knows that the officer in charge is reliable, wise, and a capable administrator, like Hananiah ben Teradion, for example. [This martyr, (d. about 135), was very scrupulous with charity funds.]

Lower in degree to this is when the giver knows to whom he gives, but the poor does not know from whom he receives. An example of this are the great scholars [of Talmudic times] who used to go about in secret and leave their money at the door of the poor. This is proper practice, particularly meritorious when the officers in charge of charity are not administering properly.

Lower in degree to this is when the poor knows from whom he receives but the giver does not know to whom he gives. An example of this are the great scholars who used to tie up their money in [the corner of] their cloaks and throw them back over their shoulders. The poor would then come and take it without being put to shame.

Lower in degree to this is when one gives even before he is asked.

Lower in degree to this is when one gives after he has been asked.

Lower in degree to this is when one gives less than he should, but graciously.

Lower in degree to this is when one gives grudgingly.

The great scholars used to give a coin to the poor before every prayer and then they would pray, for it is said in the Bible [Psalm 17:15]: "As for me, I shall behold Thy face in 'righteousness' [that is, through 'charity']."

## II. Art and Idolatry

¶It is forbidden to make images to serve as ornaments even though they are not to be used for idolatry, because it is said in the Bible [Exodus 20:20]: "Ye shall not make with Me—gods of silver, or gods of gold, ye shall not make unto you." This includes even images of silver and gold which are only made for ornament, lest fools be misled by them and think they are for purposes of idolatry. However, this prohibition against fashioning ornaments applies only to the form of the human being, and hence one is not allowed to fashion any human form either in wood or plaster or in stone. This holds

when the form is raised like a design or a mural relief found in a reception hall and the like. When one fashions these he is to be punished. However, if the form were to be engraved or painted like sketches on panels or boards, or be like the figures that are woven into a rug, behold these are permitted. [There is no objection to paintings.]

It is forbidden to wear a ring that has a seal on it in the form of a human being, if the form projects, but one may use it for sealing. If, however, the form is engraved it is permitted to wear it, but it is forbidden to seal with it, inasmuch as the impression made from it would consist of a raised form. Similarly it is forbidden to form, even on a panel, the likeness of the sun and moon, stars, planets, and angels, for it is written in the Bible: "Ye shall not make with Me," that is to say, you shall not make the likenesses of My servants who minister before Me on high. [The painting of the heavenly bodies is forbidden.] One may fashion images of cattle and all other living beings with the exception of man; likewise the forms of trees, plants, and similar things even though the image protrudes.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

### READINGS FOR ADVANCED STUDENTS

- Abrahams, I., *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*, 1932, Chap. xvii, "Private and Communal Charities. The Relief of the Poor"; Chap. xviii, "Private and Communal Charity (Continued); The Sick and the Captive."  
 Frisch, E., *An Historical Survey of Jewish Philanthropy*. Part II, "From the Fall of the State to the Beginnings of Emancipation."  
 Lowenthal, M., *A World Passed by: Scenes and Memories of Jewish Civilization in Europe and North Africa*. This delightfully written book is the nearest approach in English to a guide-book to extant Jewish antiquities and art materials.  
*JE*, "Alms"; "Art, Attitude of Judaism toward"; "Charity and Charitable Institutions."

### ADDITIONAL SOURCE MATERIALS IN ENGLISH

- Abrahams, I., *Hebrew Ethical Wills*, 2 vols. These volumes contain a great deal of material throwing light on the medieval Jewish concept of philanthropy.