

Examiners' report

A LEVEL

RELIGIOUS STUDIES

**OCR Level 3 Advanced GCE in
Religious Studies**

H573

For first teaching in 2016

H573/05 Summer 2025 series

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Introduction

Our examiners' reports are produced to offer constructive feedback on candidates' performance in the examinations. They provide useful guidance for future candidates.

The reports will include a general commentary on candidates' performance, identify technical aspects examined in the questions and highlight good performance and where performance could be improved. A selection of candidate responses is also provided. The reports will also explain aspects which caused difficulty and why the difficulties arose, whether through a lack of knowledge, poor examination technique, or any other identifiable and explainable reason.

Where overall performance on a question/question part was considered good, with no particular areas to highlight, these questions have not been included in the report.

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Paper 5 series overview

This report is based on a relatively small cohort. The diversity of entries brought depth and richness to the responses reviewed by the examining team. Several responses were particularly impressive, demonstrating a strong grasp of both knowledge and understanding. Candidates showed a high-level of engagement with the specification, and their responses reflected both the quality of teaching and the depth of their understanding.

The full range of marks was seen across both AO1 and AO2, indicating that the questions successfully differentiated between levels of performance. All questions were attempted, with Question 4 proving the most popular. There were no rubric errors, and all candidates completed the required number of responses. Due to the small entry size, nearly all scripts were reviewed by the full marking team.

Overall, the quality of responses was very encouraging. Many candidates produced answers that demonstrated 'good' or 'very good' knowledge and understanding of the specification content. They were able to engage effectively with scholarly perspectives, sources of wisdom and authority, and academic approaches to construct coherent, well-developed, and justified arguments. Some responses stood out as 'excellent', offering sophisticated analysis and insight. Centres should be commended for the strength of their teaching and for supporting students in engaging deeply with a demanding unit of the specification, particularly in the absence of a dedicated textbook. The maturity and depth evident in many answers reflect a commendable level of academic development.

Candidates who did well on this paper generally:	Candidates who did less well on this paper generally:
- gave and precise focus on the set question: responses directly addressed the stimulus, showing consistent relevance throughout and a strong understanding of the specific demands of each question - effectively used additional material and gave synoptic analysis: when broader knowledge was introduced, it was done purposefully and skilfully to support the argument, rather than adding superfluous information. Synoptic links were relevant and enhanced the depth of response - showed sophisticated understanding of the content: high-Level responses showed clear engagement with complex ideas, concepts, and debates within the specification - provided balanced, coherent, and well-structured arguments: responses were logically developed and often showed evaluation throughout, rather than simply at the end - avoided rote-learned structures or formulaic answers: answers reflected genuine engagement with the question rather than pre-prepared content. There was flexibility in approach, with responses tailored to the exact wording and focus of the question.	- did not address the set question directly: some responses, though lengthy and detailed, did not engage with the precise focus of the question. For example, in Question 1, rather than addressing the specific stimulus, some candidates offered a broad comparison of all post-Holocaust theologians. In Question 4, some candidates presented a pre-prepared response on the covenant today, which did not align with the demands of the actual question - lacked scholarly or academic engagement: lower-marked responses often did not incorporate scholarly views, sources of wisdom and authority, or academic approaches, resulting in underdeveloped and less analytical answers - showed over-reliance on rote-learned essays or formulaic structures: Some candidates appeared to reproduce memorised essay plans or generic structures, which did not respond appropriately to the specific demands of the questions. This approach hindered performance, as it often led to superficial engagement and did not allow for critical or evaluative development.

Question 1*

- 1* Critically discuss how Eliezer Berkovitz responded to the challenge of reconciling the G-d of classical theism with the events of the Holocaust.

[40]

This was a popular question and, overall, it was answered well. Most candidates engaged successfully with the material and demonstrated a sound understanding of Berkovitz's approach. Many responses reached high levels in AO2, with candidates developing clear evaluative arguments in response to the set question. The best answers maintained a strong and consistent focus on Berkovitz throughout. These candidates were able to accurately explain and apply his key theological ideas, particularly:

Free Will Defence: Berkovitz argued that God does not intervene in events such as the Holocaust because He granted humans free will at creation. This preserves God's omniscience and omnipotence, even in the face of profound evil.

Hester Panim (the hiding of the face): Berkovitz taught that God hides His face during times of suffering to allow moral and spiritual development in human beings.

Rejection of Divine Punishment: Berkovitz did not see the Holocaust as divine punishment, but rather as a human and historical event, further highlighting the role of free will.

Stronger responses also referenced texts such as Job or Isaiah which added additional depth and nuance to their evaluation.

However, not all candidates remained focused on Berkovitz. Some offered broad overviews of theodicies or constructed comparative essays covering a range of thinkers, which, although relevant to AO2 in part, did not meet the specific requirements of the question. In these cases, the lack of detailed engagement with Berkovitz limited the level of response. A few candidates also confused Berkovitz with other schools of thought, which affected the clarity and accuracy of their responses. There were, however, some outstanding answers that achieved full marks. These responses not only showed detailed and accurate understanding of Berkovitz but also integrated wider theological and philosophical perspectives, such as the evidential and logical problems of evil, to deepen their analysis. Such answers when linked to the question demands demonstrated sophisticated engagement, clear structure, and evaluative depth, with arguments that were consistently linked back to the set question.

Question 2*

2* Critically evaluate how Zionist schools of thought have impacted upon Jewish identity.

[40]

This was a relatively well-attempted question, with most responses achieving Level 4 or above. Candidates generally showed secure knowledge of the specification content and were able to outline the key themes related to Zionism, including its origins, purposes, and various expressions. However, several responses relied heavily on set or rote-learned material. While this allowed candidates to demonstrate a reasonable level of understanding, it often limited their ability to engage critically with the question and resulted in less evaluative or analytical depth.

The strongest answers engaged directly with the core themes of the question, offering a well-structured discussion of the origins and purposes of Zionism, particularly the aim of the ingathering of the Jewish People and the emphasis on the preservation of Jewish identity through education, language, and cultural values. Candidates who accessed the higher bands went beyond simple description and analysed the wider religious, historical, and political motivations behind the movement, including the response to European antisemitism and the desire for national self-determination.

High-Level responses also addressed the different types of Zionism—religious, political, cultural, revisionist—and were able to evaluate how these various strands shaped belief, identity, and practice within different Jewish communities. Some candidates made insightful connections between Herzl's vision of political Zionism and the modernisation of Hebrew or discussed how differing Zionist ideologies led to diverse interpretations of Jewish identity and statehood.

However, several responses remained surface-level, often outlining key terms and thinkers without offering sustained evaluation. In summary, while most candidates demonstrated good knowledge of the content, the strongest responses were those that showed clear critical engagement with the question. These candidates adapted their material effectively, analysed key ideas in depth, and demonstrated a mature understanding of the religious and cultural significance of Zionism.

Question 3*

- 3* 'Maimonides should be viewed as one of the most significant theologians and philosophers in Judaism today.' Discuss. [40]

This was a popular question, and while it produced a range of responses, there was a noticeable pattern of rote-learned answers. Many candidates appeared to rely on pre-prepared material, resulting in responses that followed an almost identical structure and often lacked direct engagement with the specific demands of the question. These responses tended to plateau around Level 4. However, those candidates who were able to take their learned material and apply it critically and precisely to the question were able to access the higher levels of response, with some reaching the top bands.

Candidates who scored highly demonstrated a detailed and sophisticated understanding of the specification content and engaged critically with the central issues surrounding Maimonides' thought and ongoing influence. The strongest answers presented a nuanced understanding of Maimonides as a thinker, philosopher, theologian, and legal scholar. Candidates situated his work within both historical and intellectual contexts, accurately referencing the 13 Principles of Faith from his Commentary on the Mishnah (Sanhedrin 10) and explaining their continued significance within Orthodox Judaism. Many discussed his rationalist approach, particularly how he sought to reconcile rabbinic and biblical teachings with reason, and how this has contributed to his enduring impact across both Jewish and non-Jewish traditions.

Crucially, the best responses moved beyond description. These candidates evaluated Maimonides' contemporary relevance, showing how his ideas continue to inform or are challenged by modern Jewish belief and identity. Some candidates successfully introduced perspectives from Holocaust or feminist theology to offer a counterpoint to who might be considered the 'most significant' theologian today and in doing so enriching their evaluative commentary and showing a mature engagement with alternative viewpoints.

Those who reached the higher Levels demonstrated clear, well-structured arguments that addressed the question directly. Rather than relying solely on memorised content, they used their knowledge flexibly, adapting it to respond to the question with clarity and insight. In conclusion, while many responses to this popular question relied heavily on pre-prepared material, those candidates who showed the ability to engage critically and apply their knowledge directly to the question produced high-level, thoughtful, and well-developed responses. These were among the most impressive answers on the paper.

Question 4*

4* Critically discuss the themes, forms and signs within the Abrahamic Covenant.

[40]

This question was a popular choice and elicited a wide range of responses across the Levels of Response. There were several 'excellent' and 'very good' answers that demonstrated strong engagement with both AO1 and AO2, incorporating critical analysis, textual exegesis, and relevant scholarship.

The highest scoring responses demonstrated:

A clear and critical understanding of the concept of covenant, particularly within the context of Ancient Near Eastern parity and suzerainty treaties.

Detailed exegesis of the key texts: Genesis 12:1–3, 7; 15:1–21; and 17:1–21, with appropriate focus on the theological and literary significance of these passages.

Integration of a range of scholarly views to deepen analysis and provide a more nuanced understanding of the covenantal theme.

Precise engagement with the trigger terms in the question—themes, forms, and signs—with a structured and analytical approach to each aspect.

Sophisticated exploration of the religious, historical-critical, and contemporary perspectives on the Abrahamic covenant, offering a well-rounded response.

However, not all candidates were able to meet the demands of the question; some responses lacked sufficient detail or accuracy in their knowledge of the specification content, resulting in only basic or satisfactory demonstration of understanding. Several candidates offered rote-learned responses focused on the relevance of the Abrahamic covenant today. While aspects of this may be relevant, this was not the focus of the set question, and such responses often missed critical engagement with the core elements of the question, particularly the forms and signs of the covenant.

Some candidates omitted key covenantal elements such as circumcision, focusing primarily on the land promise while neglecting other significant signs or themes. Several responses lacked reference to scholarship, which limited their ability to move beyond descriptive or surface-level analysis.

In conclusion, the best answers displayed excellent textual knowledge, critical engagement, and evaluative clarity, showing an in-depth understanding of the Abrahamic covenant from multiple perspectives. These responses stood out for their ability to interpret the concept of covenant in a layered, sophisticated manner, in line with the demands of the question rather than presenting a rote learnt response to a general 'covenant question'.

Assessment for learning



Centres are encouraged to make sure that students are familiar with the terminology and structure of the specification content, including the theological significance of covenantal promises, the forms and signs of the covenant, and scholarly debates concerning authorship, date, and purpose of the Genesis texts.

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