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# JUDAICA PETROPOLITANA

Scholarly Journal  
Научно-теоретический журнал

№ 8 (2017)

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Jerusalem  
5778

Санкт-Петербург  
2017



Академия  
Исследования Культуры

УДК 30.2+94(3)+811.411(05)  
ISSN 2307-9053

The International Center for University  
Teaching of Jewish Civilization  
The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

Department of Jewish Culture  
at Saint Petersburg State University

Международный центр университетского  
преподавания еврейской цивилизации  
Еврейский университет в Иерусалиме

Кафедра еврейской культуры  
Санкт-Петербургского  
государственного университета

*Специальный выпуск:* Формирование культуры в диаспоре

*Special issue:* Formation of Culture in Diaspora

Номер подготовлен к изданию и опубликован в рамках проекта:  
This issue was prepared for publication and printed in the framework of the project:



Российский  
научный  
фонд

Российского научного фонда | Russian Science Foundation  
(проект № 15-18-00062 «Формирование культуры в диаспоре  
на примере еврейской, армянской и греческой диаспор»;  
Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет)

При финансовой поддержке:  
Thanks to the financial support of:



Фонда «Генезис»  
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Научное издание

**JUDAICA PETROPOLITANA**

**№ 8 (2017)**

Подписано в печать с готового оригинал-макета 21.12.2017.  
Формат 60 × 90 1/16. Бум. офсетная. Печать офсетная.  
Усл. печ. л. 13,5. Тираж 550 экз. Заказ № 718

Издательство «Академия Исследования Культуры»,  
197343, Россия, Санкт-Петербург, ул. Чапыгина, д. 6, лит. А  
Тел.: +7 (981) 699-6595;  
E-mail: [post@arculture.ru](mailto:post@arculture.ru)  
<http://arculture.ru>

Отпечатано в типографии «Литография»  
191119 Санкт-Петербург, ул. Днепропетровская, д. 8

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**ISAAC BEN SOLOMON ISRAELI  
AND HIS ROLE IN THE FORMATION  
OF THE CORRESPONDENCE THEORY OF TRUTH<sup>1</sup>**

**Yu. V. Shaposhnikova**

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According to most reference books, the origins of the correspondence theory of truth are traced back to Aristotle. However, scholastic tradition in general, and Thomas Aquinas in particular, refer to Isaac ben Solomon Israeli as its founder. This paper contends that is no accident and demonstrates that the medieval worldview is, at least in one aspect, more akin to philosophical views of Israeli than to the ancient understanding — in the interpretation of a material thing and its being.

*Keywords:* Isaac Israeli, the correspondence theory of truth, the Book of Definitions, Thomas Aquinas, truth, *adaequatio*, being

**ИСААК БЕН СОЛОМОН ИСРАЭЛИ И ЕГО РОЛЬ  
В ФОРМИРОВАНИИ КОРРЕСПОНДЕНТНОЙ ТЕОРИИ  
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Согласно большинству справочных изданий, корреспондентная теория истины восходит своими истоками к Аристотелю. Однако схоластическая тради-

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<sup>1</sup> Исследование выполнено при поддержке гранта РФФИ №18–011–00281 «Историческая эпистемология: теоретические основания и исследовательские перспективы».

ция в целом и Фома Аквинский в частности ссылаются на Исаака бен Соломона Израэли как на ее основателя. В настоящей статье утверждается, что данное обстоятельство неслучайно, и демонстрируется, что средневековое мировоззрение, по крайней мере, в одном аспекте ближе философским взглядам Израэли, чем античному восприятию, а именно в понимании вещи и характера ее бытия.

*Ключевые слова:* Исаак Израэли, корреспондентная теория истины, Книга определений, Фома Аквинский, истина, *adaequatio*, бытие вещи

The question of truth is, perhaps, one of the most fundamental questions of philosophical inquiry. The history of philosophy chronicles a number of responses to this question, expressed in the form of differing theories of truth. One of them, and by common agreement, the earliest, is called *the Correspondence Theory of Truth*. This theory was commonly accepted in the era of scholasticism and most deliberately defined by the medieval theologian Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274).

The classical definition of the correspondence theory (lat. *correspondentio* — compliance) states that the truth is nothing but conformity of the mind with its subject, or thoughts and things. According to Aquinas's definition, *veritas est adaequatio intellectus et rei*, truth is the equation of things and the intellect. He repeatedly formulates the notion of truth in this way and points to his ninth-century source, Jewish Neoplatonist Isaac Israeli and, particularly, to his treatise *The Book of Definitions*.

## I

Isaac Ben Solomon Israeli was born in Egypt, presumably in 855. One of the greatest physicians of the Middle ages, he opened a medical school and served as court physician to the founder of the Fatimid Dynasty in Kairouan (now Tunisia). Israeli was also the first Jew who wrote philosophical and medical treatises in Arabic and expressed neo-platonic ideas in Jewish philosophy.

Isaac's treatises on medicine and philosophy, logic and physics were originally written in Arabic and subsequently translated into Hebrew, Spanish, and Latin. Thanks to the Latin translations of his works, such great scholars as Albertus Magnus, Thomas Aquinas, Vincent of Beauvais, and others had access to his teachings. Researchers of Israeli do not share a unified opinion upon who translated Israeli's philosophical treatises into Latin. According to Guttman, it was Gerard of Cremona (1114–1187, translated 71 books). Husik<sup>2</sup>, Nechipurenko<sup>3</sup>, Borisov and Rudavsky<sup>4</sup> suppose it was Constantine

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<sup>2</sup> Husik 1958.

<sup>3</sup> Nechipurenko 2006.

<sup>4</sup> Rudavsky 2007, 151.

the African (1020–1087), physician and translator (of Hippocrates and Galen as also of many Arab physicians).

Israeli's medical writings, translated into Latin, were studied and respected both in European universities and in Muslim schools as handbooks, usually with no reference to the author. The value of his philosophical heritage is not so obvious. The philosophic dignity of Isaac Israeli has been widely questioned, both in the history of philosophy and from current perspectives. A famous statement of Maimonides: "... he was merely a physician ..."<sup>5</sup> and a snide remark of Abraham Ibn Ezra: "Isaac the Chatterbox" (although doubts remain if it truly referred to Israeli), create a very unflattering image of Isaac Israeli. Among modern thinkers, Richard Heinzman (in *Philosophie des Mittelalters*) and Daniel Lasker (in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*) blame Israeli for his eclecticism and consider him nothing more than just a compiler. Julius Guttmann spoke of him as of the thinker who only tried — and only to a certain extent — to explain the nature of the emanation<sup>6</sup>.

Notably, a number of both ancient authors and modern scholars hold the opposite opinion. For instance, Jacob Ben Reuben, a contemporary of Maimonides and Abraham Ibn Hasdai highly valued the authority of Israeli. Among modern authors Colette Sirat believed that Israeli was the first author after Philo who managed to integrate philosophical concepts in Jewish thought directly from Greek sources<sup>7</sup>. Israeli is also quite unanimously considered the first Jewish Neoplatonist, a forerunner of Saadi Gaon. As Husik puts it,

Whatever may be said of the intrinsic value of the content of his philosophical work, none can take away from him the merit of having been the first Jew, so far as we know, to devote himself to philosophical and scientific discussions, though not with the avowed aim of serving Judaism<sup>8</sup>.

It is considered that, in his philosophy, Israeli connects the mysticism of Neoplatonists with the Jewish eschatology. Indeed, Israeli believed that different levels of reality are a series of emanations of divine intelligence, the result of the connection of the primordial matter and the primal form ("wisdom"), both created by God. Understanding man as microcosm and also holding a kind of ethical perspective on the purpose of philosophy are peculiar to his teaching<sup>9</sup>.

The surviving philosophical writings of Israeli are: *The Book of Elements*, *Commentaries on Genesis*, *The Book on Spirit and Soul* and *The Book of Definitions and Descriptions*. In 1515, a Latin edition of the collected works by Israeli, *Opera Omnia Isaci*, was published in Lyon. The writing that interests us the most in connection with the correspondence theory of truth and the defini-

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<sup>5</sup> Husik 1958, 2.

<sup>6</sup> Guttmann 1964; cf. Guttmann 1911.

<sup>7</sup> Sirat 1990.

<sup>8</sup> Husik 1958, 2.

<sup>9</sup> See Nechipurenko 2006, 14.



tion of truth by Thomas Aquinas is Israeli's *The Book of Definitions*. This work represents a compilation of views of ancient thinkers, particularly, the views of Aristotle, and gives a definition of 56 philosophical concepts, one of which is the concept of "truth".

## II

If we consult philosophical encyclopedias and dictionaries searching for historical information on the correspondence theory of truth, the first name we encounter would be that of Aristotle<sup>10</sup>. In fact, it is Aristotle who Albertus Magnus considers his predecessor, when he formulates his own version of the correspondence theory. A number of researchers trace certain rudiments of the correspondence theory of truth to Plato, particularly, in *Sophist*, *Cratylus* and *Theaetetus*<sup>11</sup>. In his commentaries on Aristotle's *Categories*, John Philoponus (second half of the 6th century) argues that truth consists in the *agreement* of statements to things. Augustine and his famous definition *veritas est id quod est* ("The truth is what is") also sometimes claims to be fundamental. Arab philosophers Averroes and Avicenna are also often viewed as precursors of the medieval definition of truth. So, the Dutch scholar Jan Aertsen believes that the formula *veritas est adaequatio rei et intellectus* acquired its final form, which St. Thomas referred to, in the writings of Avicenna and Averroes<sup>12</sup>.

And yet, in defining truth, Thomas Aquinas refers to Israeli, considering Isaac Israeli as the founder of the correspondence theory of truth. The following points form a possible basis for his position:

1. Plato's writings at this time are unavailable to Aquinas (they were not translated into Latin; hence, it was not possible for St. Thomas to trace the rudiments of this theory from Plato).

2. When Aquinas formulates his definition of truth as *adaequatio*, he is not quite familiar with Aristotle's works (in 1259 Aquinas received a task to start working on the legacy of Aristotle in order to adapt it to the Christian doctrine and spent about fifteen years working on this task, which resulted in *Summa Theologica*, 1273).

3. Offering his definition of truth, Thomas does not refer to Augustine's, although he often mentions him when dealing with other issues. In fact, a modern researcher Josef Vande Wiele contends that definition, which Thomas ascribes to Israeli, belongs to Augustine<sup>13</sup>. And yet, can we insist that "that what is" of Augustine and "equation of things and the intelligence" of Israeli are equiva-

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<sup>10</sup> See, for example, Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth-correspondence/#1>), Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy (<https://www.rep.routledge.com/articles/thematic/truth-correspondence-theory-of/v-1>), etc.

<sup>11</sup> See, for instance, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/truth-correspondence/#1>

<sup>12</sup> Aertsen 1984.

<sup>13</sup> See Wiele 1954, 539.

lent? Obviously enough, these definitions, if we take a closer look, are different, and, apparently, it was more important for St. Thomas to emphasize the aspect of correspondence rather than the ontological aspect, crucial to Augustine's interpretation.

4. Aquinas was already acquainted with Aristotle's writings but Israeli was considered a recognized authority and a reliable source, and St. Thomas followed that tradition. However, this assumption is also very problematic. As Josef Matula points out in his article *Thomas Aquinas and his Reading of Isaac ben Solomon Israeli*, St. Thomas quotes Israeli incorrectly, as the classical definition of truth is impossible to find in Israeli's treatise<sup>14</sup>. Moreover, Albertus Magnus, Bonaventure, Alexander of Hales and William de la Mare quote him just as wrongly. Therefore, he makes two assumptions. Either none of the listed scholastics, including Aquinas, ever read Israeli and only refer to a common source as a recognized authority or they were familiar with some other translation of Israeli's *On Definitions*, which is now lost.

5. St. Thomas consciously prefers Israeli's position to Aristotle's on the question of truth. Also noteworthy, Aquinas's reference to Israeli is not fragmentary or random. St. Thomas refers to the Jewish philosopher repeatedly and on multiple occasions; in *De veritate*, in *The Commentary on the Sentences of Peter Lombard*, in *Summa contra Gentiles* and *Summa Theologica*. And, if we assume that St. Thomas deliberately made a choice in favor of Israeli, it is necessary to discriminate the philosophical positions of Israeli and Aristotle and try to explain Aquinas's preference.

### III

According to Aristotle,

The true judgement affirms where the subject and predicate really are combined, and denies where they are separated, while the false judgement has the opposite of this allocation (Arist. *Met.* VI. 4, 1027b20).

Elsewhere he contends:

He who thinks the separated to be separated and the combined to be combined has the truth, while he whose thought is in a state contrary to that of the objects is in error (Arist. *Met.* IX. 10, 1051b3).

In *The Categories* Aristotle writes: "The truth or falsity of a statement depends on facts" (*Cat.* V. 4b8). And also, starting from the opposite, "A false account is the account of non-existent objects, in so far as it is false" (*Met.* V. 29, 1024b25).

Indeed, Aristotle has already claimed that the idea, which has formed the matter of being, lies within things. However, in his work *On the Sever-*

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<sup>14</sup> Matula 2012, 239–246.

*al Senses of Being in Aristotle* Franz Brentano demonstrates that, for Aristotle, the question of being as true does not exceed the boundaries of logic and that, essentially, he talks about correlation of judgement about a thing and the thought of this thing. Thus, Brentano writes: “Aristotle is very firm in claiming that judgements are the only bearers of truth”<sup>15</sup> and further: “He still seems to assert the exact opposite in other places”<sup>16</sup>. Brentano notes that Aristotle enumerates different types of falsity, including false sensation and even a false thing, and this fact puzzles at first.

“Each thing is in respect of being, so is it in respect of truth” (Arist. *Met.* II. 1, 993b30). And this sounds very similar to Augustine’s formula: “The truth is that what is”. But Aristotle clarifies — and Brentano plays special attention to this — being as true is rooted in “some affection of the thought” (Arist. *Met.* VI. 4, 1027b35–1028a5). Thus, according to Aristotle, combining and separation of things occurs in thought, not in things. The original thesis of Aristotle reads:

“The combination and the separation are in thought and not in the things, and that which is in this sense is a different sort of ‘being’ from the things that are in the full sense” (Arist. *Met.* VI. 4, 1027b33).

In another place he writes: “Falsity and truth are not in things... but in thought” (Arist. *Met.* VI. 4, 1027b25). In this sense, true and false are primarily in the judgment of the mind.

Things are called true or false depending on judgment. Brentano paraphrases Aristotle’s thought:

“Even when the subject of a proposition is a real [i. e. non-empty] concept, the copula “to be” and in the sense of being true revolve around the remaining species of being in such a way that they do not disclose a special extramentally existing nature of being. The reason for this lies in the operations of the human understanding, which combines and separates, affirms and negates, and not in the highest principles of reality from which metaphysics attempts to gain an understanding of being as being. Hence... it is to be included from metaphysical inquiry”<sup>17</sup>.

As for Israeli, as noted above, his philosophical thought is largely influenced by Neo-Platonism, and one of the key concepts of his philosophy is the neo-platonic notion of “emanation”, with a specification that he treats this concept in the sense of creation *ex nihilo*<sup>18</sup>. Thus, one of the fundamental principles on which Israeli builds his philosophical teaching is creationism, which, of course, we do not find in Aristotle.

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<sup>15</sup> Brentano 1975, 16.

<sup>16</sup> Brentano 1975, 16.

<sup>17</sup> Brentano 1975, 25–26.

<sup>18</sup> See Altmann 1979, 1–15; see also Altmann, Stern 1958.

So, according to the definition of truth given by Aquinas, truth is “the conformity of intellect and the thing”. But what does this conformity, this equation mean? Examining the meaning of the Latin *adaequatio* in *Parmenides*, providing the reader with a detailed commentary on the medieval interpretation of truth and correlating it with the ancient, M. Heidegger distinguishes two aspects of the concept of “conformity”. He sees the first in the correspondence of things to their divine plan. And the second he calls the correspondence of human intelligence to the divine. Based on this dual interpretation of the notion of *adaequatio*, Heidegger states, a complex relationship God — Thing — Person is being built, that is Divine mind — a thing created according to His idea and design — human intelligence. Thing (*res*), therefore, is nothing but the focus and the embodiment of Creator’s thoughts, as well as that litmus paper, which certifies the adequacy of the human mind to the divine intelligence.

In one of his lectures from the series *The Spirit of Medieval Philosophy* Etienne Gilson points out that every medieval epistemology is realism at core<sup>19</sup>. He confirms his thesis by asserting that mere belief that all things were created by one God makes these things true in their material reality (in contrast the ancient interpretation of true as ideal). Undoubtedly, the created thing holds a different ontological status than the thing given to us in sensibility, the transient and erratic character of which has been widely discussed by ancient thinkers.

Thus, the idea of creationism underlying Israeli’s philosophy, alien to Aristotle, fundamentally changes the meaning of the formula “truth is the equation of things and the intellect”.

Scholastically understood being is intelligible throughout. In this sense, for the medieval thought “intellectual cognition would not be possible if the sensual object of knowledge was not endowed with its own intelligibility”<sup>20</sup>. For Israeli, the truth is not something from the realm of human judgement but it is the divine attribute. And by and large, the true and existing are identical.

And yet, “The truth is inseparable from things, for things only exist because the divine intellect produces them into existence”<sup>21</sup>. Further on, citing *De veritate*, cap. XIII by Anselm of Canterbury:

The creative action of God, giving birth to things, thereby gives them the truth, immanently inherent in them: the truth of their materiality, to which the intellect, or the true intelligence, corresponds<sup>22</sup>.

Sensitive object has its own intelligibility. Otherwise, the knowledge of it would be impossible.

Quite obviously, Aristotle’s metaphysics and essentially neo-Platonic teaching of Israeli take us back to the philosophy of Plato. However, their

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<sup>19</sup> See lecture XII in Gilson 1936.

<sup>20</sup> Gilson 1936.

<sup>21</sup> Gilson 1936.

<sup>22</sup> Gilson 1936.

philosophical views radically differ in their understanding of what is a “thing”. If according to the ancient worldview — and this is true in relation to both Plato and Aristotle — the thing is only transient and therefore is an untrue imitation of a certain fixed essence, to the medieval consciousness, thing is above all God’s creation and, thus, is ontologically justified.

Being God’s creation, *res* (a thing) holds a completely different ontological status. The existence of a thing is essentially true. In this sense, although Aristotle speaks of the necessary correlation between combined and separated in thought to connected and disconnected “in reality”, St. Thomas’s position, as the scholastic position in whole, is closer to the interpretation of truth by Isaac Israeli. This can perhaps be explained by the fact that the latter, in contrast to Aristotle, starts from the reality of the things themselves, which is largely consistent with the medieval worldview, but contrary to the ancient idealism. Strictly speaking, the correspondence theory of truth, characteristic to St. Thomas, is fundamentally different from Aristotle’s mode of thinking, although the former includes the latter.

The true motives of great thinkers are, undoubtedly, unknown to us and it would presumptuous to claim that we have discovered the true cause of the act of St. Thomas. However, with some confidence we can say that creationism of Israeli, which is absent in the teachings of Aristotle, allows the great scholar to most adequately express his position in relation to the truth. And just like Augustine once preferred one preaching of the Apostle Paul to the whole ancient philosophy, Aquinas chose as his guide Isaac Israeli in search of a new answer to the old question “what is truth?”

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