

# Learning to Read Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*

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*My knowledge goes forth to point out the way,*

*To pave straight its road.*

*Lo, everyone who goes astray in the field of Torah,*

*Come and follow its path.*

*The Unclean and the fool shall not pass over it;*

*It shall be called Way of Holiness.*

The *Guide of the Perplexed* is, simply, one of the oddest books I have ever read. The poem above, placed at its beginning claims that wisdom will point out a straight path. But, unlike a philosophical treatise, which (however hard it may be to understand the difficult questions it poses) tries to be clear and direct, Maimonides' treatise is, well, tortuous: reading it, you can't help running into walls he has erected. While those walls have gates, the gates are locked and you don't have the keys. Circular speech makes a maze, so it seems, and significant silence a pitfall. (Just look at the poem! Who is speaking? What is this wisdom? A straight way to where? And those are only the beginning. Welcome to the *Guide*!) Tonight I will follow one of the many paths that weave their way through these fields from the book's beginning to its end. The question I will ask Maimonides will be "What does it mean for us to be created in the image and likeness of God?" The question I will ask myself – and you – will be "How do we read this, or (for that matter) any, book?" But first I will give a very brief summary of Maimonides' life and the as yet unresolved problem of reading posed by the *Guide*, followed by consideration of **why** he writes as he does and then of **how** he does it.

Moses son of Maimon, known to us by the Greek form of his patronymic, Maimonides, was born in 1138 in Cordoba, at that time the capital of Al-Andalus (Muslim Spain) and the largest and most affluent city in Europe. Under the reign of the Umayyads (756-1031) Cordoba and what we now call Andalusia reached a high level of civilization in art, literature, history, science, music and jurisprudence. Moses' ancestors were scholars who had served as judges and communal leaders for seven generations. But in 1148 the fundamentalist Almohads invaded Andalusia and occupied Cordoba. Resident Jews had to convert to Islam or face exile or death. Moses' family left the city when he was 10 years old. They wandered in Andalusia for twelve years or so, and Moses began to study sciences and to become familiar with the Andalusian school of Aristotelian studies with a neoplatonic component, traditions passed on and interpreted by Islamic scholars including al-Farabi, Ibn Sina, Ibn Bajja and Ibn Tufayl. Around 1160 the family immigrated to northern Africa where they lived until about 1165. But that region, too, was under the rule of the Almohads. So they moved on, eventually settling near Cairo, where the ruling dynasty supported philosophical studies. In 1171 Saladin became sultan of Egypt. Maimonides may have served as Saladin's physician; he certainly served his son. Throughout this time he studied and wrote copiously. He died in Cairo in 1204. Most notable among his many works are his vast compendium of Jewish law, called the *Mishneh Torah*, written from 1168 to 1177, and *The Guide of the Perplexed*, written from 1185 to about 1190. The *Guide* was composed in Judeo-Arabic, that is, Arabic written in Hebrew characters. A Hebrew translation was published during Maimonides' lifetime. I am using Shlomo Pines' English translation of 1963. Words in italics on the slides I will show are in Hebrew in the original.

Very briefly, the *Guide* purports to provide a way out of the crisis of faith – here called perplexity – that inevitably assails a believer in the Torah (that is, the first five books of the Bible, also known as the Pentateuch and the Five Books of Moses) who, without proper preparation, has encountered

philosophical teachings. The *Guide*, its author tells us, will show a way to reconcile the truths of the Bible with those of philosophy. There have been numerous attempts to locate that promised way. But the interpretations proffered as definitive contradict each other and, in the better part of a millennium, none of them has carried the day. As I am far from being an expert on the history of the *Guide*, I will appeal to Moshe Halbertal to summarize the situation for me. In his book *Maimonides: Life and Thought*, published in Hebrew in 2009 and in English in 2014, Halbertal groups the attempts to reach that elusive definitive interpretation into four categories, which he calls the skeptical, the mystical, the conservative and the philosophical (pp. 354-6). In brief, what he calls the **skeptical** reading holds that – as Maimonides demonstrates that philosophical exploration and language itself are insufficient to attain knowledge of God – the perplexed person should abandon philosophy altogether, return to the world and worship in silence that which he will never understand. The **mystical** reading, accepting the same human shortcomings, sees failed linguistic and philosophical interpretations as clearing the way for a meta-linguistic, meta-rational experience of the sublime. The **conservative** reading provides solace in the fact that, as philosophy cannot **prove** the eternity of the world, there is no fundamental conflict between it and religion founded on creation: therefore, both may be pursued simultaneously. Finally, the **philosophical** reading maintains that there is a difference between **true** beliefs – those achieved through philosophical investigation – and **necessary** ones – those required for living in a human community, which are taught by the Bible. The question is not whether such a distinction exists; Maimonides says that it does. The question is where to draw the line between truth and political necessity. In this case, as in the conservative reading, there is no conflict between philosophy and Scripture, as they reign in different realms. Clearly, these four interpretations, all of which have been cogently and persuasively argued, are mutually exclusive. Halbertal refuses to choose among them. Instead, he claims that Maimonides may well have meant to leave all four readings open to the reader,

telling him, in effect, that he is free to live a fully human life consisting of both piety and intellectual inquiry in accord with whichever of these interpretations suits him.

Now I can easily imagine receiving this claim with incredulity. How can it really not matter, for example, whether the world is eternal (as Aristotle holds) or was created in time (as the Bible proclaims)? How can it really not matter whether I consider my inability to know God through reason as evidence of insuperable human limitations with which I must be satisfied or the gateway to mysticism? Despite his claim that he will “liberate the virtuous one from that into which he has sunk” and “guide him in his perplexity until he becomes perfect and [ ... ] finds rest” (17), Maimonides seems to have led his readers into a morass. We will see **how** he does that shortly, but first let us consider **why** he feels it necessary to design the treatise to be so difficult to read.

I think there are three reasons for his decision. **First**, like his Islamic precursors, Maimonides takes very seriously the dangers of revealing the speculative teachings of philosophy to adherents of a religion based on revelation. The danger is real, for anything that might appear to cast doubt on holy writ could put society itself as well as the life of the purveyor of knowledge at risk (a notion that can, in the philosophical tradition, be traced back to Plato’s *Republic*), as the community based on faith, perceiving itself attacked, could turn to violence to defend itself. Social disruption related to religious stress was a constant and legitimate preoccupation for Islamic philosophers, including Maimonides’ Andalusian contemporary Ibn Rushd (known to Christian tradition as Averroes). For Maimonides himself the danger of religious turmoil, as you have seen, was not merely theoretical. The Jewish community in particular, caught between Christendom and the caliphate, was assailed from outside, but there was internal strife as well, for within Judaism, as within Islam and Christianity, there were quarreling sects seeking legitimacy, eager to appropriate evidence that would support their convictions and denounce evidence that seemed to contradict them. Anything written by a scholar of Maimonides’ stature that might seem

to question biblical revelation would endanger the spiritual health of his own people. I am inclined to read his references in the *Guide* to secrecy for the sake of the “multitude” less as intellectual arrogance than as genuine concern for the wellbeing of those who might not have the inclination or wit, or even simply the considerable time required to pursue philosophical questions.

**Second**, and more specifically, Maimonides had to contend with rabbinic prohibitions against discussing certain scriptural matters in public. In the *Guide* he states, for example, that what is called in Jewish tradition the *Account of the Beginning* (that is, the creation story in Genesis 1) is identical with natural science, while what is called *The Account of the Chariot* (that is, Ezekiel’s visions in Ezekiel 1 and 10) is identical with divine science (6). But Maimonides knows that interpretations of these two accounts must not be promulgated. Indeed he follows his statement of those identities by citing rabbinic prohibitions found in the Babylonian Talmud against divulging them. (Very briefly, for those of you who are unfamiliar with it, the Talmud is the record of rabbinic teachings that spans a period of about six hundred years, beginning in the first century C.E. and continuing through the seventh century C.E.) The authors of the Talmud, called the sages, state that “*The Account of the Chariot* ought not to be taught even to one man, except if he be wise and able to understand by himself, in which case only the chapter headings may be transmitted to him” (6), and that “*The Account of the Beginning* ought not to be taught in the presence of two men” (7). Clearly, publishing interpretations of those accounts, even if only a small elite group could read the text, violates those very specific prohibitions. Maimonides does not always agree with the sages – at one point in the *Guide*, for example, he cites sages “to whom the term *Sages* may truthfully be applied” (488, see also 492) – and, in any event, the sages don’t always agree with each other (although they may agree on this point). He does, however, take these interdictions seriously enough that he feels he has to explain why he is contravening them, adding that he has struggled with the fear of revealing too much to too many. But the Jewish community is dispersed and demoralized; you can no longer count on its being possible for two scholars to meet alone in a room.

Feeling the need to pass on what he knows so that it will not be lost (or, strictly speaking, lost again, for he says that it has been lost already but that through his studies he has recovered it [415-16]), he faces a dilemma. Whatever other concerns moved him, Maimonides' conviction that the fragile thread of oral transmission was in imminent peril of being cut forever was surely a powerful reason impelling him to write and publish the *Guide*. Now, it does not occur to Maimonides, as it does to his successor Spinoza, to question the authorship of the Bible. The Torah, which he calls a guide itself, is for him an esoteric text, written by the greatest of prophets, Moses, in what Maimonides, following the sages, calls "the language of the sons of men" in order simultaneously to reveal the Mosaic Law to all people and to conceal from the multitude the truths required for **knowledge** of God, by expressing those truths in such a way that they can be seen only by those who have the intellectual and moral capacity to understand them. Longstanding rabbinic tradition forbids unraveling in public the knot the original authors have tied. So, to keep the Torah's secrets from falling into the wrong hands, like Moses and the sages before him, Maimonides will both reveal and conceal.

But there is also a **third** reason for writing as he does, and to consider this reason we need to look more closely at the man (or men) he is addressing. The *Guide* is presented as a series of letters sent, chapter-by-chapter, to Joseph ben Judah, who had been Maimonides' student while both were living in Egypt. In the Epistle Dedicatory, which opens the treatise, Maimonides praises Joseph as a man of noble soul who has "a strong desire for inquiry" and a "powerful longing for speculative matters." Joseph writes in rhymed prose and has studied astronomy and mathematics with Maimonides, who extols the excellence of his mind. He is also a fine student of the art of logic (4). And he is perfect in religion and moral character. All of these qualities, as well as Joseph's professed desire to learn "certain things pertaining to divine matters" (4), have raised Maimonides' hopes for his gifted pupil. But Joseph has also acquired some smattering of divine science from others and has become perplexed, even stupefied, by the contradictions he has encountered between philosophy and Scripture. Moreover, as a young man, he is

overhasty in his desire for answers. Maimonides in their meetings has counseled order and restraint. But now, in 1185, Joseph has had to leave for Syria. Maimonides believes that God has decreed their separation (4), and this divine decree has, he says, aroused in him a resolution that had slackened: to write and publish important scriptural and philosophical matters he has learned in his years of study. He believes that Joseph and those like him can be rescued from perplexity by being led to see that the Bible is an esoteric work whose deepest teachings are secret. But how does one learn to read an esoteric text? In order to teach the necessary skills (including the patience that young men lack) Maimonides resolves to write an esoteric work himself. Indeed, he virtually trumpets the esotericism of his own treatise while simultaneously proclaiming that it will provide a path to understanding.

So that is the task he sets himself. And here, in short, is how he does it: In the first place he states that he will not tell his reader everything: that many (and perhaps even the most important) things will be left unsaid. But he does more: He tells us that of the issues he does cover he will deliberately introduce topics that are related to each other out of order and only briefly in what he calls “chapter headings.” But he does yet more: He claims that he will purposely contradict himself, both for pedagogical purposes and to conceal from the multitude very obscure matters that must remain hidden (18). (Let me observe in passing that encountering contradictory and contrary [or apparently contradictory or contrary] statements is a frequent and frustrating experience while reading this book.) And finally, lest we succumb to the temptation to imagine that Maimonides might have nodded, as Homer is said to have done in his long epic, he tells us that every word and its placement in the treatise have been chosen with exquisite care (15). So – what with studied silence, purposeful disorder and intentional contradiction or contrariety – the text is deliberately difficult. But surely it must be possible to understand **something**, providing (as Maimonides keeps reminding us) we always consider the context. So let us set out on our journey, proceeding slowly and carefully. Maimonides says he will teach his stupefied student how to read Scripture in two ways. The **first way** is by showing that the apparently



univocal terms found in the Bible (that is, words that appear to have only a single meaning) may instead be equivocal (having more than one meaning), or derivative (having a figurative meaning derived from an original meaning), or amphibolous (which he defines as “at times believed to be univocal and at other times equivocal”) (5). The **second way** is by explaining “very obscure parables occurring in the books of the prophets, but not explicitly identified there as such” (6).

Let us look first at how Maimonides teaches us to read words that have more than one meaning, beginning with Chapter 1 of Book I. In this chapter Maimonides states that his intent is to “refute the doctrine of the corporeality of God and to establish His real unity – which can have no true reality unless one disproves His corporeality” (21). At first glance, refuting that doctrine seems impossible. Everything about the account of creation as it appears in what Maimonides will call the external meaning of the text of Scripture is problematic. As the reader of the *Guide* will learn, he does not accept as simply true the opinion (for that is what he deems it to be despite its sacred source) that the world was created in time as Genesis 1: 1 seems to say. And as for the incorporeality of God, problems arise as early as Verse 3, where God creates light by speaking. How can one speak without a body?

These are fundamental difficulties that will be addressed throughout the *Guide*. But curiously perhaps (as they appear at the very beginning of the Torah) Maimonides does not begin with either of them. Instead, he begins his treatise proper with the famously perplexing verse, Genesis I: 26: “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” Maimonides does not censure naïve worshippers of the past, brought up as idolaters, who inferred from this verse that God had a body. In fact, he says, in order not to give the lie to the biblical text those worshippers could only understand from it that “God was a body provided with a face and a hand, like them in shape and configuration” though “bigger and more resplendent than they themselves, and the matter of which he is composed is not flesh and blood” (21). But now those who wish to read the Torah correctly must learn that it is **precisely** the corporeal

interpretation that gives the lie to Scripture because that way of reading sets up a mental image of an embodied God. And such an image – because it is internal – is even more pernicious than the physical images called idols. In order to show that this bodily image is not the one intended by Scripture Maimonides appeals to the language in which the Torah is written. The Hebrew word for *image* in verse 26 is *šelem*, while that for *likeness* is *demuth*. To address the meaning of *image*, he points out that the popular Hebrew term for physical shape and configuration is *to'ar*, used elsewhere in that sense in the Bible, whereas *šelem* refers (or, at least, may refer) to what he calls the natural form, the specific form: the soul. This he claims is the **true reality** of man: namely his intellectual apprehension or reason, which “is not found in anything else that exists under the sphere of the moon” (23). He points out that the reason idols are called images is not their shape or configuration but rather the notion of divinity and power that is deemed to subsist in them and he continues that even if *šelem* may be used in some contexts to denote physical shape or configuration the term must be regarded as equivocal or amphibolous.

As for *demuth*, it signifies “likeness in respect of a notion.” An attentive teacher, Maimonides gives, first, an easy example of the equivocality of the verb from which *demuth* is derived, from Psalm 102, verse 7: “I am like a pelican in the wilderness,” which he says – plausibly enough – no one would take to mean that the author had wings and feathers. Rather, even those who are not scholars understand this verse to say that the author’s sadness is like that of the lonely bird. Quoting the verses, *Their venom is in the likeness of a serpent* (Psalm 58: 5) and *His likeness is that of a lion that is eager to tear in pieces* (Psalm 17: 12), Maimonides makes the again unexceptionable point that both verses refer to a “likeness in respect of a notion and not with respect to a shape and a configuration” (23). Then he gives another example, less easy to interpret perhaps, as it is taken from Ezekiel’s vision known as *The Account of the Chariot*, quoting “*the likeness of the throne, the likeness of a throne,*” (Ezekiel 1:26), and explaining that the likeness in **this** case is in respect of elevation and sublimity, not in the throne’s square shape, its

solidity, and the length of its legs. Finally, he quotes from the same prophetic vision “*the likeness of the living creatures,*” referring to the figures Ezekiel saw, saying no more than that a similar explanation should be applied to that likeness as to the throne. (23). Now, having prepared us to read that puzzling verse concerning image and likeness, Maimonides at the end of Chapter 1 tells us how it is properly understood. Here is the paragraph:

Now man possesses as his proprium something in him that is very strange, as it is not found in anything else that exists under the sphere of the moon, namely intellectual apprehension. In the exercise of this, no sense, no part of the body, none of the extremities are used; and therefore this apprehension was likened unto the apprehension of the deity, which does not require an instrument, although in reality it is not like the latter apprehension, but only appears so to the first stirrings of opinion. It was because of this something, I mean because of the divine intellect conjoined with man, that it is said of the latter that he is *in the image of God and in His likeness*, not that God, may He be exalted, is a body and possesses a shape (23).

I hope you can begin to appreciate the care and artistry involved in Maimonides’ work. He begins with a verse from *The Account of the Beginning*, but not with its very beginning. Rather, he chooses a verse that is central to his purposes, at once managing both to address the perilous misunderstanding about God’s corporeality fostered by the external sense of the text and to begin to establish what he calls the true reality of man. With the example of the likeness to the pelican in the wilderness he calls our attention to the fact that there is nothing controversial in principle about his claim that words may be equivocal. In fact, we read figuratively all the time; we just may not be aware that we are doing so. By the time he rises to the likeness of the throne in the *Account of the Chariot* we understand that a figurative interpretation, despite our lack of direct experience with the likeness seen by Ezekiel, is preferable to a literal one. Indeed, by listing the physical characteristics of a throne – square shape,

solidity and length of its legs – he makes the literal interpretation sound almost as silly as that of a man with wings and feathers, though he does point out that “wretched people,” – a category that surely includes, and may in this context even be limited to, the obstinate – do misread in precisely this way.

Now, St. John’s students, having read *De anima*, will recognize that, without naming Aristotle (who is first named in Chapter 5 of Book I), Maimonides has incorporated in his scriptural interpretation Aristotle’s notion of the specific form of the human soul: reason or intellectual apprehension. And St. John’s students, being careful readers, will also have noticed that this account does not, in fact, claim to tell us anything **true** about what it means to say that man was created in the image and likeness of God. Even granting that Maimonides’ understanding of the human intellect is correct, what does it mean to say that this apprehension “was **likened** unto the apprehension of the deity” (and, moreover, only according to the incorrect first stirrings of opinion) or that because of the divine intellect conjoined with man “it is **said**” – by whom? – that man is *in the image of God and in His likeness*? It is certainly salutary to say that we are created in the likeness of God because of our intellect, inasmuch as that interpretation turns our internal gaze away from the pernicious image of God’s big shining body. But Maimonides himself has not said that this is true, and a mere report does not make it so. Clearly, there is more work to do.

For 33 more chapters – most of which are devoted to pointing out the equivocality or derivative character of numerous terms in the Bible – Maimonides sets the question of God’s corporeality aside, while continuing to lay the foundation for its denial. But in Chapter 35 of Book I he returns explicitly to the issue, stating outright that every believer must deny to God both corporeality and affections. Whether achieved through philosophical knowledge or as an article of faith, the denial of corporeality to God is unquestionable, for if God is a body he must be divisible and finite and such a god cannot be true unity. But the consequence of God’s incorporeality and concomitant lack of affections seems to be

insuperable distance between us and him, for it leads to the realization that “there is absolutely no likeness in any respect whatever between Him [that is, God] and the things created by Him; that His existence has no likeness to theirs; nor His life to the life of those among them who are alive; nor again His knowledge to the knowledge of those among them who are endowed with knowledge” (79-80). In short, by I.35 we have learned that the “likeness” we see in Genesis 1: 26 cannot remotely mean **anything** normally conveyed by that word. So where do we go from here?

One might at this point step back and ask – given our apparently definitive separation from God – what evidence we have outside the assertions of the Torah that there even **is** a god. Maimonides does not consider the question of God’s **existence** to be particularly difficult. To help us understand it, he tells a tale about the ruler of a country. If you wish to make the existence of a ruler known to one of the people of his country, who does not know him, you can draw that person’s attention to the ruler’s existence in many different ways. You might appeal to accidents and say, for example, that the ruler is a tall individual, white in color and gray-haired. Or you might say that he is the one you see from afar surrounded by a great company of riders saluting him with banners, drawn swords and trumpets. Or that he resides in a castle in a certain city or that he ordered a particular wall or bridge to be built or other similar actions. Or you might indicate his existence through circumstances of what Maimonides calls a more hidden nature. For example, if someone asks you whether the country has a ruler your answer might be yes, and you would offer as proof that a big, strong, poor man does not take the wealth of a weak, small, rich man. This example provides evidence that life in the country proceeds in an orderly fashion because of fear of the unseen ruler (98-99).

Indeed, to reach the conclusion that God exists, you do not need the Bible, for, by analogy to the well-ordered country, the orderliness of the natural world points to that existence. Nature itself, properly understood (that is, in an Aristotelian and not in an Epicurean sense) shows that the world is a cosmos

and not a haphazard heap of chance happenings, and that is no small thing. But nothing we can say about that ruler gives us what Maimonides calls “an indication of the ruler’s essence and of the true reality of his substance in respect of his being a ruler” (98). So we have made some progress, but those who seek to know God cannot be satisfied with knowing simply that He **exists**. We also want to know his essence and, ultimately, his likeness to us, which, despite Genesis 1: 26, seems now to have been categorically denied. How, then, to get at that essence and that likeness? Appealing to descriptions of God given in the Bible might seem to be a promising path. The books of the prophets and the Torah itself shower God with attributes: he is jealous, he is merciful; he has a voice, a finger, etc. But, as the one thing we now **know** about God through both philosophy and correct reading of the holy text is that he is **not** a body, no attribute can indicate what Maimonides calls his true reality. Therefore, despite perhaps being useful to encourage obedience and good behavior, none of them provides a path toward **knowledge** of God. So we are left in ignorance, which might be bad enough, but, in truth, the situation is far worse. Maimonides tells us that – in addition to presumptuously assuming that human traits can meaningfully be applied to the deity at all – applying even one attribute to God violates his unity by attributing multiplicity to him. From this it follows that the more attributes you apply to him the farther you get from him. Consequently, anyone who affirms that God has positive attributes actually recedes from him to the point that, in mounting attribute upon attribute, he “has abolished his belief in the existence of the deity without being aware of it” (145). What one might have thought was the positive way toward knowing God, then, turns out to be the way of infidelity. So **that** cannot be the right path. But perhaps there is another way; as the positive way leads in exactly the wrong direction, let us turn around and try going in the opposite direction: let us follow the negative way. According to this approach, God cannot be defined; God has no attribute; God has no quality; God has no relation to time or place or created things; though the Torah calls him jealous and avenging and keeping anger and wrathful, in truth he suffers no passions (126), and so on. Indeed, Maimonides says, the more attributes

you **negate** of God, the closer you get to him. The negative way, then, has the considerable advantage over the positive way of making no heretical assertions about something we cannot know. But negation, by its nature, cannot lead to knowledge of anything (136-7), so it certainly cannot help us with what we are trying to learn. As there seems to be no way to understand what was said back in Chapter 1 of Book I about any relation between us and God, Maimonides quotes Psalm 65: "Silence is praise to thee" (139).

I would like to observe here, for those of you who have not read the *Guide*, that Maimonides does not fall silent at this point. The particular path I have taken to reach his conclusion that we cannot know God is not the only possible one, but whatever path you follow, by the time you read the first of his several exhortations to silence in the presence of wonder, in Chapter 50 (112), you have not completed even Book I, which consists of 76 chapters, and is followed by two more books: the second with 48 chapters and the third with 54. Here is a **partial** list of the topics he covers after counseling reverent silence: In the rest of Book I he treats the names of God, the Sabians (the ancient pagans) and the defective arguments of the Islamic philosopher-theologians for the existence of God based on creation of the world in time. In Book II he examines Aristotle's understanding of the heavens, showing it to be flawed; he points out the philosophers' inability to demonstrate the eternity of the world; he discusses angels; the nature of proof; the danger of doubt; prophecy; *The Account of the Beginning*; miracles; the Sabbath and the Gathering at Sinai. In Book III he treats *The Account of the Chariot*, matter and corruption, providence, the nature and purpose of the Mosaic Law, the foundations of the Torah, the mysteries of the Torah (though, of course, he doesn't tell us what they are), and finally God's purpose on earth.

So let us not fall silent either. There seem to be two more ways of pursuing the question of God's essence and our possible conjunction with the divine. One is philosophical, the other scriptural, though, as you will see, the two will converge.

In brief, a philosophical argument, whose summary you might recognize from Aristotle's *Metaphysics* Book A.7 and 9 is this: Maimonides begins Chapter 68 of Book I by stating what he calls the generally accepted dictum of the philosophers: "that He [God] is the intellect as well as the intellectually cognizing subject and the intellectually cognized object, and that those three notions form in Him, may He be exalted (notice the un-Aristotelian praise!), one single notion in which there is no multiplicity" (163). Now man, too, as a creature possessing intellect, is capable of intellectually cognizing a thing, though, unlike God, who is intellect in actu (that is, always active), man is only potentially a cognizing subject. When a person cognizes something, however – say, a piece of wood (this is Maimonides' example) – by stripping its form of its matter, he becomes temporarily an intellectually cognizing subject in actu. And as long as he is engaged in the activity of cognizing, his intellect is identical with the essence of intellect. Finally, to complete the analogy, Maimonides states that, as its act is identical with its essence, the intellect temporarily in actu is also temporarily identical with the intellectually cognized thing, in this case the pure form of the wood. So for a moment man is Godlike inasmuch as he is simultaneously intellect, intellectually cognizing subject and intellectually cognized object. Now that was a pretty dense passage, but it also (I believe) calls our attention to another rhetorical tactic that Maimonides uses to reinforce his arguments, that is, word play, which in this passage is apparent even to those of us who are reading the *Guide* in translation (at least to those of us who know a little Greek). For he goes on to characterize man's embodied intellect as *hylic*, using not the normal Arabic word for material but rather a word used by the Islamic philosophers and derived from the Greek *ύλη*, whose original meaning (as I'm sure you know) was "wood." So, with a wink and a nod to his philosophically sophisticated readers, the woody intellect becomes one with wood! But suppose we turn that material intellect away from material things and toward the divine. As Maimonides says at the end of the chapter, speaking now of the essence of God: "Thus His essence is the intellectually cognizing subject, the intellectually cognized object, and the intellect, as is also necessarily the case with regard to every intellect in actu" (166). In



agreement with the philosophers, then, we can turn away from our material selves and share the essence of the divine, however briefly, if we direct our intellect toward divinity.

This seems promising but there still must be something missing, because Maimonides does not stop here, either. To find that missing thing we have to turn to the Bible, specifically to the second of his biblical concerns: the parables. So first, let us ask ourselves what a parable is; second, how we recognize that a story is one, given that the Bible does not always identify a parable as such; and, third, how, having determined that a story is a parable, we should go about interpreting it.

As to the first question, adopting the imagery of *Proverbs* 25: 11 and an unnamed sage Maimonides gives us a venerable and lovely simile for a saying that has two meanings. Such a saying, he tells us, “is like an apple of gold overlaid with silver filigree-work having very small holes” (12). A parable, he explains, like an equivocal or amphibolous word, has an external and an internal meaning. Its external meaning ought to be as beautiful and precious as silver while its still more beautiful and precious internal meaning ought to be as gold to the silver that encases it. Applied to the parables of the prophets this simile can be interpreted as teaching that “their external meaning contains wisdom that is useful in many respects, among which is the welfare of human societies, as is shown by the external meanings of *Proverbs* and of similar sayings. Their internal meaning, on the other hand, contains wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerned with the truth as it is” (12).

It is, of course, crucial to the simile that the golden apple inside the silver filigree, though difficult to see, not be completely sealed off. From a distance, Maimonides tells us, the piece appears to be simply of silver; but a keen-sighted observer, looking closely, will perceive the tiny holes. That is, the external meaning of the parable will contain in it something that indicates to someone contemplating it with care what is to be found in its interior. Maimonides will help us learn to see past the silver filigree, but even if we can recognize that a story is a parable, we still have the problem of knowing how to interpret it.

Fortunately, in the introduction to the work, Maimonides has given us a clue about the interpretation of parables, though, not surprisingly, he doesn't do all the work for us. Parables are of two sorts, he tells us: those (like Jacob's ladder) in which you should interpret every detail and those (like Solomon's parable of the married harlot in Proverbs 7:6-23) whose single teaching – that “all the hindrances keeping man from his ultimate perfection, every deficiency affecting him and every disobedience, come to him from his matter alone” (13) – does not depend on the details as they all point to that teaching. In short, even within parables there are different sorts of speech, some of it meaningful and some not. Part of the work of interpretation is to determine which is which. Let us see how Maimonides goes about that work.

I will say nothing more about *The Account of the Beginning* and *The Account of the Chariot* than that Maimonides considers both of them to be parabolic and that he gives a partial interpretation of each (*The Account of the Beginning* in II.30 and *The Account of the Chariot* in III.1-7). But after his interpretation of *The Account of the Chariot*, in the beginning of Book III, which is arguably the culmination of the journey upward toward divine truth, we are suddenly plunged back down into the miasma of matter, the world of uncertainty at best and calamity at worst. In the context of our painful doubt Maimonides turns to the story of Job and the trial of Abraham, both of which he considers parables.

Maimonides devotes Chapters 22 and 23 of Book III to the Book of Job, a story he calls extraordinary and marvelous (486). The sages disagree, he says, about whether Job himself existed or not, but everyone “endowed with intellect” agrees that the prologue relating Satan's conversation with God in heaven is a parable. He points out that the name of Job's country, *Uṣ*, is equivocal and suggestive, as it can be both the name of an individual and the imperative of a Hebrew verb meaning to reflect and meditate. It is, he says, as if Scripture itself exhorts us to meditate on the parable. Choosing to obey that perceived

exhortation, Maimonides will interpret the story, an activity that he claims will banish the considerable doubts and perplexity it inevitably raises for the serious reader. After a fairly detailed interpretation of the prologue he turns to the story itself, pointing out its significant features. **First**, Job and his friends do not know (as we readers do) that the agent at work is not God, but Satan, whom Maimonides identifies with the angel of death and, more prosaically, the imagination, which, in turn, he calls the evil inclination (490). **Moreover**, the misfortunes Job suffers are graduated according to the various circumstances of people – loss of fortune, death of children, physical pain – so that, whether or not they ever happened to a man called Job, they are pertinent to us all. **Finally** – and this is what Maimonides says is the most marvelous and extraordinary thing about this story – knowledge is not attributed to Job, and Maimonides has already said in I.54 that God’s “favor and wrath, His nearness and remoteness correspond to the extent of a man’s knowledge or ignorance” (124). Job is morally virtuous and righteous but he is not called wise, comprehending, or intelligent. Maimonides continues to interpret the story by considering the discourse of Job and his three friends in which they express opinions that correspond to four known opinions about providence. Job’s initial opinion he identifies with that of Aristotle, that of Eliphaz with that of the Mosaic Law, and those of Bildad and Zophar with the opinions of two Muslim sects. And **all** of them he says are mistaken. Only Elihu, distinguished in the story as both the youngest and the wisest, is correct. Maimonides summarizes his opinion, telling us that the *Book of Job* as a whole calls our attention to the inference to be drawn from natural matters, “so that you should not fall into error and seek to affirm in your imagination that God’s knowledge is like our knowledge or that His purpose and His providence and His governance are like our purpose and our providence and our governance. If a man knows this, every misfortune will be borne lightly by him. And misfortunes will not add to his doubts regarding the deity and whether He does or does not know and whether He exercises providence or manifests neglect, but will, on the contrary, add to his [that is, the person’s] love, as is said in the conclusion of the prophetic revelation in question: *Wherefore I abhor*

*myself, and repent of dust and ashes. As [the Sages], may their memory be blessed, have said: Those who do out of love and are joyful in sufferings” (497). Maimonides ends his interpretation by telling us (punning on the name of Job’s country) that if we meditate on this parable, its truth will become clear. So the story of Job is a parabolic version of the incommensurability between God and human beings that we have encountered before, but, in this prophetic revelation attained through speculation regarding natural science (493 and 496), Job’s recognition that God’s knowledge, purpose, providence and governance are nothing like ours leads not to sorrowful resignation but to love and joy in sufferings. Now, this interpretation was more surprising to me than it would have been to Maimonides’ intended readers. For they would have been familiar with the words he quotes of the sages, while I knew only the biblical account. And the Bible verse Maimonides cites does not mention love. But even if the notion that **love** is Job’s response to understanding stems from a long tradition, its appearance here is remarkable, as love has hardly appeared in the *Guide* until now. To be sure, Maimonides mentioned in Book I, Chapter 39 that love is associated with the heart (the word he was interpreting in that chapter) and he has several times cited injunctions from the Torah to love God. But under Job’s circumstances (which, remember, are the circumstances of us all), expecting him to love God because he was told to do so would be futile, not to say cruel. In order to truly love he had to move beyond simple acceptance of traditional authority and become wise.*

The next four times that love is mentioned occur in the next chapter (III.24), whose subject is Abraham’s binding of Isaac on Mt. Moriah. Now, Maimonides does not question whether Abraham existed or not, but he does interpret the story of the binding as a parable. He knows the story is a parable (he tells us) because – despite the fact that the Torah mentions trials in six passages of which the binding is merely the most difficult – God, as he understands him, simply cannot require a trial to discover whether anyone fears or loves him. For Maimonides the true reality of the parable consists in two “great notions that are fundamental principles of the Law,” both of them models for the community (500). The first is

that the extent of Abraham's devotion is intended to **teach** the limit that the fear and the love of God must reach. For Abraham, he tells us, carries out God's will in the carefully considered spirit of both fear and love (500-501). The other is "making known to us the fact that the prophets consider as true that which comes to them from God in a prophetic revelation" (501). For Abraham would not have hastened to perform a deed so extraordinary, Maimonides writes, that one would not imagine human nature capable of it, if he had had the slightest doubt about the source of the terrible request. So this story has both an external and an internal meaning, and is therefore a parable, though the Torah does not identify it as such. Indeed, its external meaning is beautiful only if you can see through it to the gold inside. For if you can't, you risk believing that God is so ignorant that he must test even his most devoted follower to discover if he truly fears and loves him. Maimonides considers this the evil belief of ignorant fools (502).

But we have seen that the protagonist of Job's story could have been anyone; in this respect the parable of the binding is different. Maimonides writes: "In truth it was fitting that this story, I mean the *binding*, should come to pass through the hand of *Abraham* and in regard to someone like *Isaac*." And here is the reason: "For *Abraham our Father* was the first to make known the belief in Unity, to establish prophecy, and to perpetuate this opinion and draw people to it" (502). Like Job, Abraham was morally upright and virtuous; unlike him, he was wise, comprehending and intelligent. In Maimonides' estimation, following long Jewish tradition, Abraham was not simply Abram, son of Terah, who had sufficient faith to leave his home country and set off for a strange land at God's sudden bidding and promise that he would make his descendants a great nation (Genesis 12: 1-4). He was instead an exile from his home country because, despite having been brought up among pagans (as the original belief in monotheism had been lost), after a prophetic revelation (515), he realized and began to teach that there is only one God. Maimonides saw Abraham as a knower, a philosopher, and a link in a tradition of **speculative** knowledge of God – repeatedly lost and rediscovered over many centuries – that began with

Adam and culminated with Moses. The characteristics that make Abraham a fitting protagonist for the story of the binding – in particular his knowledge combined with his fear **and love** of God (as in the story of Job, not named in the biblical text, which mentions only fear) – are what make the parable deeply true. To recognize the true reality of this parable, like that of the parable of Job, means to realize that with knowledge of God come not only trust but also **love** of him.

There is one more chapter concerning love and that is Chapter 51 of Book III, which Maimonides calls a kind of conclusion (618), though three chapters remain before the end of the book. The chapter begins with another parable of a ruler followed by its interpretation. This one is unlike the first one I recounted for you in two respects. One is that we are no longer in the country distant from the ruler's palace, but, rather, in the city, close enough to see and even to enter the palace if we choose to do so. The other is that, while fear and awe remain – for the ruler, though closer now, is **the ruler** after all, and (as we have learned) utterly unlike us – love has entered the city. There was a detail from the earlier parable of the ruler that I did not relate fully when recounting it, and this is it: To exemplify the hidden and most telling proof of the ruler's existence, Maimonides writes of the encounter between the rich money-changer and the poor man: "This proof is to be found in the fact that while this money-changer is, as you see, a weak and small man and this great amount of dinars is placed before him, this other big, strong, and poor individual is standing in front of him and asking him to give him as alms a carob-grain and that the money-changer does not do this, but reprimands him and drives him off by means of words. For, but for his **fear** of the ruler, the poor man would have been quick to kill him or to drive him away and to take the wealth that is in his possession" (97). When I saw this example I thought, "This is cruel and vicious. Maimonides can't have meant it!" But of course he did. For that was a dismal, albeit orderly, country ruled by fear alone, in which the true God and, therefore, charity, had no place. In the intervening chapters we have come on a long journey, up the mountain to Sinai and Ezekiel's prophetic vision. Back down on earth we have read Maimonides' explanation of the wisdom behind the 613 commandments

given in the Torah, observance of which he says perfects (indeed heals!) both our bodies and our souls. Not everyone will choose to enter the ruler's palace, but those who are prepared may reach even its inner chambers. You will not be surprised by Maimonides' description of what it means to enter. The one, he writes, who "has achieved demonstration, to the extent that it is possible, of everything that may be demonstrated; and who has ascertained in divine matters, to the extent that that is possible, everything that may be ascertained; and who has come close to certainty in those matters in which one can only come close to it – has come to be with the ruler in the inner part of the habitation" (619).

And this brings Maimonides – and us – back to the notion of human intellect conjoined with the divine. True worship, he tells us, is not following a mere imagining or the authority of somebody else. "If," he says, "you have apprehended God and His acts in accordance with what is required by the intellect, you should afterwards engage in totally devoting yourself to Him, endeavor to come closer to Him, and strengthen the bond between you and Him – that is, the intellect" (620). Our intellect is now called the **bond** between God and us. But how strong that bond will be is up to us; we, not God, are the ones who will determine its strength by the direction in which we turn. And that bond will involve the heart as well as the intellect, for love, not mentioned in Book I Chapter 1, is now present and is proportional to intellectual apprehension (621). Maimonides has told us earlier that Moses' apprehension of God was like that of no other. In Chapter 51 of Book III he tells us that Moses, followed closely by Miriam and Aaron, achieved the highest form of passionate love, as tradition tells us that all three siblings died by God's kiss, or, in Maimonides' interpretation of the metaphor, "in the pleasure of this apprehension due to the intensity of passionate love" (628). As for the rest of us, even if no one else will ever reach that degree of apprehension and love, anyone can work, joyfully, to attain the highest understanding that is possible for him or her, hoping to reach, at the moment of death, a "condition of enduring permanence, [in which] that intellect remains in one and the same state, the impediment that sometimes screened him off having been removed. And he will remain permanently in that state of intense pleasure, which

does not belong to the genus of bodily pleasures” (628). Superseding corporeality, if only at the moment of death, this person will achieve true intellectual pleasure and the permanence that is divine.

In the three chapters that remain of the treatise Maimonides returns to the activity with which he began, interpreting the meaning of three terms applied in the Bible to God because of his perceived actions – loving-kindness, judgment and righteousness – and speaking of the four senses in which the term wisdom is used, culminating with the human intellect, whose excellence will, in a metaphor often used in the treatise, necessarily **overflow** into worldly actions. He ends the body of the treatise with the following passage: “It is clear that the perfection of man that may truly be gloried in is the one acquired by him who has achieved, in a measure corresponding to his capacity, apprehension of Him, may He be exalted, and who knows His providence extending over His creatures as manifested in the act of bringing them into being and in their governance as it is. The way of life of such an individual, after he has achieved this apprehension, will always have in view *loving-kindness, righteousness, and judgment*, through assimilation to His actions, may He be exalted, just as we have explained several times in this Treatise” (638). These words read like a description of what Maimonides himself might have hoped to attain as a scholar, a teacher and a man, and what he might have hoped for his gifted pupil. They sound a ringing affirmation of the height of human excellence both intellectual and moral, which can be seen in the individual whose decision to turn toward the divine is manifested in the world by the loving-kindness, judgment and righteous actions that necessarily flow from that decision. This person is, indeed, the living image and likeness of God.

If the *Guide* were a normal book it would end here. But it isn’t and it doesn’t. In an echo of the Epistle Dedicatory Maimonides follows the above statement with a direct address to Joseph and those like him: This is the extent of what I thought fit that we should set down in this Treatise; it is a part of what I consider very useful to those like you. I hope for you that through sufficient reflection you will grasp all



the intentions I have included therein, with the help of God, may He be exalted; and that He will grant us *and all [the people of] Israel, being fellows*, that which He has promised us: *Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped. The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light; they that dwelt in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.*

AMEN

*God is very near to everyone who calls,*

*If he calls truly and has no distractions;*

*He is found by every seeker who searches for Him,*

*If he marches toward Him and goes not astray.*

Remember, the words in italics are in Hebrew in the original; you will perhaps recognize the quotes from the book of Isaiah. The *Guide of the Perplexed* is a long and dauntingly complex work and yet, its author writes on its final page, it contains only “**the extent of what I thought fit** that we should set down in the Treatise” and “**a part of what I consider very useful** to those like you,” followed by the hope expressed that “through sufficient reflection” (and with God’s help) “you will grasp all the intentions I have included therein” (638). It is as if only now at the end of the treatise is the reader ready to begin the real work, and that is to understand **what has not been said**, to read the silence as well as the speech. Maimonides has never claimed to know all the secrets of the Torah; in fact, he has said more than once that he does not know everything. But he does claim to know more than he is telling and he is telling us here that we too can know more if we proceed properly. For all that he has told us about the Bible and its relationship to the Greek philosophical tradition – and he has told us quite a lot – he has only hinted at the most significant of the secrets the perplexed person must know in order to reach peace and rest

and safety. His last words to attentive readers exhort us to go back and read between the lines. This is not bad advice for any worthy book!

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This lecture was delivered in Annapolis in January and in Santa Fe in December of 2016. It was supported by slides, which I have either omitted or incorporated into the text. At the end of the lecture I showed a slide from a copy of the *Guide* located in the National Library of Israel. Its left-hand page is the penultimate page of that book, analogous to the last page of our translation, with an added prayer in Aramaic. The poem of the translation and some other material are on the final page. If you care to consult it, you can find it in the World Digital Library.