

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-03221-7 - Ibn Gabirol's Theology of Desire: Matter and Method in
Jewish Medieval Neoplatonism
Sarah Pessin
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

IBN GABIROL'S THEOLOGY OF DESIRE

Drawing on Arabic passages from Ibn Gabirol's original *Fons Vitae* text and highlighting philosophical insights from his Hebrew poetry, Sarah Pessin develops a Theology of Desire at the heart of Ibn Gabirol's eleventh-century cosmo-ontology. She challenges centuries of received scholarship on his work, including his so-called Doctrine of Divine Will. Pessin rejects voluntarist readings of the *Fons Vitae* as opposing divine emanation. She also emphasizes Pseudo-Empedoclean notions of Divine Desire and Grounding Element alongside Ibn Gabirol's use of a particularly Neoplatonic method with apophatic (and what she terms "doubly apophatic") implications. In this way, Pessin reads claims about matter as insights about love, desire, the human relation to goodness, wisdom and God, and the receptive, dependent, and fragile nature of human being. Pessin reenvisioned the entire spirit of Ibn Gabirol's philosophy, moving us from a set of doctrines to a fluid inquiry into the nature of God and human being – and the bond between God and human being in desire.

Sarah Pessin is Associate Professor of Philosophy and the Emil and Eva Hecht Chair in Judaic Studies at the University of Denver. She works on Neoplatonisms (Greek, Jewish, Islamic, and Christian), medieval philosophy, modern Jewish philosophy, and comparative philosophies of religion. She has presented and published widely, including contributions to *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, the *Routledge Companion to Islamic Philosophy*, *The Cambridge History of Medieval Philosophy*, the *Blackwell History of Philosophy in the Middle Ages*, the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, and the *Journal of the History of Philosophy*. Her research interests include the phenomenology of receptivity, the nature of apophatic discourse, methodologies for the study of intercultural texts, and Jewish theologies of exile.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03221-7 - Ibn Gabirol's Theology of Desire: Matter and Method in
Jewish Medieval Neoplatonism

Sarah Pessin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03221-7 - Ibn Gabirol's Theology of Desire: Matter and Method in
Jewish Medieval Neoplatonism

Sarah Pessin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Ibn Gabirol's Theology of Desire

Matter and Method in Jewish Medieval Neoplatonism

SARAH PESSIN

University of Denver



CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-03221-7 - Ibn Gabirol's Theology of Desire: Matter and Method in
 Jewish Medieval Neoplatonism
 Sarah Pessin
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS
 Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town,
 Singapore, São Paulo, Delhi, Mexico City

Cambridge University Press
 32 Avenue of the Americas, New York, NY 10013-2473, USA

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107032217

© Sarah Pessin 2013

This publication is in copyright. Subject to statutory exception
 and to the provisions of relevant collective licensing agreements,
 no reproduction of any part may take place without the written
 permission of Cambridge University Press.

First published 2013

Printed in the United States of America

A catalog record for this publication is available from the British Library.

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data

Pessin, Sarah.

Ibn Gabirol's theology of desire : matter and method in Jewish medieval Neoplatonism / Sarah
 Pessin, University of Denver.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-03221-7 (hardback)

1. Neoplatonism. 2. Jewish philosophy. 3. Philosophy, Medieval. 4. Islamic philosophy.
 5. Ibn Gabirol, 11th cent. Yanbu' al-hayah. I. Title.

B517.P45 2013

181'.06-dc23 2012037619

ISBN 978-1-107-03221-7 Hardback

Cambridge University Press has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for
 external or third-party Internet Web sites referred to in this publication and does not guarantee
 that any content on such Web sites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-03221-7 - Ibn Gabirol's Theology of Desire: Matter and Method in
Jewish Medieval Neoplatonism
Sarah Pessin
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

חסד ודעת

This book is dedicated to my father (זצ"ל) and grandfather (זצ"ל)



Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03221-7 - Ibn Gabirol's Theology of Desire: Matter and Method in
Jewish Medieval Neoplatonism

Sarah Pessin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>page</i> xiii
1. Introduction	1
1.1 Discovering Ibn Gabirol: The Aims and Goals of This Project	1
1.2 Chapter Guide	4
2. Text in Context	9
2.1 First Unfoldings	9
2.2 Background	11
2.3 Desire and Love: Terminological Preamble I	15
2.3.1 Desire as God-Born and God-Directed	16
2.3.2 Desire as Love	16
2.4 From Divine Will to Divine- <i>Irāda</i> -as-Desire: Terminological Preamble II	20
2.5 From Prime Matter to Grounding Element: Terminological Preamble III	22
2.5.1 Matter Terminology in Ibn Gabirol's Milieu	22
2.5.2 Ibn Gabirol's <i>al-'unṣur al-awwal</i>	23
3. From Human Being to Discourse on Matter? The Threefold Quest for Wisdom, Goodness, and God – and the Root of Life in Desire	28
3.1 The Epistemological, Ethical, and Theological Context	28
3.1.1 The Epistemological Call	29
3.1.2 The Ethico-Theological Call	31
3.2 Metaphysics of Matter and Desire at the Core of All	32
3.3 Positive Valuations of Matter: A Reversal of Intuitions	36
4. Root Desire and the Pseudo-Empedoclean Grounding Element as Love	41
4.1 Desire at the Core of Being	42

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03221-7 - Ibn Gabirol's Theology of Desire: Matter and Method in Jewish Medieval Neoplatonism

Sarah Pessin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii

CONTENTS

4.2	Love Makes the World Go Round: Some Greek and Arabic Sources	43
4.2.1	Aristotle	43
4.2.2	The <i>Theology of Aristotle</i>	43
4.2.3	Avicenna's " <i>Risālah fī'l-‘ishq</i> "	44
4.2.4	Islamic and Jewish Neoplatonized Aristotelianism	45
4.3	A Pseudo-Empedoclean Love Story: Unspecified Being, Matter over Form, and the Kernel of Desire	46
4.4	In the Illuminating Shadow: Ibn Gabirol's Pseudo-Empedoclean Revision of the Neoplatonic Return	51
5.	From Divine Will to Divine <i>Irāda</i>: On the Mistaken Scholarly Rejection of Ibn Gabirol's Emanationism	53
5.0	"Divine Will" and the Mistaken Scholarly Rejection of Ibn Gabirol's Emanationism	53
5.1	Trying to Make Sense of Scholarship on Ibn Gabirol's So-Called Anti-Emanation Voluntarism: The Rejection of Divine Emanation in a Limited Emanation Framework?	54
5.2	Problems with the Limited Emanation Framework Reading: Free Choice, Mediated versus Unmediated Will, and Three Varieties of Voluntarism	56
5.3	Divine Will versus Divine Emanation? Casting More Doubt on the Canonical Voluntarist Reading of Ibn Gabirol	58
5.4	Rethinking Will and Emanation	59
5.4.1	Emanation and Will I: Since When Does "Divine Will" Mean "No Divine Emanation" in a Neoplatonic Context? (Considering Divine Will in Plotinus and the <i>Theology of Aristotle</i>)	60
5.4.2	Emanation and Will II: Is the Term "Will" Leading Some to Mistaken Conclusions? (Considering the Possibility of Augustinian Overtones)	60
5.5	Rethinking "Intermediating between the Extremes": Two Competing Views	61
5.5.1	Intermediation I: Brunner's Horizontal Intuitions, Divine Will in Opposition to Divine Emanation, and an Occasionalist God?	62
5.5.2	Intermediation II: On the Vertical Image of Intermediation in Ibn Gabirol – Toward a New Reading of Divine <i>Irāda</i> as Divine Emanation	64
6.	<i>Irādic</i> Unfoldings: Ibn Gabirol's Hylomorphic Emanationism and the Neoplatonic Tripart Analysis	66
6.0	Rereading Ibn Gabirol: Divine <i>Irāda</i> as Emanation and the Theology of Desire	66

CONTENTS

ix

6.1	The Vertical Imagery of Matter and Form in the Theology of Desire: On the Correct Interpretation of the Divine <i>Irāda</i> 's "Connecting" Intermediation	67
6.2	"Intermediary between the Extremes" as Joining, and Joining as the Vertical Emanation Counterpart of Neoplatonic Return	69
6.3	Rethinking "Matter+Form Composition" and the Intermediation of Divine <i>Irāda</i> as the Downward Procession of Emanation	72
6.4	"Matter," "Matter+Form," and "Form": Ibn Gabirol's Tripart Hylomorphic Method and Neoplatonic Tripart Analysis	74
6.5	The Theology of Desire Revisited: Ibn Gabirol's Revised Great Chain of Being and Neoplatonic Tripart Analysis	77
6.6	The <i>Irādic</i> /Erotic Unfolding: Love at the Root of Being	87
6.7	Ibn Gabirol's Cosmo-Ontology (Initial Conclusions): Great Chain of Being + Pseudo-Empedocles + Neoplatonic Tripart Analysis	87
7.	Matter Revisited	91
7.1	Matter as River	91
7.2	Matter as Born of God's Essence	92
7.3	Matter as Foundation and Divine Throne	93
7.4	Matter as Essence and Unifier: Layers of Matter, <i>Genus Generalissimum</i> , Sustainer of Diversity, and Giver of Name	94
7.4.1	Layers of Matter	95
7.4.2	Essence	97
7.4.3	Genus, <i>Genus Generalissimum</i> , and Name-Giver	98
7.4.4	Unifier	99
7.5	Matter as the Preexistent <i>Per Se Existens</i> : Contra Gundissalinus, Contra Schlanger	100
7.5.1	Gundissalinus' Erasure of "Matter Per Se": Obscuring Matter as <i>Per Se Existens</i> from the Arabic Text to the Latin Translation	102
7.5.2	Schlanger's Erasure of "Matter Per Se": Losing Pseudo-Empedocles to Philo?	104
7.6	Revisiting "Universal Hylomorphism" and a Call to Charitable Reading: On the Limiting Lenses of Augustine and Aquinas	106
7.7	Creation as the Splitting of the Nothing	113
7.8	Call to Selfhood	116
8.	Neoplatonic Cosmo-Ontology as Apophatic Response and as Prescription for Human Living (Methodological Reappraisal I)	118
8.0	Moving to Questions of Method: An Overview	118

Cambridge University Press
 978-1-107-03221-7 - Ibn Gabirol's Theology of Desire: Matter and Method in
 Jewish Medieval Neoplatonism
 Sarah Pessin
 Frontmatter
[More information](#)

x

CONTENTS

8.1	Emanation Reconsidered: From “Doctrine” to Apophatic Response (on the Paradox of Divine Unity and the Neoplatonic Tripart Analysis)	119
8.2	Ibn Gabirol's Neoplatonic Tripart Analysis: Making Sense of the “Triune” Theology of Divine Essence, Divine <i>Irāda</i> , and Divine Wisdom	123
8.2.1	Divine Essence: God as Apophatically Seen from the Perspective of Remaining	125
8.2.2	Divine <i>Irāda</i> : God as Apophatically Seen from the Perspective of Procession	125
8.2.3	Divine Wisdom (or Word): God as Apophatically Seen from the Perspective of Reversion	128
8.2.4	From Confusion to Tripart Apophasis: Conclusions	130
8.3	On the “Doubly Apophatic”: Neoplatonic Cosmo-Ontology as Dual Discourse on God and Human Being	131
8.4	From Apophasis to Human Prescription	133
8.5	Dependence, Receptivity, and Fragility: Orientations for Human Being (from Descriptions of Matter to Prescriptions for Living, and Experiencing the Self Qua Matter)	135
8.5.1	From Layers of Matter to Human Dependence	136
8.5.2	From Matter to Human Receptivity and Fragility	136
9.	Transcendental Grounding, Mythopoetic and Symbolic Transformation, and the Creation of New Worlds with Words (Methodological Reappraisal II)	140
9.1	On What Not to Do: Failures in Methodological Approaches to Neoplatonic Cosmo-Ontology (or, Finding Invisible Kansas)	141
9.2	Map Is Not Territory: A Double Insight for Interpreting Neoplatonic Cosmo-Ontology (or, There Is No Invisible Kansas)	147
9.3	On Human Being: Neoplatonic Cosmo-Ontology as Transcendental Grounding	149
9.4	Human Being, Human Transformation: Perspectives on Imagination, Myth, Exegesis, Sound-Meaning, Meditation, and Beyond	150
9.5	Writing as Creation: Cosmo-Ontology as Creating Worlds with Words	156
10.	Embroidering the Hidden	160
10.1	Embroidering the Hidden I: Rethinking Creation	162
10.2	Embroidering the Hidden II: Rethinking Metaphysics (Creation of Worlds with Words): A Closing Word on Cosmo-Ontology	162

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-03221-7 - Ibn Gabirol's Theology of Desire: Matter and Method in Jewish Medieval Neoplatonism

Sarah Pessin

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

CONTENTS

xi

<i>Appendix. Matter as God-Born Cradle of Life: A Sampling of Matter Imagery in Ibn Gabirol's Milieu</i>	165
A1 Ibn Gabirol's Neoplatonic Hylomorphism: Plato's Participation Revised	165
A2 Plato and Pythagoreanism: From Timaeon Receptacle as Chaos to Nicomachus' Receptacle as Divine Ground and Source	166
A3 Ibn Gabirol's Neoplatonic Hylomorphism: Aristotelian Substance Revised (and the Possibility of a Pseudo-Empedocles–Aristotle link)	168
A4 Matter in Aristotle	170
A5 Plotinus and Intelligible Matter	172
A6 Proclus' <i>Elements of Theology</i> , the <i>Kalām fī maḥḍ al-khair</i> , and the <i>Liber De Causis</i>	173
A7 First Matter: "Ibn Ḥasday's Neoplatonist," Isaac Israeli, and the <i>Longer Theology of Aristotle</i>	175
A8 The Ismā'īlī Context: <i>Kūnī</i> and <i>Qadar</i>	178
A9 Matter in the <i>Ikhwān</i> Tradition	180
A10 Mu'tazilites: <i>al-Ma'dūm</i> as a Something	182
A11 Subtle Material Prophetic Intermediaries: Saadya's "2nd Air," Judah HaLevi's <i>amr ilāhī</i>	182
A12 Islamic and Jewish Pseudo-Empedoclean Trends	183
A13 Suhrawardī: Love versus Dominance, Love as Humility	185
A14 Kernels and Shells	185
A15 "From One Must Come Two" as "From One Must Come One" (Considering Ibn Gabirol in the Context of Greek Limit/Limitlessness Philosophies)	186
<i>Notes</i>	189
<i>Bibliography</i>	233
I. Ibn Gabirol Texts	233
1. <i>Fons Vitae</i> : Original Eleventh-Century Arabic Text	233
2. <i>Fons Vitae</i> : Twelfth-Century Latin Translation (and Translations of the Latin Translation)	233
3. <i>Fons Vitae</i> : Thirteenth-Century Hebrew Translation (and Translations of the Hebrew Translation)	234
4. <i>The Choice of Pearls (Mivḥar ha-Penīnīm)</i>	234
5. <i>Book of the Improvement of the Moral Qualities of the Soul</i>	235
6. Hebrew Poetry Editions	235
II. Ancient and Medieval Texts (other than Ibn Gabirol)	235
III. Main Bibliography (contains materials from Bibliography Section I, selected materials from Bibliography Section II, as well as Secondary Sources)	241

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-03221-7 - Ibn Gabirol's Theology of Desire: Matter and Method in
Jewish Medieval Neoplatonism
Sarah Pessin
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

xii

CONTENTS

<i>Index</i>	263
1. <i>Index of Concepts (Partial List)</i>	263
2. <i>Index of Source References (Partial List)</i>	265
3. <i>References to Ibn Gabirol's Poetry, Liturgy, and Aphorisms</i>	266
4. <i>Index of Names, Ancient-Medieval (Partial List)</i>	266
5. <i>Index of Names, Modern-Contemporary (Partial List)</i>	267
6. <i>Index of Figures</i>	269

List of Figures

3.1	Plotinus' Cosmo-Ontology	<i>page</i> 33
3.2	Jewish Neoplatonic Modification of Plotinian Cosmo-Ontology	34
3.3	Ibn Gabirol's Revised Neoplatonic Cosmo-Ontology	34
3.4	Reversing Intuitions: Matter's Purity, Form's Divisions	37
3.5	Matter over Form: Desire Precedes Existence	38
3.6	On the "Divine Essence–Matter" Link	38
4.1	Comparing the Hierarchies of Plotinus and Ibn Gabirol	48
4.2	Ps. Empedoclean Love as Kernel and Strife as Shell	51
5.1	Brunner's "Horizontal Joining" of Matter to Form in the <i>Fons Vitae</i>	63
6.1	Ibn Gabirol's Hylomorphic Great Chain of Being	78
9.1	Ibn Gabirol's "Cosmic Map"	148