

Interpretation

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A Study of Part 1, Chapters 1–7 of Maimonides’ *The Guide of the Perplexed*

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I

Dr. Marvin Fox’s recent book entitled *Interpreting Maimonides* reveals both sympathy and uncertainty regarding the alleged “esotericism” of Maimonides’ *The Guide of the Perplexed* (the edition used in this essay is Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, translated and introduced by Shlomo Pines with an introductory essay by Leo Strauss [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963], volumes I and II, hereafter cited as the *Guide*). At one point, Mr. Fox recognizes the difficulties in reading the *Guide* because of its reputedly concealed composition. As a result he initiates a direction of study for the writing of a commentary on the work which would sort out the contradictions and allusive rhetoric of the *Guide*.

Once we begin to read Maimonides in the way he requires, we can no longer be comfortable about the confidence with which straightforward accounts of his general philosophy have been written, nor can we always trust the writers’ statements about Maimonides’ views and doctrines. Only the most painstaking study makes it possible for us even to hazard an opinion concerning the views of Maimonides, and such an opinion is reliable only if it emerges from a sensitive confrontation with the obstacles and subtleties of the texts. (M. Fox, *Interpreting Maimonides*, Studies in Methodology, Metaphysics, and Moral Philosophy [Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1990], p. 7.)

At another point, his tone bears frustration at the suggestions of the depth of the esotericism. In response to Dr. Leo Strauss’ essays, which are, in the modern context, formative in explicating the magnitude of Maimonides’ esotericism, Fox writes:

I have chosen to discuss Strauss’ method at such length because it is widely, and justly, considered to be one of the most important modern contributions to the study of Maimonides. We have seen, however, that with all its brilliance and ingenuity, it seems to do little to advance the cause of sound understanding, even for readers who are well prepared and sophisticated. If the only way to expound an

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esoteric text is by compounding and complicating the esotericism, then perhaps we should give up the effort altogether. (p. 62)

Few of us would not admit that the arguments made by Strauss regarding the deliberate concealment of the teachings of the *Guide* are indeed disturbing. Moreover, if the *Guide* is written with intentional contradictions, one wonders what can possibly be written about the *Guide* which will not be contradicted by another part of it. The interpreter of Maimonides seems required to reconsider preliminary impressions of the book and destined to regret his first expositions of the *Guide*. This tension remains evident in Mr. Fox's recent publication. In the same chapter from which the latter quotation is taken (it is actually only one page later), he writes: "If he was to conform to the law [talmudic law], Maimonides had no choice but to write his book in this esoteric fashion" (p. 63). Despite Fox's occasional tone of frustration, he recognizes Maimonides' respect for a rabbinic law in the concealment of certain teachings. If, then, Maimonides does deliberately conceal as well as reveal, we will need to make an inquiry into what he is concealing and how the concealment is accomplished. If we are determined not to misunderstand the *Guide*, and we are resolved to endure disturbances which might cause evasiveness in our inquiry, it seems unavoidable that we will need to scrutinize what elements lead to the affirmation that the *Guide* is a difficult, even esoteric, composition. Fox sets out what might be done; he suggests that it is necessary to write a commentary on the chapters which will not be the final exposition of Maimonides' teaching, but will be the careful comment on what is found in each chapter, and what the chapter's relation is to what precedes and follows (p. 152).

II

In the "Introduction to the First Part" of the *Guide*, Maimonides states that there are two purposes to his treatise, the explanation of biblical terms and the explanation of obscure biblical parables. He begins the *Guide* with a discussion of numerous biblical terms. Maimonides also identifies the two most central biblical parables as the Account of the Beginning (*ma'aseh bereshit*, the first chapters of Genesis) and the Account of the Chariot (*ma'aseh merkabah*, Ezekiel 1 and 10). The place in the *Guide* devoted to each parable is more difficult to discern than with the terms. The Account of the Beginning does not appear to be discussed directly in any chapter of the *Guide*. The Account of the Chariot is discussed in seven chapters at the beginning of Part III. Even in these seven chapters the explanation of Ezekiel 1 and 10 is cursory and allusive, however. If Maimonides fulfills his second purpose, that is, the explanation of biblical parables, it is necessary to discern the manner in which he offers this explanation. Furthermore, in what sense are these two passages parables? It is perhaps simple enough to recognize that Ezekiel's visions are symbolic, but

even this awareness does not account for the sense and purpose of these symbols. And in what way is the account of creation a parable? Is the claim that it is a parable more controversial than the claim that the Account of the Chariot is a parable, and is it therefore more necessary to present the Account of the Beginning enigmatically? Why does it appear that there are no chapters devoted to the Account of the Beginning in the way that there are for the Account of the Chariot?

Maimonides begins by cautioning the reader of the *Guide* to proceed in an orderly manner. In the Epistle Dedicatory to Joseph (2b), Maimonides writes: “Yet I did not cease dissuading you from this [Joseph’s demand for additional knowledge] and enjoining upon you to approach matters in an orderly manner. My purpose in this was that the truth should be established in your mind according to the proper methods and that certainty should not come to you by accident.” Maimonides recognizes that the reader may be impatient; the reader wants to know the final statement on all matters without the appropriate respect for the difficulty of the subject, without taking the necessary steps in developing and completing an argument and without submitting to any kind of moral training. In order to guard against the superficial readings that will arise due to the student’s impatience, Maimonides warns that it is necessary to read and to contemplate the teaching of each chapter of his treatise in its place. By means of this cautionary remark Maimonides indicates that the *Guide* will begin with certain preliminary teachings which are necessary for the full comprehension of later teachings in the *Guide*. Maimonides’ explanation of all matters does not occur at once.

Maimonides’ creation of a difficult, even a concealed and esoteric, book seems to arise from his insistence that the student should proceed in an orderly fashion and that the student should have proper preparation. Since there is doubt in this matter, let us note the three ways that he claims he uses to achieve this aim. First, Maimonides does not explain what the organization of the treatise is; he says only that “you must connect its chapters one with another” (9a). Second, the treatise is written “with great exactness and exceeding precision” (9a), and only the meticulous reader will scrutinize it with the required persistence and thoroughness. Third, Maimonides claims that the treatise contains contradictions. In the “Introduction” Maimonides mentions seven causes of contradictions in any book or compilation (10a–12a); at the end of this enumeration he says that “Divergences that are to be found in this Treatise are due to the fifth cause and the seventh” (12a). The fifth cause arises from the necessity of teaching difficult matters in ways that are easy to comprehend (10a–10b). The seventh cause arises from the necessity to conceal some parts of a difficult matter and to reveal other parts (10b). The reader is required to identify these contradictions without extensive assistance by means of acquiring a complete familiarity with texts of both classical philosophy and the Bible and by following Maimonides’ argument closely. One only gains confidence in the precision

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with which Maimonides' treatise is written as one begins to see that what at first may appear as lack of direction in the *Guide* turns into a sustained and coherent exploration of particular philosophical and biblical problems.

In order to be as concrete as possible as to the way in which these assertions regarding the composition of the *Guide* can be witnessed, let us look at one preliminary example. As already mentioned, the Account of the Chariot is found in Chapters 1–7 of Part III of the treatise. Yet even an initial reading of these chapters reveals how the explanation found in these passages is incomplete without the proper discussion of certain terms and problems found in other chapters. For instance, in III 1 and III 2 Maimonides insists, through at least three different arguments, that the forms of living creatures in Ezekiel 1 and 10 are those of human beings. He does not in any of the seven chapters of the *Guide* devoted to Ezekiel state why this argument is important. Furthermore, the meanings of all the key terms in these chapters have already been examined elsewhere. The term “face,” for example, is studied in I 37 and there it is explained that the term has six possible senses. Maimonides does not say which of the six senses is used in the Account of the Chariot. The explanation of the Account of the Chariot requires the study of other biblical terms as well, and they are treated in other chapters of the *Guide*. The reader is only alerted to the variety of meanings of a word if the chapters of the *Guide* have been studied in order, that is, if the chapters devoted to the explanation of the variety of usages of the terms have already been mastered. Thus impatient and disorderly readers will not be able to sort out what is said about the Account of the Chariot because they have not studied the other parts of the *Guide* adequately. The student who is serious in study is required to begin the laborious task of understanding each chapter in its place.

Maimonides also cautions the reader against commenting on the *Guide*. The teaching of the treatise may be harmful to the student, to the teacher and to the truth itself, and Maimonides urges the reader to be reticent in making comments. The reader is cautioned to explain the *Guide* only to the extent that the teachings of the treatise are explained elsewhere by authorities of the Jewish law (9a). Maimonides follows this legal sanction prohibiting the explanation of certain biblical passages before the student is prepared. This is one of the reasons that the *Guide* is such a difficult book. Only the diligent student, only the cautious student, will complete the necessary training. Thus the student of the *Guide*, provided he respects the cautions issued by Maimonides or submits to the Jewish authorities, is limited in what he may say or write about it. If the student does not submit to the author's own explicit instructions, there is little chance of discovering what his true views are. If the student respects Maimonides' instruction, the student may explain certain teachings of the treatise to others, but would also be restrained in teaching all that he has discovered on certain subjects.

The need for orderliness in the study of the *Guide* attests to an agreement

between the teachings of Aristotle and the teachings of the Bible. Both sources teach the need for respect for authority. For Aristotle the authority that must be respected is rationality; for Scripture the authority is the teaching of the prophets. Maimonides' intentionally difficult rhetoric, therefore, requires the student to submit to the requirements of rationality and the wisdom of the prophets. A rash student will do neither. In this respect for authority the *Guide* is a vigorous defence of both the intellectual life and the teachings of Scripture. The difficult nature of the *Guide* is, thus, a way of distinguishing between students who are truly respectful of those authorities and those who are not.

It is possible that someone will claim to know the teachings of the *Guide* when in fact he is in ignorance. The student must come to be able to distinguish between trustworthy and untrustworthy authorities. The key to this discrimination is always the extent to which the alleged authority can lead each student to the next step of his education. Maimonides assures the student that those who obtain a certain perfection have not gained it only for themselves; the one who has understood is under an obligation to allow the knowledge to be learned by someone else (II 29 [66a]). If the student can confirm the hints intimated by the teacher, the student has reason to be convinced of the competence of the authority. The aim of the teacher is always to teach to the student as much as the student can apprehend; the final teachings are not to be hidden from the student who is adequately prepared. To be sure, what constitutes adequate preparation will be a continual problem; each reader's first inclination will likely be to assume he is competent. Maimonides must begin by creating a situation in which his readers become aware of their uncertainty and perplexity. Furthermore, the student will need to work independently and learn to resolve difficulties alone. However, the student need never be betrayed by a teacher who in fact does not know the teachings of the *Guide* and is being obscure as a way of hiding his or her ignorance. The qualities of a good teacher will be the most severe loyalty to reasonableness, the extreme care in the reading of all biblical texts, and a certain straightforwardness in revealing the next step, even if not all steps, in the student's learning.

This essay begins the reading of the *Guide* in an orderly way in order to reveal, at least in part, the nature of the esotericism of the *Guide*. I shall study the first seven chapters of Part I, but even in these chapters I make no claim to having determined the purpose of all that is said therein. However, if we begin to see an order that is at first not apparent, we will be cautioned against a too rapid and superficial reading of the *Guide*. This essay seeks to explain that what appears in these first seven chapters as a discussion of randomly selected biblical terms is in fact an extensive commentary on certain biblical passages. In order to be alerted to the biblical passages the student must be sufficiently familiar with Scripture to know the significance of the contexts from which individual terms are chosen. The student cannot but begin to marvel at how well Maimonides knew the Hebrew Scriptures, and to be cautioned against

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seeing these initial chapters of the *Guide* only as a discussion of randomly selected biblical terms. This careful exposition of key biblical passages is only one example of Maimonides' esotericism in the *Guide*.

III

The first chapter of the *Guide* begins with a discussion of two Hebrew terms, "image" (*şelem*) and "likeness" (*demuth*). By citing the use of these terms in biblical passages, Maimonides establishes that the sense of both terms is not limited to physical shape or configuration. *Şelem* means "physical shape" in I Samuel 6:5, "images of your emerods," but it does not mean "shape" in Psalm 73:20, "thou shalt despise their image," for what is despised is a characteristic of their soul and not their physical shape. *Demuth* means "likeness in respect to a notion," rather than simply physical likeness; see Ezekiel 31:8, Psalms 58:5 (King James Version English translation, verse 4), Psalms 102:7 (KJV, verse 6), and elsewhere. *Şelem* and *demuth* are both used to refer to that which is incorporeal and immaterial. In particular, *şelem* may be used to indicate that which causes a thing to be what it is, the formal cause or essence.

Maimonides studies the meanings of these two words because they occur in the same passage, Genesis 1:26–27. A phrase from these verses, "Let us make man in our image, after our likeness," containing both terms, is the first biblical quotation in Chapter 1 of the *Guide*. Parts of Genesis 1:26–27, though not always this phrase, are repeated three more times in the first chapter. Thus, through the coincidence of the terms *şelem* and *demuth* in Genesis 1:26–27, and through repeated reference to these two biblical verses, there is a suggestion that Chapter 1 of the *Guide* is devoted especially to the explanation of this single biblical passage. The importance of this passage is confirmed by the identification of the theme of the first chapter. Maimonides states that it is necessary to prove the doctrine of God's incorporeality if we are to prove the doctrine of His unity (I 1). Thus he sets out to prove that God is incorporeal: God does not have a body, and He is wholly separate from matter and nature. According to certain philosophical arguments, it is a contradiction to say that separate substance is corporeal; but Maimonides does not draw attention to that philosophical argument. He proceeds by showing that biblical passages teach that God is incorporeal. The first and most central passage suggesting that God has a body is Genesis 1:26–27. If Adam is made in the image of God, then that image may be man's physical shape. Maimonides sets out to refute this argument. Through his lexical study he shows that *şelem* and *demuth* in this passage do not mean physical likeness.

As an alternative he says that the image of God in mankind is intellect or reason. Reason is what constitutes the human being as a substance or being: it is our highest perfection. It distinguishes our species from all other species of

plants or animals. Moreover, reason is what makes us like unto God. God's nature is best evoked by saying God is reason and the image of God in mankind is an image of this reason. The first chapter of the *Guide* introduces the reader to a basic principle of philosophy. The chapter gives a justification of philosophy from a Scriptural text.

What began as a discussion of Hebrew terms resulted in the explanation of a single key biblical passage, Genesis 1:26–27. The significance of this one passage is, however, at first concealed because the chapter examines the meaning of another Hebrew term, “form” (*to'ar*), and there are numerous references to other biblical texts throughout the chapter. We are given the initial hint that the study of terms may conceal the more significant biblical context from which certain terms are selected.

IV

Chapter 2 does not begin with the explanation of biblical terms as Chapter 1 does. Chapter 2 presents and then responds to an objection that is raised against the conclusion of Chapter 1. The objection is based upon a second biblical passage, Genesis 3:5: mankind is prohibited from eating the fruit because if they eat they will be like gods, knowing good and evil. Genesis 3:5 appears to contradict Genesis 1:26–27. With regard to the latter, Maimonides has just argued that mankind's highest perfection is reason and hence he suggests that the purpose of human life is the cultivation of the intellect and perhaps the attainment of the knowledge of God. Yet in Genesis 3:5, it appears that human beings are forbidden to pursue such knowledge. It appears too in the following verses in Genesis 3 that human beings gain the capacity for knowledge only after their disobedience: Genesis 3:7 says that after man and woman ate the fruit their eyes were opened and they knew that they were naked. Genesis 3 suggests that the pursuit of knowledge is a result of disobedience.

Maimonides places the objection in the mouth of a learned man, albeit a man who is intemperate in regard to drink and sex. The intemperate man defends the second biblical passage over the first: he seems to have proof that desires and imaginings have brought reason into being rather than caused a diminution of it. Maimonides' initial reservation about this reading is made, however, by noting what type of moral life accompanied this objection.

Maimonides answers this intemperate man and resolves the apparent contradiction between the two biblical passages with two rejoinders. First, he shows that one of the Hebrew terms for god, *Elohim*, has three possible meanings: it refers to the deity, or angels or rulers who govern cities. Maimonides does not establish these meanings of *Elohim* by citing their use in biblical passages; he refers instead to another authority, the Aramaic translation of Onqelos. In Genesis 3:5 Onqelos translates *Elohim* as “rulers” (*rabrabin*). The knowledge pos-

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essed by rulers is not the highest form of knowledge; it is not identical to the knowledge possessed by God. What mankind acquires as a result of disobedience is the kind of knowledge that rulers have, but not the type of knowledge that God has.

Maimonides' second argument is a confirmation and elaboration of the first argument. He distinguishes "truth" (*'emeth*) and "falsity" (*sheqer*) from "good" (*tob*) and "evil" (*ra'*). What is true and false exists by necessity. With the intellect humans discern the nature or necessity of all things or that which is always true. Good and evil, in contrast, are designations for generally accepted opinions (*al-mashhûrât*). Maimonides identifies the Hebrew words "good" (*tob*) and "evil" (*ra'*) with, respectively, the somewhat ambiguous Arabic words *al-ḥasan* which may mean "good," "beautiful" but even "agreeable," and *al-qabîḥ* which may mean "evil," "ugly" and "disagreeable". He thus emphasizes that "good" and "evil" refer to generally accepted opinions. They are the opinions and views of the majority, and they may or may not be true. Through the cultivation of reason these opinions can be replaced by true knowledge. Since the terms "good" and "evil" (*tob* and *ra'*) are used in Genesis 3:5, and not "truth" and "falsity" (*'emeth* and *sheqer*), Maimonides concludes that what is acquired as a result of the disobedience of humans is not true knowledge but generally accepted opinions. Opinions are lower in dignity than truth; opinions are only possible after the disobedience and tend to distract people from the highest kind of knowing.

The inferiority of these generally accepted opinions is revealed in their admixture with the desires of the imagination. In Genesis 3:6 the tree is described as good for food, as pleasant to the eyes and as able to make one wise. But Maimonides indicates that this knowledge that comes by way of imagination is quite different in nature from the knowledge that comes by way of reason. Due to disobedience the human state tends to be absorbed in imaginings. Most people know only what is agreeable through their sensual nature and the impressions of this sensuality upon the imagination. The inferiority of this "knowledge" is indicated by the intemperate morality of the man who advocates it. The depravity of mankind's subsequent condition is further evinced by the difficulty he has in securing food (Genesis 3:17–19); the human state becomes more like that of the beasts (I 2).

Chapter 2 of the *Guide* begins by responding to an objection to the reading of Chapter 1. Chapter 2 explains the key verses in Genesis 3 and, thus, gives an account of the cause and effects of Adam's and Eve's disobedience. Chapter 2, like Chapter 1, focuses upon a biblical passage. The first two chapters set up a dialectic between two different positions. Both positions have a certain merit and are, therefore, persuasive. However, Maimonides offers a criticism of the case against the view presented in Chapter 2 because the argument is made by an intemperate man. Yet is it not possible that the argument could have been made by a moral man? We may perhaps need to examine more closely what

Maimonides implies about the proper understanding of these two positions, especially as he may modify or clarify his position later in the *Guide*. The force of Maimonides' argument in these first two chapters stresses that the image of God in humans is reason and that God is incorporeal. The chapters seem to be written to someone who will immediately accept that intemperance is wrong, and that the intemperance of someone, including a philosopher, makes their argument incorrect. The one who is persuaded by Maimonides' presentation will likely be a religious reader who, because of the moral problems associated with the position presented in Chapter 2, will accept the teachings that God's essence is rationality and that this essence is the image of God's perfection in human beings, as presented in Chapter 1. The religious reader is persuaded to accept the philosophical view, that is, a view he might not initially be sympathetic with, for moral reasons. There are also two types of readers that may not be immediately persuaded by Maimonides' argument. The first reader is the genuinely intemperate person who prefers intemperance to right moral action, though such persons would be left with the insinuation that their argument is irrational because they are intemperate. Now it is possible that Maimonides affirms that intemperance causes irrationality, but it is also possible that he claims that someone who has not mastered all his passions may have achieved a certain degree of intellectual perfection. At this stage we do not know which of these situations characterizes the intemperate man. The second reader is one who is temperate and who agrees that rationality is mankind's supreme perfection, but who wonders if what has been constructed with this dialectic are two extremes that need not be as radically opposed as Maimonides presents. Do the imagination and commonly accepted opinions participate in any more integral way in the perfection of the human intellect? We can at this point only wait to see how Maimonides manages these two positions in the subsequent chapters of the *Guide*.

The dialectical character of these first two chapters alerts us to a distinction between the ostensible literary form of the *Guide* and what the dynamics of the work truly are. The *Guide* appears to be a treatise with an exposition of various topics in a sustained fashion. But the dialectical nature of the first two chapters introduces the possibility that two or perhaps more viewpoints will be in conversation in subsequent chapters. It remains to be seen how one or the other of the views predominates or how one view is modified by the other.

V

Chapters 3 and 4 of the *Guide* discuss the meaning of five Hebrew terms. Chapter 3 examines the words "figure" (*temunah*) and "shape" (*tabnith*). The purpose of this lexical study is similar to what we discovered in respect to the terms "image," "likeness" and "form": Maimonides shows which term is used

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to indicate physical shape and when, if at all, the terms mean essence or natural form. “Shape” (*tabnith*) is used exclusively of physical shape. “Figure” (*temunah*) has three uses: it may be used in the sense of physical shape, in the sense of the imaginary form of an object after the object is no longer manifest to the senses and in the sense of natural form or essence. Maimonides isolates one passage in which “figure” is used in the sense of the essence of God. In Numbers 12:8 Moses beholds the similitude (*temunah*) of God. The word “similitude” as it is used here in Numbers 12:8 could mean that Moses saw God’s physical shape, and for those who do not know the other meanings of the word or the problem of saying that God is corporeal, the meaning is helpful, for it indicates that Moses knew God. But for those who know that similitude (*temunah*) means essence as well and who also know the problem of saying that God is corporeal, the passage indicates the perfection of Moses’ knowledge. Moses’ apprehension of God is perfect human knowledge because he knows God’s true being. Moses apprehends the nature of God by his reason and not by his imagination nor with any apprehension received through the senses.

Chapter 4 notes the use of “to see” (*ra’oh*), “to look at” (*habbit*) and “to vision” (*hazoh*). In explaining the sense of these terms Maimonides cites those cases in which God either sees or is seen by human beings. Whenever God sees or is seen the terms are figurative; God does not have a body and, therefore, has no eyes to see nor shape to behold. The biblical text describes God as “seeing” as a figurative way of indicating that God possesses knowledge. Maimonides also notes numerous biblical passages in which God is seen by humans. The passages in the Pentateuch which say that God is seen by humans are Genesis 18:1, Exodus 24:10 and Numbers 12:8. Maimonides refers in both Chapters 3 and 4 of the *Guide* to the passage in Numbers 12; he thus gives us a clue to the importance of this passage. In the passage the terms “similitude” (*temunah*) and “to look at” (*habbit*) occur together. What links Chapters 3 and 4 is a single biblical passage; *habbit*, like *temunah*, is used figuratively. In Numbers 12:8 Moses does not actually see the form of God with his eyes; he apprehends the form of God with his intellect.

Numbers 12 is a biblical chapter which establishes the superiority of Moses’ prophecy over that of Aaron and Miriam. In particular the Lord reveals to Miriam and Aaron that Moses has been singled out to know God. Other prophets at the time know God in visions and dreams (12:6) and in dark speeches (12:8); the Lord speaks to Moses “mouth to mouth” (12:8). The perfection of Moses’ apprehension of God is contained in the phrase: “and the similitude of the Lord shall he behold.” The passage at first suggests, like the passage in Genesis 1:26–27, that God is corporeal. As Maimonides explains the other possible meanings of *habbit* and *temunah*, the passage is understood as evidence of the perfection of Moses’ apprehension of God.

The theme of the superiority of Moses’ intellectual prophecy is continued in Chapter 5 as well. This chapter is not a study of terms, and it functions with

respect to Chapters 3 and 4 as Chapter 2 functions with Chapter 1. Chapter 2 answers an objection to Chapter 1; Chapter 5 answers an objection to Chapters 3 and 4. The latter propose that Moses apprehends God through the intellect rather than through the imagination. But how can such apprehension of perfect being be possible for human beings after their disobedience? And even if such an apprehension is possible, Scripture and common opinion would insist that the prophet must possess a moral perfection by having a sense of shame. In order for Maimonides to affirm the degree of superiority of Moses' apprehension, he must point out where Scripture reveals that Moses possesses moral perfection.

Maimonides begins his response to this problem with a digression on comments made by “the chief of philosophers” when he began to investigate obscure matters. According to Maimonides' account in *Guide* I 5, the chief of the philosophers enjoins the student to be patient, which indicates that the student should appreciate his own limitations and the difficulty of the subject. The “chief of the philosophers” claims the student may require an improvement in character; the student must extinguish the desires and cravings engendered by the imagination. Maimonides draws to our attention that moral probity is also central to the prophecy of Moses; in particular, Moses possesses more humility than other men upon the face of the earth, as is stated explicitly in Numbers 12:3, the passage central to Chapter 4 of the *Guide*. Moses is capable of an apprehension of God because he initially drew back from such an apprehension. The incident to which Maimonides refers in Chapter 5 is the story of the burning bush (Exodus 3:1–4:17). In the story Moses realizes both his own deficiency and God's perfection, and Moses draws back from such a knowledge of God (Exodus 3:6). Later, in Numbers 12, Moses is honored as having received a more perfect apprehension of God than Miriam and Aaron, and Moses is also said to be the meekest man on earth (12:3). Moses achieved, or was granted, the most perfect character and the most perfect intellect. He was thereby able to overcome the generally accepted opinions which came about as the result of Adam's disobedience.

VI

Chapter 6 and 7 return to the study of Hebrew terms. Chapter six discusses the use of “man” (*'ish*), “woman” (*'ishshah*), “brother” (*'ah*) and “sister” (*'ahoth*). Chapter 7 examines the use of a single verb meaning “to bear children” (*yalod*). The purpose of Chapter 6 is at first obscure because the four terms that it examines are not in any key passages we have studied. It is in fact easier to establish the purpose of Chapter 6 if we begin with Chapter 7.

In Chapter 7 Maimonides distinguishes the literal notion of “to bear children” from its figurative uses. *Yalod* is used figuratively to mean the creation

of mountains, the growth of plants, the procuring of the events of the day, the telling of lies and the propagation of opinions and knowledge. In the last sense the term is used in a biblical passage similar to Genesis 1:26–27. In Genesis 5:3 Adam “bears” a son in his own likeness and image. What is intended in the passage is not simply that Adam bore a son by procreation but that Adam instructed his son, Seth, so that Seth bears the intellect of his father. The image of God in Adam that is passed on to his son is reason and not a physical shape. Moreover, Seth is the first son of Adam who bears this intellectual perfection; the descendants of Cain, depicted in Genesis 4:17–24, cultivated evil and violence and, thus, did not resemble Adam. Therefore, it is only at the birth of Seth that the text says that a son is born that is in the image of Adam.

Chapter 7, like the chapters before it, focuses upon a biblical passage, Genesis 5:1–3. This passage is similar to Genesis 1:26–27 in that it uses the terms “image” (*şelem*) and “likeness” (*demuth*). But Genesis 5:1–3 is potentially a refutation of Maimonides’ reading of Genesis 1:26–27 because it says that Adam begat a son in his likeness and image. If “begat” means only the creation of physical shape, what Adam begets in his son is a body. Since the word “image” is both what God creates in Adam and what Adam begets in his son, then we expect the image to be the same. Hence, the passage may suggest that God is corporeal. Maimonides opposes this conclusion by showing that “begat” has several usages, one of which is the propagation or the education of true notions. “Begat” does not mean “physical shape” in Genesis 5:3; it is used in the sense of the preservation and perfection of reason.

Let us now return to Chapter 6. Every chapter thus far in the *Guide* contributes to the argument that God is incorporeal. We might suspect, then, that the same is true of Chapter 6. Maimonides’ central statement about the terms “man” and “woman” is that they refer to human beings. Maleness and femaleness is a human distinction. He proceeds to say that animals possess this distinction as well, and, thus, they too may be called man and woman. Maimonides leaves the student to draw his own conclusion from this statement. If we are correct that a central theme in these first chapters is God’s incorporeality, then how could these terms contribute to Maimonides’ exploration of the theme? The student is led to the possible problem of the origin of sexual differentiation. This problem is indeed necessary in the exposition of Genesis 1:26–27 and Genesis 5:1–3 because in both passages it is possible that the image of God in Adam is either maleness or femaleness or a combination of the two. The Hebrew terms used in these passages, however, are “male” (*zakar*) and “female” (*neqebah*), and not “man” and “woman.” If Maimonides wishes to make his reading of these two passages in Genesis conform to his affirmation that God is incorporeal, he must point out that the uses of “male” and “female” are limited to human beings and animals and that the image of God is not sexually determined or circumscribed. Maimonides makes this argument only by way of saying that “male” and “female” are equivalents to “man” and

“woman” (*Guide*, p. xxviii). As God is neither “man” nor “woman,” so God is neither “male” nor “female.” Sexuality is part of the created order and is not a part of the divinity. This discussion of equivalent terms does contribute to the theme of God’s incorporeality.

Chapter 7 alerts us to the passage in Genesis 5 which forms part of the reading of Genesis 1 and 3. Maimonides continues to maintain that the image of God in mankind is reason.

VII

In summary, the first seven chapters of the *Guide* begin with an examination of what at first appear to be randomly selected biblical terms. Through a study of these terms the reader is introduced to the problem of God’s incorporeality, and the reader might therefore conclude that the terms that are discussed have been chosen simply because they suggest that God is incorporeal. But throughout these chapters there is a movement from the study of biblical terms to the study of biblical passages, Genesis 1:26–27, 3:5–7, 5:1–3 and Numbers 12:8. The passages are identified as the reader becomes aware that the biblical terms which are chosen for examination are not selected randomly, but are used in specific biblical passages. At the same time Maimonides diverts attention away from these passages by examining terms that are not in these particular passages. He examines the terms “form,” “shape,” “to see” and “to vision” in these chapters, even though these terms do not occur in any of the four passages we have identified. These terms give the appearance that the study is purely lexical and is not devoted to specific passages. Several other terms, “man,” “woman,” “brother” and “sister,” are equivalents of the words used in these passages. The equivalents are used to confirm the reading of these specific biblical passages but also deflect attention away from the passages because they are not found in them. Maimonides uses several devices to alert the student to the biblical passages with which he is concerned so that as a reader seeks to clarify the lexical study of the opening chapters of the *Guide* the treatise becomes an extensive commentary on specific biblical passages.

Maimonides’ reading of these passages establishes three teachings which he wishes to explore and develop in the *Guide*. First, reason is the image of God in human beings; it is our highest perfection. Reason is what makes mankind most like God. Therefore the image of God in us is not corporeal being, for God is not a body and does not possess bodily parts or organs. Second, Adam’s primordial disobedience causes a diminution of the human capacity for reason; most human beings are now ruled by desires and imaginings and are intemperate and even bestial. Human “knowledge” is more often of generally accepted opinions rather than of what is true or false. This “knowledge” is of a different order than the knowledge that Adam once had, and it is of a different

order than Moses' apprehension of God. Whereas Adam's reason was once able to apprehend truth without senses and imagination, after the disobedience intellectual knowledge has been obscured by mankind's preoccupation with the desires and pleasures of the senses. Third, Moses has been granted again, or has attained, the perfection of the intellect. Moses does not know God by way of the senses and imagination, in visions and obscure parables, but apprehends God through reason.

What is so boldly accomplished by these early chapters is that Maimonides has established, by recourse to Scriptural exegesis, the validity and necessity of pursuing philosophical investigation. He has shown that the Torah not only does not condemn philosophy, it points to the religious or moral necessity of pursuing it. Moreover, the prophet Moses is not antagonistic to philosophy, but is himself a philosopher, that is, he has achieved the highest possible human intellectual perfection. In a brilliant argument directed primarily to the religious reader, Maimonides reveals the religious and moral obligation for intellectual inquiry of the nature of God through a moral argument derived from Scripture.

Three of the four biblical passages which are central to these first seven chapters of the *Guide* are in the early chapters of Genesis. The explanation of these passages forms part of the first parable which Maimonides sets out to explain, the Account of the Beginning. We have gradually begun to reconstruct Maimonides' account of the first parable. But we should be cautioned lest we think the explanation of the first parable is complete. Maimonides has not resolved all of the problems in the explanation of these chapters in Genesis, and we have only begun our study of the *Guide*. We will need to be especially concerned with whether later chapters in the *Guide* modify any of these early affirmations in any way.

This inquiry reveals how Maimonides both explains and conceals the full import of particular biblical passages. It is an initial example of Maimonides' esotericism in the *Guide*. This esotericism is demanding on the student of the *Guide*, even humbling as we learn of our ignorance, but it does not seem, even on the basis of this preliminary investigation, that the *Guide* can be understood unless this deliberate procedure is recognized.