

Interpretation

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The Guide to *The Guide*: Some Observations on “How To Begin To Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*”*

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In his interpretation of *The Frogs* in *Socrates and Aristophanes*, Leo Strauss points out the implied thought of an Aristophanean character that “only gods can know whether a given being is or is not a god,” a thought Strauss gives special prominence by repeating the core of it in Latin translation¹. In a slightly different way, I believe, it also holds that only philosophers can know whether a human being is or is not a philosopher. In becoming a philosopher himself, Strauss began to understand that Maimonides was a genuine philosopher, and, as he states in “A Giving of Accounts,” he “eventually” began “to understand...the whole *Guide of the Perplexed*.”² This understanding makes Strauss’s interpretation of Maimonides so distinctive and important that no student of Maimonides or of Strauss can dismiss it.

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¹ Leo Strauss, *Socrates and Aristophanes* (New York: Basic Books, 1966), 245.

² “A Giving of Accounts: Jacob Klein and Leo Strauss,” *The College* 22, no. 1 (April 1970): 3. It is worth noting that right after the statement quoted, Strauss continues: “Maimonides never calls himself a philosopher; he presents himself as an opponent of the philosophers. He used a kind of writing which is in the precise sense of the term, exoteric.”

In the well-known “Autobiographical Preface” to the English translation of his book on Spinoza, Strauss mentions that he experienced a “change of orientation” in the early 1930s, before which he had accepted the premise that “a return to premodern philosophy is impossible.”³ If the “first expression” of Strauss’s “change of orientation”—which was closely connected to a new hermeneutic openness and the rediscovery of the philosophic art of writing—presented itself in 1932 in his “Notes on Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*,”⁴ the full impact of Strauss’s discovery became manifest during the last two years of the 1930s. At this point, he explored in detail a wide range of books of classical and medieval thinkers as *works* of the art of exoteric-esoteric writing. It is perhaps no accident that the first fruits of this in-depth exploration were “The Literary Character of *The Guide for the Perplexed*,” which “was worked out by Strauss in 1938,”⁵ and “The Spirit of Sparta and the Taste of Xenophon,” written and published in 1939.⁶ Whereas Strauss never republished the essay on Xenophon’s *Constitution of the Lacedaemonians*, he not only reprinted “The Literary Character” in 1952 but placed it in the center of *Persecution and the Art of Writing*.⁷ In fact, Maimonides was one of those philosophers whom Strauss studied throughout his life and wrote about from his first until his last book.

For Strauss’s endeavor of introducing the art of writing to the modern reader, Maimonides is a most striking exemplar, as he openly claims in the Introduction to his *Guide of the Perplexed* that he chose his diction “with great exactness and exceeding precision,” while simultaneously admitting

³ Leo Strauss, “Preface to *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*,” in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books, 1968), 257.

⁴ The essay was originally published in German in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* 67, no. 6 (Aug.–Sept. 1932): 732–49.

⁵ Heinrich Meier, “The Renewal of Philosophy and the Challenge of Revealed Religion: On the Intention of Leo Strauss’s *Thoughts on Machiavelli*,” in *Political Philosophy and the Challenge of Revealed Religion*, trans. Robert Berman (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 28n8. See also Strauss’s letters to Jacob Klein of January 20, February 7 and 16, and July 23, 1938, in Leo Strauss, *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 3, *Hobbes’ politische Wissenschaft und zugehörige Schriften—Briefe* (hereafter GS), 2nd ed., ed. Heinrich Meier and Wiebke Meier (Stuttgart-Weimar: Metzler, 2008), 544–46, 548–50, 553–54.

⁶ See Strauss’s letters to Jacob Klein of February 16 and 28, March 10, April 13, May 29, and July 25, 1939, in GS 3:566–69, 571–75.

⁷ Leo Strauss, “The Literary Character of *The Guide for the Perplexed*,” first published in *Essays on Maimonides*, ed. S. W. Baron (New York: Columbia University Press) in 1941, was reprinted in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press) in 1952. Hereafter references to “The Literary Character of *The Guide for the Perplexed*” will be given in the text according to its paragraph number and page number in *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (abbreviated as PAW). For instance, (§5 [I.4], 39) refers to paragraph 5 (which is paragraph 4 in Part I) on page 39 in PAW.

to “divergences” and contradictions in his treatise.⁸ Yet despite this openness, Maimonides’s *Guide* is notoriously difficult to understand. Precisely because he contradicts himself on almost all important subjects, readers may understand the *Guide* in completely different ways. To be sure, Strauss’s understanding of Maimonides and his *Guide* underwent adjustments and even profound modifications after the 1920s. For instance, whereas in *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, he held the view that Maimonides was “a believing Jew,” about five years later, in *Philosophy and Law*, he calls Maimonides the “classic” of “medieval rationalism.”⁹ A few years later, writing to his closest friend Jacob Klein on July 23, 1938, about the just-completed essay “The Literary Character of *The Guide for the Perplexed*,” Strauss claims that “the exacting reader will understand *everything* from it.”¹⁰ It is in “The Literary Character” that Strauss for the first time discusses the issue of esotericism generally and Maimonides’s esotericism at length; it may very well be that in “The Literary Character,” Strauss first practices the art of esoteric-exoteric writing himself.

A well-known assertion by Strauss on the art of writing is that “the problem inherent in the surface of things, and only in the surface of things, is the heart of things.”¹¹ This assertion is perhaps also one of the most puzzling for many of his readers. What is “the surface” in Strauss’s view? If we understand by “things” the writings of previous thinkers, then “the surface” may be the form or structure of a writing. The “problem inherent in the surface of things” is then, to use Strauss’s own term, “the literary character” or “the plan” of a writing that would “become clear” to the philosophically attentive reader after meticulous and sustained study.

Strauss discusses the plan of Maimonides’s *Guide of the Perplexed* in his most comprehensive and also most demanding essay on the *Guide*, “How To Begin To Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*.” The opening sentence of the essay reads: “I believe that it will not be amiss if I simply present the plan of

⁸ Moses Maimonides, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, trans. Shlomo Pines (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), 15, 20. Hereafter references to *The Guide of the Perplexed* will be given according to its part, chapter number, and page number in the Pines translation. For instance, (*Guide* III 29, 521) refers to *Guide* Part III, chapter 29 on page 521. In the texts of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, the italicized words are those originally in Hebrew.

⁹ Leo Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion*, trans. E. M. Sinclair (New York: Schocken Books, 1965), 185. Also Leo Strauss, *Philosophy and Law: Contributions to the Understanding of Maimonides and His Predecessors*, trans. Eve Adler (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995), 21.

¹⁰ Strauss, GS 3:553; “everything” (*alles*) is underlined by Strauss.

¹¹ Leo Strauss, *Thoughts on Machiavelli* (Glencoe, IL: Free Press, 1958), 13.

the *Guide* as it has become clear to me in the course of about twenty-five years of frequently interrupted but never abandoned study.”¹² Heinrich Meier has drawn our attention to an interesting fact that sheds light on the beginning of Strauss’s study of the plan and its importance, as opposed to the beginning of Strauss’s study of the *Guide* in general. According to Meier, “in the manuscript [of “How To Begin To Study”] on which Strauss worked from May 19 to August 13, 1960, he first wrote ‘36 years,’ which would put us in 1924, the year in which ‘Cohens Analyse der Bibel-Wissenschaft Spinozas’ was published. Strauss then changed it to ‘25 years’ and underscored it in red, which places the beginning of Strauss’s study of the *plan* of the *Moreh* [i.e., the *Guide*] in the period following the publication of *Philosophie und Gesetz*.”¹³ In other words, “36 years” would have referred to the beginning of the study of the *Guide*; whereas “25 years” refers to the beginning of the study of the *plan* of the *Guide*. Meier further emphasizes how important the plan is for an adequate understanding of a philosophic work like Maimonides’s *Guide*. If we read Strauss’s opening statement in the light of his letter to Jacob Klein of August 18, 1939, in which he says, “I have in the meantime understood the *Memor[abilia]* completely, if in the case of such books to completely understand is identical with understanding the plan [*Aufbau*],”¹⁴ we will better understand his remark in “A Giving of Accounts” that “eventually” he understood “the whole *Guide of the Perplexed*.” So, in 1960, claiming to have attained clarity about the plan of the work, Strauss composed his own “Guide of the Perplexed” for the students of Maimonides’s *Guide of the Perplexed*.

¹² Strauss’s “How To Begin To Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*” was meant to serve as one of the introductions to the new English translation of the *Guide*, which was made by Shlomo Pines with the assistance of Strauss’s student Ralph Lerner. The translation was published in 1963 by the University of Chicago Press. Strauss reprinted the essay in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (New York: Basic Books) in 1968 (pp. 140–84). Hereafter references to “How To Begin To Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*” will be given in the text according to its paragraph number and page number in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* (abbreviated *LAM*). For instance, (¶17, 152) refers to paragraph 17 on page 152 in *LAM*. The first sentence of our essay appears on page 140 in *LAM*.

¹³ Heinrich Meier, “How Strauss Became Strauss,” trans. Marcus Brainard, in *Reorientation: Leo Strauss in the 1930s*, ed. Martin D. Yaffe and Richard S. Ruderman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 28n26.

¹⁴ Strauss, letter to Jacob Klein of August 18, 1939, in *GS* 3:579–80. The English translations of Strauss’s letters in this paper are largely taken from Laurence Lampert’s rendering in his chapter “Exotericism Exposed: Letters to Jacob Klein,” in *The Enduring Importance of Leo Strauss* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 7–31 (the above quotation appears on page 21). In Lampert’s view, “January 1938 marks a turning point in the life of an already established scholar in his thirty-ninth year, for only then did Strauss recover exotericism in its full radicality—and report it with complete candor in the outspoken, unvarnished detail of private letters spread across almost two years to his best friend who also shared his intellectual interests, Jacob Klein” (7–8).

I. A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF EXOTERICISM AND ITS PRACTICE

“How To Begin To Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*” has a strange title: not only does it give a new English translation for the title of Maimonides’s *Guide*, it also, unusually, has the initial letters of the two prepositions capitalized.¹⁵ Before Strauss, Maimonides’s *Guide* had usually been rendered as “The Guide *for* the Perplexed” in the English-speaking world, as is shown in the earlier writings of Strauss himself.¹⁶ The most evident case is the title of his 1938 essay, “The Literary Character of *The Guide for the Perplexed*”; when Strauss reprinted it in 1952, the title remained the same. Why did Strauss change his mind? What is the difference between the two titles? While both “for” and “of” are acceptable renderings of the original Arabic title *Dalālat al-hā’irīn*, “of” appears more ambiguous:¹⁷ it suggests that “the perplexed” include both the addressee and the addresser, while “for” indicates only the addressee. In other words, “The Guide of the Perplexed” suggests a book written by a “once perplexed author” to “the now and future perplexed ones.” Or,

¹⁵ In his stimulating dissertation, Steven Lenzner has a sharp point on Strauss’s capitalization of the two prepositions in the title of his essay. He states that “whereas the ‘to’ in the former essay [i.e., “How to Study Spinoza’s *Theologico-Political Treatise*”] is not capitalized, the two ‘To’s in the latter essay [i.e., “How To Begin To Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*”] are. The explanation for this irregularity: Those two ‘To’s surround ‘Begin’; in other words, one must Begin at [*Guide*] II 2” (Lenzner, “Leo Strauss and the Problem of Freedom of Thought” [PhD diss., Harvard University, 2002], 196). On the importance of *Guide* II 2 in Strauss’s essay, see further Lenzner’s dissertation, 192–203.

¹⁶ It is interesting to note that the first complete English translation of the *Guide*, by Michael Friedländer, was in fact given the title *The Guide of the Perplexed* in the first edition (3 vols., London: Trübner, 1885). This three-volume edition was thought to be “exhausted without having fully supplied the demand,” therefore the second edition was “reduced to one volume by the elimination of the notes”; and the title of the second edition was changed to *The Guide for the Perplexed*. See M. Friedländer, translator’s preface to *The Guide for the Perplexed*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 1904), v. According to Josef Stern, “From 1904 until 1963—that is, until the publication of Shlomo Pines’s translation—this ‘cheap edition’ (in Friedländer’s own words) was the standard edition of the *Guide* and the point of entry for Anglo-American audiences to Maimonides’ philosophical world.” See Stern’s introduction to *Maimonides’ Guide of the Perplexed in Translation: A History from the Thirteenth Century to the Twentieth*, ed. Joseph Stern, James T. Robinson, and Yonatan Shemesh (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2019), 12. The second edition of Friedländer’s translation was so popular that its title became the convention among scholars. In the 1941 volume *Essays on Maimonides: An Octocentennial Volume* (New York: Columbia University Press), edited by the historian Salo W. Baron on occasion of the eight hundredth anniversary of Maimonides’s birth, where Strauss’s essay “The Literary Character of *The Guide for the Perplexed*” was published for the first time, all authors mentioning the *Guide* title it *The Guide for the Perplexed*. There were exceptions to this trend, of course. For instance, Solomon Zeitlin favors the title *The Guide to the Perplexed*, whereas Isaac Husik uses *The Guide of the Perplexed*. See Solomon Zeitlin, *Maimonides, a Biography* (New York: Bloch, 1935), passim; Isaac Husik, *The Philosophy of Maimonides*, Maimonides Octocentennial Series 4 (New York: Maimonides Octocentennial Committee, 1935), passim.

¹⁷ The “ambiguities” involved in the construction “*Guide of the Perplexed*” are exactly what some try “to avoid.” See Daniel Davis, “Note on References,” in *Method and Metaphysics in Maimonides’ “Guide for the Perplexed”* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 161.

so to speak, it is a book written by an author who is looking for his kindred natures. Although Strauss used the more conventional title “The Guide for the Perplexed” in his essay “The Literary Character,” by that time he already understood that “the perplexed” are in fact “the philosophers.” This is most clearly stated in a letter to Jacob Klein on July 23, 1938, in which he claims: “The Guide of the Perplexed, or the Instruction of the Perplexed, is a repetition of the Torah (= instruction [*Weisung*]) for the perplexed, i.e., for the philosophers—i.e., an imitation of the Torah with ‘little’ ‘additions’ which only the expert notices and which imply a radical critique of the Torah.”¹⁸ By identifying “the perplexed” with “the philosophers,” Strauss shows that the real addressees of the *Guide* were the philosophers, and intimates that only a philosopher would write with the intention to educate the future philosophers. It is thus most likely with this philosophic understanding of the *Guide* as a book written by a philosopher for philosophers that Strauss later employs the more nuanced preposition “of” for the English title of the *Guide*.¹⁹

But Strauss never openly claims that the *Guide* is a philosophic book. On the contrary, he emphatically states, first in “The Literary Character” and then in “How To Begin To Study,” that the *Guide* “is not a philosophic book” (“The Literary Character,” ¶55 [VI.2], 79), that it “is a Jewish book: a book written by a Jew for Jews” (“How To Begin To Study,” ¶4, 142).²⁰ That this claim is not simply true is suggested by the opening sentence of Strauss’s later essay, “Notes on Maimonides’ *Book of Knowledge*”: “If it is true that *The Guide of the Perplexed* is not a philosophic book but a Jewish book, it surely is not a Jewish book in the same manner in which the *Mishneh Torah* is a Jewish book.”²¹ Here Strauss is inviting us to wonder whether the conditional conjunction “if” should not rather be perceived as “even if,” which would bring to the whole statement that “the *Guide* is not a philosophic book but a Jewish book” a sense of vagueness or even ambivalence. The statement

¹⁸ Strauss, letter to Jacob Klein of July 23, 1938, in GS 3:553–54 (quoted in Lampert, *Enduring Importance of Leo Strauss*, 11).

¹⁹ Although Strauss was not the translator of the 1963 English edition of the *Guide*, he played a decisive role in this translation, as is shown for instance in his letter to Seth Benardete of June 18, 1959: “My chief activity during this summer will be the study of Maimonides’ *Guide of the Perplexed* (in connection with a new English translation which is being made under my supervision)” (Leo Strauss Papers, Box 4, Folder 20, Special Collection, University of Chicago Library).

²⁰ See also Leo Strauss, “Notes on Maimonides’ *Book of Knowledge*,” in *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to Gershom G. Scholem on His Seventieth Birthday by Pupils, Colleagues and Friends*, ed. E. E. Urbach, R. J. Werblowsky, and Ch. Wirszubski (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967), 269. This article was later reprinted in Leo Strauss, *Studies in Platonic Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 192–204 (hereafter *SPPP*).

²¹ Leo Strauss, *SPPP*, 192.

can be seen as Strauss's distinctive effort to restrain himself from "pulling Maimonides out of Judaism" because it would amount to "pulling out the foundation of Judaism."²² The immediate conflicting receptions of "The Literary Character" reflect the success of the author's art of exotericism.²³

The new understanding of the art of writing in "The Literary Character" testifies to a significant deepening in Strauss's thought between 1935 and 1938. Although at least as early as 1931, Strauss had talked about the distinction between the "esoteric" and the "exoteric," the way he used these concepts differed from what he means by them later. In the third chapter of *Philosophy and Law*, "The Philosophic Foundation of the Law: Maimonides' Doctrine of Prophecy and Its Sources" (originally written in 1931), Strauss stated: "if one considers that the modern Enlightenment, as opposed to the medieval, generally *publicizes* its teachings, one will not object to the assertion that the medieval Enlightenment was essentially esoteric, while the modern Enlightenment was essentially exoteric." Here "exoteric" referred to the *publicization* of the philosophic teaching by the modern Enlightenment, and Strauss used it in a rather derogatory sense. However, in "The Literary Character" (written in 1938), while stating in the central paragraph that the *Guide* "is devoted to the esoteric explanation of an esoteric text" (§34 [V.1], 60), Strauss invites his reader to think about the question "whether, in accordance with the terminology of the philosophic tradition, the *Guide* ought not

²² Leo Strauss, letter to Jacob Klein of February 16, 1938, in *GS* 3:549–50. See also Laurence Lampert, *Enduring Importance of Leo Strauss*, 9–10. In a letter to Julius Guttmann of May 20, 1949, Strauss says: "If my hunch is right, then Maimonides was a 'philosopher' in a far more radical sense than is usually assumed today and really was almost always assumed, or at least was said. Here the question arises immediately of the extent to which one may responsibly expound this possibility publicly.... This was one of the reasons why I wanted to present the problem in principle of esotericism—or the problem of the relationship between thought and society—in *corpore vili*, thus with respect to some strategically favorable, non-Jewish object." Quoted in Heinrich Meier, "The Theologico-Political Problem: On the Theme of Leo Strauss," in *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 24n32. Strauss's letter to Guttmann reveals that he was well aware of the fact that Maimonides "is usually assumed today" and "was almost always assumed" to be a "philosopher." Strauss's use of quotation marks for the word "philosopher" shows that the popular opinion of seeing Maimonides as a philosopher is not acceptable to him. He has a clearly distinctive view on *what a philosopher is*. It is likely that Strauss's refraining from regarding the *Guide* as a philosophic book and, to a large extent, from openly calling Maimonides a philosopher is also due to his unwillingness to be confused with others who see Maimonides as a Jewish or religious philosopher. See further Strauss's 1944 lecture "How to Study Medieval Philosophy," *Interpretation* 23, no. 3 (Spring 1996): 334.

²³ On one hand, the reviewers applauded the essay for being "enlightening" (Solomon Zeitlin, *Jewish Quarterly Review* 32, no. 1 [1941]: 107), "circuitous and repetitive but very wise" and "provocative" (Quirinus Breen, *Journal of Religion* 22, no. 3 [1942]: 327); on the other hand, the conclusion of the essay was thought to be that "the *Guide* is not a book of philosophy at all," but "belongs to the literature of the *kalām*, and the 'intention of the science of *kalām* is to defend the law, especially against the opinion of philosophers'" (E. A. M., *Journal of Philosophy* 38, no. 21 [1941]: 583).

to be described rather as an exoteric work” (§45 [V.12], 70). Here, “exoteric” is no longer negative and does not denote the publicization of the philosophic teaching. Rather, it refers to the “publicization” or the explicit declaration of the traditional teaching, and the concomitant communication of the secret or philosophic teaching in an esoteric or implicit way. In this sense, “the esoteric” and “the exoteric” no longer belong to opposite camps but are now rather two complementary parts of one single “philosophic tradition,” or, so to speak, of one single philosophic art of writing.²⁴ This deepening of thought can be recognized also in Strauss’s tracing the beginning of his study of the plan of the *Guide* back to 1935.

The growing recognition of the art of writing not only led Strauss to a genuine understanding of “the thinkers of the past,” that is, to his endeavor of understanding them “exactly as they understood themselves”;²⁵ it also enabled him to develop his own way of philosophic writing. In both “The Literary Character” and “How To Begin To Study,” Strauss discerns and practices the art of exoteric-esoteric writing. In “The Literary Character,” Strauss, detective-like,²⁶ shows how Maimonides used different kinds of rhetorical devices, such as “abrupt changes of subject matter,” “repetitions with greater or slighter variations,” “purposeful irregularities,” and above all, “contradictions,” to create an esoteric work (§35 [V.2], 61; §§43–50 [V.10–17], 68–74). And in “How To Begin To Study,” he puts the rhetorical devices he described in the *Guide* to use no less than Maimonides had.

²⁴ Leo Strauss, *Philosophy and Law*, 103; *PAW*, 60, 70. For Strauss’s mature view on exotericism, see Hannes Kerber, “Leo Strauss on Exoteric Writing,” *Interpretation* 46, no. 1 (Fall 2019): 1–25.

²⁵ Strauss’s whole statement reads: “The task of the historian of thought is to understand the thinkers of the past exactly as they understood themselves, or to revitalize their thought according to their own interpretation” (Leo Strauss, “Political Philosophy and History,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 10, no. 1 [1949]: 41, emphasis added). It should be noted that Strauss presents this principle, as early as in 1931, in opposition to Cohen’s Kantian “idealizing interpretation,” in his lecture “Cohen and Maimonides.” See Strauss, “Cohen and Maimonides,” trans. Martin D. Yaffe and Ian Alexander Moore, in *Leo Strauss on Moses Maimonides: The Complete Writings*, ed. Kenneth Hart Green (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2013), 185. For the original German, see *GS* 2:401–2. Strauss’s hermeneutical approach is highly demanding: it requires the reader to ascend to the same or similar height so as to understand “the thinkers of the past,” which rarely occurs. Strauss’s hermeneutical approach is in fact closely connected to his insight on what a philosopher is: “what comes into sight as the ‘original’ or ‘personal’ ‘contribution’ of a philosopher is infinitely less significant than his private, and truly original and individual, understanding of the necessarily anonymous truth” (Leo Strauss, “Farabi’s Plato,” in *Louis Ginzberg Jubilee Volume on Occasion of His Seventieth Birthday* [New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1945], 377). Heinrich Meier takes this insight to be one of Strauss’s “self-explicative statements.” See Meier, “The History of Philosophy and the Intention of the Philosopher: Reflections on Leo Strauss,” in *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, 71–73.

²⁶ On Strauss as detective, see Steven J. Lenzner, “A Literary Exercise in Self-Knowledge: Strauss’s Twofold Interpretation of Maimonides,” *Perspectives on Political Science* 31, no. 4 (Fall 2002): 225.

II. THE “WHAT” AND THE “HOW”: ON THE CENTERS OF THE ESSAY

In the nineteenth paragraph of “How To Begin To Study,” Strauss reminds us, or rather, warns us, that by being habituated to Maimonides’s way of explaining biblical terms in the opening chapters of the *Guide*, “the readers ...become engrossed by the subject matter, the What, and will not observe the How.” “However,” Strauss continues, “the critical reader...will find many reasons for becoming amazed,” that is, to use Strauss’s own terms, amazed by the “irregularities” and “varieties” and other rhetoric devices in the *Guide* (§19, 152–53, emphasis added). Through this reminder, Strauss simultaneously draws our attention to the importance of the “How” for understanding *his own* essay.

One of the widely accepted views on “How To Begin To Study” is that Strauss “concludes with [*Guide*] II 24.”²⁷ Taking into account all of the references to the *Guide* in Strauss’s essay, we come to a rather different conclusion. Statistics I have done show that Strauss only abstains from specifically referencing one-sixth of the *Guide*’s one hundred seventy-eight chapters. If we consider all his references to the groups of chapters that comprise sections or subsections in the *Guide*, the unmentioned chapters turn out to be even fewer. Above all, the central message Strauss’s essay conveys is that the chief purpose of the *Guide* is to explain the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot, which are, generally speaking, both dealt with in the second half of the *Guide*, and thus are mostly found after II 24. In addition, Strauss’s intention in the essay is, among other things, to give hints on how to understand “the secret teaching of Maimonides” in the *Guide*. Since the secret teaching of Maimonides is implied in the different subject matter throughout the *Guide* (§6, 143), Strauss’s essay cannot have stopped “at the halfway point.”

What then is the subject matter of “the secret teaching” of Maimonides according to Strauss? When we look through all the occurrences of the phrase “the secret teaching,” which is one of the key terms in Strauss’s essay,

²⁷ Aryeh Tepper, *Progressive Minds, Conservative Politics: Leo Strauss’s Later Writings on Maimonides* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2013), 128. In a recent article on Strauss’s “How To Begin To Study” essay, Warren Zev Harvey, despite his reconsideration of the essay’s characteristics and a number of sharp reflections on it, states that “it is striking that Strauss’s exposition covers only the first half of the *Guide*.” But of course, one can say, as Harvey does in the same passage, that “Strauss’s chapter-by-chapter (or more precisely, subsection-by-subsection) exposition of the *Guide* ends abruptly with ii 24.” See Harvey, “How to Begin to Study Strauss’s ‘How to Begin to Study the *Guide of the Perplexed*,’” in *Interpreting Maimonides: Critical Essays*, ed. Charles H. Manekin and Daniel Davies (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 245.

we find that “the secret teaching” is related to the “secrets” of the Law. Strauss does not point out exactly which topics belong to the “secrets of the Law” in “How To Begin To Study,” but in “The Literary Character,” he had stated that the *Guide* gives “two enumeration[s]” of the secrets of the Torah, the first one, in *Guide* I 35, consisting of “divine attributes, creation, providence, divine will and knowledge, prophecy, names of God,” and the second one, in II 2, containing “*Ma’aseh bereshit* [sic] (the account of creation), *ma’aseh merkabah* (the account of the chariot, Ezekiel 1 and 10), prophecy and knowledge of God” (¶8 [I.7], 41). With slight adjustments of terms and different weights, these topics all appear in Strauss’s “How To Begin To Study,”²⁸ and they become the substantial part of the “What” in the essay. Among these subjects, those related to the “secret teaching” of Maimonides are first of all the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot, and then the divine attributes and providence as well. In “How To Begin To Study,” the term “secret teaching of the *Guide*” also leads us to an additional subject of importance: Sabianism. Literally speaking, Sabianism refers to the way of life and especially to the religious beliefs of the Sabians. According to the standard of the Bible, however, Sabianism would simply mean idolatry. In Maimonides’s view, the biblical accounts of the corporeal God are a kind of Sabian relic. Strauss suggests that “the recovery of the Sabian relics in the Bible with the help of Sabian literature is one of the tasks of his secret teaching” (¶21, 155). Strauss’s discussion of Maimonides’s overcoming of Sabianism in the *Guide* implies an important theme of the essay, namely, Maimonides’s superiority to or his progress beyond Moses, the biblical prophets, and postbiblical sages.

The Account of the Beginning, or *ma’aseh bereshith*,²⁹ and the Account of the Chariot, or *ma’aseh merkabah*, are rabbinic terms that are related to the secret teaching of the Bible. According to the Mishnah, “One does not expound upon forbidden sexual relations in the presence of three, nor upon *ma’aseh bereshit* [the Account of the Beginning] in the presence of two, nor upon the *merkavah* [the Account of the Chariot] in the presence of one, unless that one were wise and understood upon his own.”³⁰ Traditionally, *ma’aseh*

²⁸ In “How To Begin To Study,” Strauss replaces “divine knowledge” with (divine) Intellect, and contrasts “providence” with “governance,” which occurs in the enumeration in *Guide* I 35. See Maimonides, *Guide* I 35, 80.

²⁹ The transliteration of the Hebrew and Judeo-Arabic words in this article follows Shlomo Pines’s English translation of Maimonides’s *Guide*.

³⁰ Ḥagigah II 1. The Mishnah text is from Menachem Kellner, “Maimonides’ Commentary on Mishnah Hagigah II.1, Translation and Commentary,” in *From Strength to Strength: Lectures from Shearith Israel*, ed. Marc D. Angel (New York: Sepher-Hermon, 1998), 102.

bereshith is connected to Genesis 1, or Creation; therefore some scholars render it as “the account of creation.” On the other hand, *ma’aseh merkabah* is connected to Ezekiel’s vision of the chariot in Ezekiel 1 and 10. In the *Guide*, Maimonides states that “the chief aim” of his treatise is “to explain what can be explained of the *Account of the Beginning* and the *Account of the Chariot*” (*Guide* III Introd., 415; cf. II 2, 254). He also claims that the Account of the Beginning is identical with natural science and the Account of the Chariot is identical with divine science (*Guide* I Introd., 6). Yet it is by no means clear what he means by these two equations. According to Strauss, “the secret par excellence of the *Guide*” is what Maimonides “means by identifying the core of philosophy (natural science and divine science) with the highest secrets of the Law (the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot) and therewith by somehow identifying the subject matter of speculation with the subject matter of exegesis” (§8, 145). We are therefore safe in suggesting that the chief aim of “How To Begin To Study” is to explain what Maimonides “means” by his identification of natural science with the Account of the Beginning and divine science with the Account of the Chariot.

How then does Strauss give his explanation? Like Maimonides, Strauss arranges the order of his essay, not to say chooses every word of it, with “exceeding care” (§6, 143); like Maimonides, Strauss gives us only indications and hints about Maimonides’s secret teaching (§43 beginning, 172); like Maimonides, Strauss provides “varieties” and “irregularities” in his text. He reminds us, both implicitly and explicitly, that the center of a writing or of its divided parts deserves our special attention (cf. §26, 158; §29, 160; §42, 171). The original edition of Strauss’s essay, which appeared in the Shlomo Pines English translation published in 1963, had 43 paragraphs in total. When Strauss reprinted it in *Liberalism Ancient and Modern* in 1968, however, he changed the number of paragraphs to 58. The most striking difference caused by this change is that the center of the essay shifts. In order not to risk confusion as a result of the two different paragraphing systems, I shall always follow the later, 58-paragraph edition; I will refer to the 1963 version of the essay as the “original” and to the 1968 version as the “reprint.” Paragraph 26 (of the reprint) was the center of the original, whereas paragraphs 29 and 30 become the double center in the reprint.

Let us see now what is indicated in the two centers of the two versions of Strauss’s essay. Paragraph 26 was originally the twenty-second of 43 paragraphs. The context of paragraph 26 is Strauss’s discussion of the second subsection of the *Guide*, that is, *Guide* I 8–28. According to Strauss, the whole

of the first section of the *Guide*, that is, *Guide* I 1–70, is devoted to the explanation of biblical terms suggesting God’s corporeality and multiplicity (§1, 140); and the theme of the second subsection of that first section is Maimonides’s lexicographic explanation of “place as well as certain outstanding places [like ‘throne’]...and the organs for changing place” (§25, 157). In paragraph 26, Strauss discerns that *Guide* I 14 and 17 constitute a kind of “interruption” or “irregularity,” because the topics of these two chapters, “man” and “natural science” respectively, do not belong to the theme of the second subsection. Strauss states that “by this irregularity our attention is drawn to a certain *numerical symbolism*” or to numerology, that “14 stands for man or the human things, and 17 stands for nature” (§26, 158, emphasis added). He further points out that 26, being “the numerical equivalent of the secret name of the Lord...may therefore also stand for His Torah.” Then, in a seemingly less emphatic way, Strauss says: “Incidentally, it may be remarked that 14 is the numerical equivalent of the Hebrew for ‘hand’; I 28 is devoted to ‘foot’: no chapter of the *Guide* is devoted to ‘hand,’ the characteristically human organ, whereas Maimonides devotes a chapter, the central chapter of the fourth subsection, to ‘wing,’ the organ used for swift descent and ascent” (§26, 158). Strauss does not give us the specific number of that “central chapter,” but it is not difficult to figure it out from the plan of the *Guide*, which is supplied by him at the beginning of the essay (§1, 140–42). The chapter in question is *Guide* I 43: by structuring his essay originally using 43 paragraphs, and by referring to the 43rd chapter in the central paragraph, in which he discusses “numerical symbolism,” Strauss invites us to take particular heed of *Guide* I 43, a lexicographic chapter on the biblical term *kanaph* or “wing.”³¹ In the Bible, “wing” is related not only to the flying animals, but also to angels. According to Maimonides’s explanation in I 43, “in all cases in which *wing* occurs with reference to the angels, it signifies that which conceals” (*Guide*, I 43, 94). Maimonides illustrates it with the biblical verse “*with twain* [two wings] *he covered his face, and with twain* [two wings] *he covered his feet,*” which is taken from Isaiah 6:2. Strauss’s remark induces us to note that the same verse, Isaiah 6:2, which occurs in *Guide* I 43, is referred to by Maimonides in his thematic discussion of the Account of the Chariot in *Guide* III 6 (*Guide* III 6, 427). As a passage containing what Strauss refers to as “the

³¹ That Strauss mentions the center of a text he is discussing in a central paragraph of his own writing is one of the devices of his “art of writing.” Another case can be seen in the second chapter of *Socrates and Aristophanes*, “*The Clouds*.” Strauss states in one of its central paragraphs: “Accordingly, the Just Speech speaks here, *in the central part of his exposition*, much more of what Pheidippides should abstain from or not do than of what he should do, not to say enjoy” (*Socrates and Aristophanes*, 30, emphasis added).

Isaian theophany,” Isaiah 6 plays an important role in Strauss’s essay. This theophany appears in paragraph 30, part of the new center of Strauss’s essay, where it is put in parallel with Exodus 33, in which the Mosaic theophany is presented (§30, 161). It then appears in paragraph 38, where Strauss notes that “the Account of the Chariot...occurs in the book of Ezekiel and in its highest form precisely in the sixth chapter of Isaiah” (§38, 167–68). In a way, Isaiah 6 bridges the subject matter of the Account of the Chariot and that of prophecy as well as “progress beyond Moses” in the essay. Going back to the term “wing” that Strauss leads us to in the old center of his essay, we notice that “wings” are part of the living beings in the prophet Ezekiel’s vision of the chariot in Ezekiel 1 and 10, which are at the core of the Account of the Chariot. In other words, by implicitly referring to *Guide* I 43, Strauss guides us to one of the scattered pieces necessary for the understanding of Maimonides’s secret teaching of the Account of the Chariot. In addition, when describing “wing” as “the organ used for swift descent and ascent,” Strauss is pointing us on one hand to the descending and ascending of the four elements, namely, air, fire, water, and earth, which Maimonides called angels (*Guide* II 6, 262; also II 10, 272), and on the other hand to the theme of the descent and ascent of the *Shekhinah* or divine indwelling, and therewith to the theme of providence. The connection of *Shekhinah* and providence is discussed in paragraph 29, the first part of his essay’s new center.

In the old center, Strauss stresses the importance of numbers in the *Guide*. Among the numbers he singles out, 17 is conspicuous for its lack of biblical connection.³² According to Strauss, “17 stands for nature”: in *Guide* I 17 Maimonides explains “the prohibition against the public teaching of natural science” (§26, 158). Natural science is important to Maimonides, not merely because he identifies it with the Account of the Beginning, but also because, in Strauss’s view, he orchestrates the plan of the *Guide* as it is on the basis of the typical addressee’s lack of knowledge of natural science.

Incidentally, in the last two sentences of the old center, Strauss states: “In all these matters one can derive great help from studying Joseph Albo’s *Roots*. Albo was a favorite companion living at the court of a great king” (§26, 158). If we look through the fifteenth-century Jewish philosopher Albo’s life, we

³² By the end of paragraph 29, Strauss points out in his essay that “not only *Shekhinah* but also ‘providence’ and ‘governance’ are not biblical terms.” What he omits is that “nature” is not a biblical term either. This can hardly be unintentional. In “The Literary Character,” when talking about the “Maimonidean devices” that are applied to give hints, Strauss states that “another device consists in *silence*, i.e., the omission of something which only the learned, or the learned who are able to understand of themselves, would miss” (PAW, 75, emphasis added).

realize that Albo was never living at any court: is the king Strauss refers to the philosopher-king Maimonides?³³

What are Strauss's messages in the new center after he reparagraphed the essay for the 1968 reprint? First of all, no matter what the focus is in paragraph 29, the first of the new center, it is connected to the old center (§26) through the very term "wing." In a paragraph on a different subject, Strauss "incidentally" mentions that "the chapter devoted to 'wing' does not contain a single reference to the *Shekhinah*" (§29, 160). Again, he speaks of *Guide* I 43 without explicitly citing it. Moreover, the fact that the very word *Merkabah* and its English translation "Chariot" appear in passing in the new center is another sign of the central position of the Account of the Chariot. In addition to these nuances, the postbiblical term *Shekhinah*³⁴ appears 16 times in this paragraph, and only in this paragraph, which seems to suggest that *Shekhinah* is the theme of the new center. However, closer inspection shows that the theme of paragraph 29 is more likely the connection as well as the difference between *Shekhinah*, providence and governance. Strauss notes that in the *Guide* Maimonides puts *Shekhinah* parallel to "governance" on one hand and "providence" on the other. He says: "it is characteristic of the *Guide* that in it *Shekhinah* as a theological theme is replaced by 'providence,' and 'providence' in its turn to some extent by 'governance,' 'governance' being as it were the translation of *Merkabah* (Chariot), as appears from I 70" (§29, 160). What is the meaning of these three concepts, *Shekhinah*, providence, and governance, according to Strauss? To answer this question we need to examine all the biblical citations in the *Guide* to which Strauss refers. In doing so we are led to realize that while the descent and ascent of *Shekhinah* refer to God's protection of Israel and the removal of His protection from Israel or punishment for them, "providence" (*ināya*) means protection or watching over by God. As for "governance" (*tadbīr*), Strauss informs us in the same paragraph that Maimonides has a chapter on governance, which is *Guide* I 40, a lexicographic chapter on "air" (*ruah*). For Maimonides, air is first of all one of the four elements. The reference to this meaning of *ruah* given by Maimonides is

³³ Matthew Joel Sharpe proposes a different yet illuminating explanation of the "great king" passage in Strauss's essay. Referring to *Guide* III 51 as well as paragraph 26 of Strauss's essay, he says: "The highest perfection or way of life for men, which grants them a place in the Court of a Great King (*Guide* III 51; Strauss #26 end/157), is the life of the intellect (#36/166) [*sic*: #26 end/158 is intended]" (Matthew Joel Sharpe, "In the Court of a Great King': Some Remarks on Leo Strauss' Introduction to the *Guide of the Perplexed*," part 2, *Sophia* 50 [March 2011]: 413). The first part of Sharpe's essay was published earlier in the same journal with the title: "In the Court of a Great King': Some Remarks on Leo Strauss' Introduction to the *Guide for the Perplexed*," *Sophia* 50 (Jan. 2011): 141–58.

³⁴ In rabbinic Judaism, *Shekhinah* refers to the indwelling of God, or simply to God.

Genesis 1:2, “and the air of God hovered [over the face of the waters],” which is usually rendered more theologically as “and the spirit of God was hovering” etc. According to Maimonides, when *ruah* or air “is applied to God, it is used in the fifth sense,” namely, “denoting the divine intellectual overflow that overflows to the prophets”: in this connection, Maimonides implicitly groups “governance of that which exists as it really is” with “the divine intellectual overflow” (*Guide* I 40, 90). In other words, in the *Guide*, “governance” refers to the governance of the natural order by divine intellect. In Strauss’s presentation of the *Guide*, divine intellect is in contradistinction to divine will, which is the source of all kinds of miracles. In the chapter on governance indicated by Strauss, Maimonides himself refers us to the “chapter that will deal with His governance.” That chapter is *Guide* III 2, one of the core chapters dealing with the Account of the Chariot. Moreover, in paragraph 29, in connecting *Merkabah* or Chariot to *Guide* I 70, the chapter heading of which is “To ride [*rakhob*],” Strauss suggests that for Maimonides, the Account of the Chariot, or divine science, is about the divine governance of “that which is existent” by means of “heaven” (*Guide* I 70, 173). Strauss here supplies us with one of the crucial pieces for completing the jigsaw puzzle created by Maimonides regarding the Account of the Chariot. In this regard, he points out more clearly later in the essay: “According to the *Guide*, the Account of the Chariot deals with God’s governance of the world” (¶38, 167). Now it becomes quite clear that in paragraph 29, the first part of the new center, Strauss is pointing us to Maimonides’s scattered discussion of the Account of the Chariot. At the same time he is showing us that Maimonides’s secret teaching of the Account of the Chariot is central for understanding the *Guide*. While in the old center, paragraph 26, Strauss deals with both the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot, in the first part of the new center, he focuses almost exclusively on the theme of the Account of the Chariot or on the so-called divine science. In a way, this is in accord with the higher status divine science has compared to natural science in Aristotle, and with the higher secretiveness attached to the Account of the Chariot compared to the Account of the Beginning. As we may recall, in the Mishnah, while it is permitted to speak about the Account of the Beginning to one person, in the case of the Account of the Chariot, it is prohibited to speak about it even to one person if the person is not wise enough to understand by himself. In changing the number of the paragraphs, Strauss shifts the emphasis of his essay to the most secret part of Maimonides’s *Guide*, the knowledge of God.

III. ON SABIANISM

What about the second part of the new center? Strauss begins paragraph 30 by pointing out the central position of two biblical passages in the second subsection of the *Guide* (namely, *Guide* I 8–28) and so initiates a new topic of the discussion. The two biblical passages are Exodus 33:20–23 and Isaiah 6, which relate to Moses’s and Isaiah’s respective visions of God, or, to use Strauss’s expression in paragraph 38, to “the Mosaic theophany” and “the Isaian theophany” (§30, 161; §38, 167). Whereas Moses is told by the Lord, “there shall no man see me, and live,” and Moses can see only the Lord’s “glory passeth by” (Exod. 33:19–20, 22), Isaiah claims that his eyes “have seen the king, the Lord of hosts” (Isa. 6:5). In this connection, Strauss surprisingly makes no reference to the second subsection of the *Guide*, which he has been discussing since paragraph 25. Rather, he refers instead to *Guide* I 5 and to Albo’s *Roots* III 17 (§30, 161). Albo was mentioned for the first time in Strauss’s essay at the end of paragraph 26, the old center. Here we see another bridge connecting the old center and the new.

Based on the same two biblical passages, Albo discusses in *Roots* III 17 whether we should understand Isaiah’s vision of the Lord to be superior to Moses’s. So the new topic Strauss proposes at the center of paragraph 30 is: “We are thus induced to believe that Isaiah reached a higher stage in the knowledge of God than Moses or that Isaiah’s vision marks a progress beyond Moses.” Strauss admits immediately that “at first hearing,” this thought is “preposterous, not to say blasphemous,” because “the denial of the supremacy of Moses’ prophecy seems to lead to the denial of the ultimacy of Moses’ Law” (§30, 161). How then could “progress beyond Moses” be possible according to Maimonides? Strauss appeals to Maimonides’s *Treatise of Resurrection*, in which the author points out that resurrection is taught only in the book of Daniel, and “certainly not in the Torah” (§30, 161). Strauss summarizes Maimonides’s explanation of this “strange fact”:

at the time when the Torah was given, all men, and hence also our ancestors, were Sabians, believing in the eternity of the world, for they believed that God is the spirit of the sphere, and denying the possibility of revelation and of miracles; hence a very long period of education and habituation was needed until our ancestors could be brought even to consider believing in that greatest of all miracles, the resurrection of the dead (26, 18–27, 15, and 31, 1–33, 14 Finkel).³⁵

³⁵ The reference Strauss gives in §30 is to Finkel’s edition of Maimonides’s *Treatise of Resurrection*. An English translation by Hillel G. Fradkin can be found in Ralph Lerner, *Maimonides’ Empire of*

This is the first time that “Sabians” as a group of ancient people are mentioned in our essay. The adjective “Sabian” appeared three times before, in paragraph 21. It is made parallel in the first place to “idoltrous” and “pagan,” as if they were synonymous. Strauss then suggests that “the recovery of Sabian relics in the Bible with the help of Sabian literature is one of the tasks of his secret teaching” (§21, 155). According to Strauss, the “Sabian relics in the Bible” refer to the biblical accounts that suggest a corporeal God, on one hand, and to certain sacrificial laws, on the other (§§32–33, 163–64). But what is the Sabian literature? Strauss does not specify it in our essay. As we have pointed out earlier, to explain or give hints to the understanding of Maimonides’s secret teaching is a major task of Strauss’s “How To Begin To Study.” Here in the second part of the essay’s new center, paragraph 30, Strauss singles out the Sabians and their literature as the key for understanding the Mosaic prophecy and therewith for his own argument of “progress beyond Moses.” What seems to be “strange” in Strauss’s depiction of the Sabians is that their belief “in the eternity of the world” and their “denying of the possibility of revelation and miracles” are so close to those of the philosophers. In Maimonides’s *Guide*, the doctrine of eternity of the world is attributed to Aristotle, “the chief [or prince] of the philosophers” (*Guide* I 5, 29; cf. “How To Begin To Study,” §23, 156). But the Sabians are first of all, in Maimonides as well as in Strauss, pagan idolaters, who seem to have believed in all kind of things but most importantly in the stars, that is, in astrology, which, from the perspective of the Mosaic Law, is regarded as idolatry and should be demolished. What then is the truth about the Sabians and their belief?

In the passage of the *Treatise on Resurrection* Strauss refers to, Maimonides depicts the Sabians and their beliefs much in the way that Strauss claims. What Strauss leaves out is Maimonides’s next sentence, that according to the Sabians, “prophecy is impossible.” One may wonder whether this last point by Maimonides is Strauss’s real target, which he leaves for the attentive reader to discover by himself. Maimonides, in turn, invites the addressees of the *Treatise on Resurrection* to read his explanation of the Sabians and their literature in the *Guide of the Perplexed*.³⁶ What exactly does Maimonides say about the Sabians in the *Guide*? One of the passages in which Maimonides discusses the Sabians is *Guide* I 70, a chapter that Strauss had pointed to, among others, in the previous paragraph. In *Guide* I 70, Maimonides says

Light: Popular Enlightenment in an Age of Belief (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 169–70, 172–74.

³⁶ Maimonides, *Treatise on Resurrection*, trans. Hillel G. Fradkin, in Lerner, *Maimonides’ Empire of Light*, 173.

that “the Sabians imagine that God is the spirit of heaven” (*Guide* I 70, 172). The word for “spirit” in the original text is *rūh*—the Hebrew equivalent of which is *ruah*, the same word Maimonides explicated in I 40, whose literal meaning is “air” or “wind.” Strauss has reminded us in the first part of the new center, paragraph 29, that *Guide* I 40 is the chapter on governance, and that according to Maimonides, when it is applied to God, *ruah* should always be taken as “intellectual overflow” (*Guide*, I 40, 90). In this sense, what the Sabians believed was that God is the intellect of the heavenly sphere. This point is critical for an adequate understanding of Maimonides’s secret teaching of the Account of the Chariot.

Strauss discusses Sabianism in the context of the question of “why progress beyond the teaching of the Torah is possible or even necessary” (§31, 162). He points out that the Mosaic law was proclaimed in the time of the “universal rule of Sabianism.” Although, according to Strauss, the only purpose of the Torah is to destroy Sabianism or idolatry, the Torah nevertheless yielded to some Sabian habits because “human nature does not permit the direct transition from one opposite to the other” (§32, 163). It is in this sense that “the corporealism of the Bible” is “an adaptation to Sabian habits” (§33, 163). With a reference to *Guide* III 29, Strauss states in paragraph 33 that for the Sabians, “the gods are the heavenly bodies or the heavenly bodies are the body of which God is the spirit” (§33, 163). This statement deserves our special attention. Earlier in paragraph 30, the second part of the new center, Strauss points out that the Sabians “believed that God is the spirit of the sphere.” In repeating the belief of the Sabians he adds something. According to Strauss himself in “The Literary Character,” “the purpose of repeating conventional statements is to hide the disclosure, in the repetition, of unconventional views. What matters is...the slight additions to, or omissions from the conventional view which occur in the repetition” (§37 [V.4], 64). Now in Strauss’s first statement, for the Sabians, God is the spirit of the sphere; in his second statement, the gods are heavenly bodies, or God is the spirit of the heavenly bodies. Two points contribute to the difference between the two statements. While at first blush “sphere” and “heavenly bodies” are not the same thing, later in his essay Strauss makes it clear that for the Sabians, “their god [is] the sphere and its stars” (§54, 181); therefore in this regard, sphere and heavenly bodies can be classified as belonging to one single type of thing. But why does Strauss use “heavenly bodies” rather than “stars” in the initial statement (§33, 163)? The second statement differs from the first one also in its “slight addition” to the first statement. It suggests that the Sabians did not have a unified belief in God, but rather believed either in heavenly bodies, in corporeal gods,

or in a god whose essence is spirit. Now it becomes clear that Strauss uses “heavenly bodies” in order to highlight the contrast between body and spirit, or intellect. By suggesting that there were two kinds of beliefs among the Sabians, Strauss indicates that there were in fact two types of Sabians in the *Guide*. Referring to a rather subtle half-way statement in *Guide* III 29, Strauss had presented the difference between these two types of the Sabians more clearly in his “Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*”: those who “identified God with the spirit of the celestial sphere” are “the philosophers’ of the Sabian period”; on the other hand, “the large majority of” the Sabians “evidently identified God with the body of the celestial sphere.”³⁷

Maimonides’s most comprehensive discussion of the Sabians and Sabian literature is in *Guide* III 29, to which Strauss refers as often as nine times, the largest number of textual references to a single chapter in the essay. It is in *Guide* III 29 that Maimonides introduces the Sabian work *The Nabatean Agriculture*. According to Maimonides, *The Nabatean Agriculture*, among other things, tells the parallel stories of the biblical figures Adam, Noah, Abraham, and so on. With intervals, Maimonides reports the Sabian story about Adam. He tells us that when Adam left India and came to Babylon, “he brought with him marvelous things: among them a golden tree that grew and had leaves and branches, also a stone tree, and a green leaf of a tree that fire could not burn” (*Guide* III 29, 516). Those who are familiar with the Five Books of Moses would recall that in Exodus there is a burning bush which is not consumed by the fire and out of the midst of which the Lord appeared to Moses and called Moses to deliver the Israelites from the bondage of the Egyptians (Exod. 3:2). After telling this story about Adam, Maimonides remarks: “it is to be wondered at that people who think that the world is eternal should at the same time believe in these things that are impossible in nature for those who have knowledge of the speculation on nature” (*Guide* III 29, 516). For Maimonides, “people who think that the world is eternal” are, or at least agree with, philosophers. And the philosophers should know what is impossible in nature. Such people should not believe that there is “a tree that fire could not burn.” Following this, Maimonides says that the Sabian authors’ purpose “in mentioning *Adam* and everything they ascribe to him is to fortify their doctrine concerning the eternity of the world so that it should follow that the stars and the sphere are the deity” (*Guide* III 29, 516). It seems that Maimonides takes this Sabian story as not true but superstitious. Does he imply that the story of Moses in front of the burning bush is also not true?

³⁷ Leo Strauss, “The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*,” in PAW, 125n97.

The Sabian story of Adam continues in *Guide* III 29 only after Maimonides has told the story of how Abraham fought against the Sabian worship of stars and how Moses received prophetic inspiration and commanded the prohibition against idolatry. This time the story of Adam is even more marvelous:

about *Adam, the first man*, that he [i.e., the author of *The Nabatean Agriculture*] recounts in his book that in India there is a tree whose branches, if taken and thrown on the earth, move, crawling as snakes do; and also that there is another tree there whose root has a human form; this root may be heard to growl and to emit isolated words. He also narrates that if a man take a leaf of an herb, whose description is given, and puts it against his breast, he becomes hidden from people and is not seen wherever he comes in or goes out. If this herb is used in fumigations under the open sky, people hear a sound and fearsome voices in the atmosphere while the smoke rises. (*Guide* III 29, 519)

Maimonides admits that the Sabian story of Adam is a fable, meaning that it is not literally true, as in the case of the biblical description of a corporeal God. Moreover, Maimonides asserts that the Sabian story of Adam serves to criticize the miracles and to suggest that “they are worked by means of tricks” (*Guide* III 29, 519). It is not too difficult to see that this part of the story of Adam is connected to the earlier part, the part regarding the “tree that fire could not burn.” Maimonides tacitly divides the story and scatters its parts in different places in the chapter. This part of the story of Adam is preceded by two seemingly contradictory statements. First, Maimonides admits that “the meaning of many of the laws became clear to me and their causes became known to me through my study of the doctrines, opinions, practices, and cult of the Sabians.” Second, he claims that the book *The Nabatean Agriculture* “is filled with the ravings of the *idolaters* and...with the actions of talismans,” and “also” with “extraordinary ravings laughed at by the intelligent, which are thought to depreciate the manifest miracles” (*Guide* III 29, 518–19). Such statements may induce the reader to ask: What are those “extraordinary ravings” all about? And what is their connection with the many laws?

Again, Strauss provides us with a rather clear interpretation of what is at issue in this long and confusing chapter of the *Guide*. In the digressive paragraph on Maimonides in his 1943 essay “The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*,”³⁸ Strauss explains that for Maimonides, these “ravings,” or in his terms this

³⁸ “The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*” was written from “December 1941 to August 1942 with many long interruptions.” See Heinrich Meier, “The Renewal of Philosophy and the Challenge of Revealed Religion,” 27n6. For the original German, see *Politische Philosophie und die Herausforderung der Offenbarungsreligion*, 44n6. Strauss’s “The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*” was first published in *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, no. 13 (1943): 47–96.

“ridiculous nonsense,” was deliberately presented by the Sabian author to show how absurd the biblical miracles are. Moreover, Strauss points out that the purpose of some of the stories, according to Maimonides, was to suggest that “the biblical miracles were performed by tricks.”³⁹ Strauss discerned that there were two types of men under the same name “the Sabians,”⁴⁰ and thus it is possible to infer from it that the two “ravings” in Maimonides’s passage should belong to these two types of men respectively. Strauss is in fact giving hints to the reader, who would then notice that in the above-quoted passages of *Guide* III 29, the same elements, such as the transformation between snake and rod, a tree that fire cannot burn, and “the fearsome voices in the atmosphere while the smoke rises,” were indicated either in the biblical account of the revelation on Mount Sinai/Horeb, that is, were part of what Strauss calls the Mosaic theophany (Exod. 3, 19, 20, Deut. 5), or belonged among the miracles Moses performed in Egypt (Exodus 7:8–13). The author of “How To Begin To Study *The Guide*” thus presupposes that his reader would have read his “Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*” and detected his point in that specific paragraph on Maimonides’s discussion of *The Nabatean Agriculture*. By placing Maimonides’s discussion of Sabianism in the new center of his essay, Strauss not only tacitly yet successfully connects the Sabian habits of idolatry with the Mosaic legislation, with biblical miracles, and with prophecy in general; he also gives evidence for his argument that “progress beyond Moses” is possible.

IV. ON PROGRESS

The twofold meaning of Sabianism, implied by Strauss, also bears on the Mosaic Law. As Strauss points out, “Sabian habits” are responsible for the description of God as a corporeal being in biblical texts and for the sacrificial laws in the Torah (¶32, 163). Yet on the other hand, idolatry, “the Sabianism proper,” is precisely what the Mosaic Law intended to destroy. Strauss’s use of the term “habits” reminds us of *Guide* I 31, in which Maimonides discusses the “causes of disagreement about things.” The first three causes were taken from Alexander of Aphrodisias, the third-century commentator on the writings of Aristotle. According to Alexander, the causes of disagreement among people are man’s “love of domination and love of strife,” the difficulty of apprehending a subtle and obscure thing, and “the ignorance of man and his inability to grasp things that are possible to apprehend.” However,

³⁹ Strauss, “The Law of Reason in the *Kuzari*,” in *PAW*, 125.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 125n97.

Maimonides claims, “in our times there is a fourth cause that [Alexander] did not mention because it did not exist among them. It is habit and upbringing. For man has in his nature a love of, and an inclination for, that to which he is habituated” (*Guide I* 31, 66–67). According to Maimonides, “opinions” are among the things that man would be habituated to and would wish to defend, and the source of those opinions, such as the corporeality of God, are the “texts that it is an established usage to think highly of and to regard as true” (*Guide I* 31, 67). Whereas Maimonides refers to the “texts” as the fourth “cause of disagreement,” Strauss not only narrows them down to “revered ‘texts,’” but also identifies them, in paragraph 13 (where *Guide I* 31 is referred to for the first time) as “obstacles to speculation” (§13, 148–49). In other words, Strauss makes clear what Maimonides insinuated: habits formed from the “revered” or sacred texts are new “obstacles” to achieving true knowledge.⁴¹ Furthermore, Strauss points out that habits are in need of change, but a wise and prudent thinker like Maimonides would “wish to proceed in a manner that changes habits to the smallest possible degree” (§13, 148).

Strauss suggests that Maimonides saw the necessity of changing the habit of understanding the Torah literally. In Strauss’s presentation, Sabianism as a universal habit is the second of three reasons for the possibility of “progress beyond the teaching of the Torah,” which means it is the central reason (§32, 163). Strauss explains that although the corporeal meaning is not the true meaning of the Torah, “it is as much intended as the true meaning...because of the need to educate and to guide the vulgar,” who were originally “under the spell of Sabianism” (§33, 164). The goal of such education is for the vulgar to know that God is (that God exists), for “the vulgar mind does not admit... the existence of any being that is not bodily” (§33, 164).

According to Strauss, the reason for the possibility of “progress beyond Moses” also lies in “the limitation of law,” because “law is more concerned with actions than with thoughts”: thus the Mosaic Law is concerned merely with “the thirteen moral attributes.” Strauss observes that Maimonides treated Abraham as “a man of speculation,” whereas Moses was regarded as “a prophet who convinced by miracles and ruled by means of promises and threats.” He makes one more step to clarify that for Maimonides, Abraham’s

⁴¹ On Strauss’s early discussion of this passage in *Guide I* 31, compare Heinrich Meier, “The History of Philosophy and the Intention of the Philosopher,” 59n7 and Timothy W. Burns, “Strauss on the Religious and Intellectual Situation of the Present,” in *Reorientation: Leo Strauss in the 1930s*, ed. Martin D. Yaffe and Richard S. Ruderman (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 79–113, esp. 85–86.

God is “the God of the transmoral whole,” and Moses’s God is “the law-giving God” (¶31, 162). It goes without saying that for Maimonides as well as for all classical philosophers, action is lower in dignity than thought, and the moral God is not free from passion. Strauss here is challenging his reader with the question: Does Maimonides indeed take Moses to be superior to Abraham?

Another reason given by Strauss for Maimonides’s “progress beyond Moses” emerges through Maimonides’s treatment of providence. In the *Guide*, Maimonides indicates that the true view of providence is communicated in the book of Job (*Guide* III 22–23, 486–97). In accord with this indication, Strauss points out that Maimonides implies “that the book of Job...marks a progress beyond the Torah and even beyond the prophets (cf. III 19).” Yet providence is not the point Strauss wants to make here. What is at stake is the distinction “between the view of the Law...and the true view” and thus, ultimately, the intellectual status of the Mosaic revelation. When Maimonides explains “the account of the revelation on Mount Sinai,” he indicates, Strauss says, that “the beautiful consideration of the texts is the consideration of their outer meaning (II 36 end, 37)” (¶34, 164). Let us take a look at “the outer meaning” of the texts in the *Guide* that Strauss refers to. Following the Sages, Maimonides points out in the last part of *Guide* II 36 that prophecy ceases when the prophets are sad, angry, or disturbed, or, so to speak, when they are dominated by their emotions rather than by their intellect. Even Moses is not excepted from this rule. According to Maimonides, this is why during the Exile, prophecy no longer exists. In the last lines of the chapter he refers to the promised restoration of prophecy “*in the days of the Messiah*” (*Guide* II 36, 373). In the next chapter, Maimonides discusses three classes of men with respect to their cognitive status. He states that it is “characteristic of the class of men of science engaged in speculation” that “the intellectual overflow overflows only toward the rational faculty and does not overflow at all toward the imaginative faculty.” On the other hand, it is “characteristic of the class of prophets” that “this overflow reaches both faculties, the rational and the imaginative.” As for the class of those for whom “the overflow only reaches their imaginative faculty,” they are those “who govern cities, legislators, the soothsayers, the augurs and the dreamers of veridical dreams,” and those who are not men of science yet “do extraordinary things by means of strange devices and secret arts” (*Guide* II 37, 374). Although Maimonides does not rank these three classes in the chapter, it is crystal clear that to him, theoretically, intellect is superior to imagination (cf. *Guide* I 73, 209–12). Now Strauss’s remark that Maimonides’s indication regarding “the beautiful consideration of the texts” occurs “within the section on prophecy in which he

makes for the first time an explicit distinction between the legal (or exegetic) and the speculative discussion of the same subject (cf. II 45 beginning)” (§34, 164), that is, within chapters II 32–48, leads us back to the very chapter in which Maimonides focuses on the revelation on Mount Sinai, *Guide* II 33. The general thrust of that chapter is how God’s words reach the people of Israel “at the *Gathering at Mount Sinai*.” According to Maimonides, “every time when their hearing words is mentioned, it is their hearing the *voice* that is meant, *Moses* being the one who heard words and reported them [the words] to them. This is the external meaning of the text of the *Torah* and of most of the dicta of the *Sages*” (*Guide* II 33, 364). In other words, Maimonides makes a distinction between Moses and all the other people at Mount Sinai, saying that Moses is the only one who hears the commandments by God. However, Maimonides does not stop at the “external meaning of the text.” In the name of the Midrash and Talmud sages, he points out further that the first two commandments reach the people as clearly as they reach Moses. “For these two principles, I mean the existence of the deity and His being one, are knowable by human speculation alone. Now with regard to everything that can be known by demonstration, the status of the prophet and that of everyone else who knows it are equal” (*Guide* II 33, 364). As Strauss indicates, Maimonides makes “an explicit distinction between the legal (or exegetic) and the speculative discussion of the same subject.” According to the legal discussion, Moses is the only one who heard the words of God and repeated the words to the people. Yet according to the speculative discussion, Moses is not the only one who heard the words of God. The equal status of knowing the first two commandments between Moses and those who know how to make demonstration means that “there is no superiority of one over the other. Thus these two principles are not known through prophecy alone” (*Guide* II 33, 364). Maimonides’s exotericism or “beautiful consideration” is even more revealing in Strauss’s next instance: “Accordingly, he speaks in his explanation of the Account of the Chariot, at any rate apparently, only of the literal meaning of this most secret text” (§34, 164). In the Introduction to the Third Part of the *Guide*, Maimonides states that he would like to interpret the meaning of the Account of the Chariot “in such a way that anyone who heard that interpretation would think that I do not say anything over and beyond what is indicated by the text, but that it is as if I translated words from one language to another or summarized the meaning of the external sense of the speech” (*Guide* III Intro., 416). Thus in the way that he describes, Maimonides can explain the secret of the Account of the Chariot without transgressing the rabbinic prohibition against teaching it publicly. However, as he immediately adds: “On

the other hand, if that interpretation is examined with a perfect care by him for whom this Treatise is composed and who has understood all its chapters... the whole matter... will become clear to him” (*Guide* III Introd., 416). Clearly, this “whole matter” cannot be “the external sense of the speeches” that he has summarized from the texts of the books of Ezekiel and Isaiah. And by understanding Maimonides’s secret teaching and presenting it in the way that Maimonides explains the secrets of the Law, Strauss shows that he is one of those for whom Maimonides’s treatise was composed.

Strauss also regards “progress beyond Moses” as possible because he discerns that Maimonides’s view on the intellectual status of the Mosaic prophecy is self-contradictory. What is at issue in this regard is whether Moses applied imagination in his prophecy. Strauss points out that Maimonides’s assertion that “Moses’ prophecy was entirely independent of the imagination leads to a great difficulty,” for similes and metaphors are brought forth by imagination (§35, 165). Since there are plenty of similes and metaphors in the Torah, it is difficult to say that Moses does not use his imagination, as Maimonides claims (cf. *Guide* II 36, 373). Strauss notes that for Maimonides, “all cognition or true belief stems from the human intellect, sense perception, opinion, or tradition.” He then talks about the different cognitive status of the Ten Commandments again (§36, 165; cf. *Guide* II 33, 363–64). Here Strauss continues his discussion of Maimonides’s explanation of the very core of the Mosaic prophecy, the Sinaitic revelation. He seems to deliberately scatter the same subject in different paragraphs, just as Maimonides does in the *Guide*. Strauss makes clear that in Maimonides’s view, man’s ultimate perfection is the perfection of his intellect. In this sense, faith as a moral virtue does not belong to the highest human perfection (§36, 165–66; cf. *Guide* III 53–54). Since the prophetic speeches have a “nonrational element” which is “to some extent imaginary”—Strauss calls it “infrarational”—their truth becomes problematic. The answer to this problem is “the supranatural testimony of the miracles” (§36, 166). By speaking of “miracles,” Strauss again draws attention to *Guide* III 29, the chapter on the Sabian work *The Nabatean Agriculture*, whose story about miracles made by tricks is retold by Maimonides. Strauss’s conclusion of the possibility of “progress beyond Moses” is that since the Torah is not always literally true, “the teaching of other prophets may be superior in some points to that of Moses” (§36, 166). We see here that the standard for the superiority is truth (cf. *Guide* I 1, III 54).

But there is still the “difficulty” of how to differentiate the supranatural from the infrarational among the not literally true parts of the Torah,

because the former should be believed while the latter should not. According to Strauss, “recourse to the fact that we hear through” the Torah “not human beings but God himself” is untenable, because in Maimonides’s view, “God does not use speech in any sense.” Strauss comments that “this fact entails infinite consequences” (§36, 167). One of these “infinite consequences,” to use Strauss’s own suggestion in his “On the Interpretation of Genesis,” could be that the Bible or the Torah can be taken as “a work of the human mind” and “it has to be read like any other book—like Homer, like Plato, like Shakespeare—with respect but also with willingness to argue with the author, to disagree with him, to criticize him.”⁴² To resolve the difficulty, Strauss makes the suggestion in our essay that “the infrarational in the Bible is distinguished from the suprarational by the fact that the former is impossible, whereas the latter is possible.” By “impossible” he means those “biblical utterances that contradict what has been demonstrated by natural science or by reason,” whereas “the possible” refers to “views the contrary of which has not been demonstrated,” such as “creation out of nothing” (§36, 167). Closely following Maimonides’s teaching, Strauss takes creation out of nothing to be possible, because the contrary of it, namely, the eternity of the world, has not been demonstrated. Here, Strauss refers to two chapters of the *Guide*, I 32 and II 25, and of the two, II 25 is more pertinent to our context. There, Maimonides states:

Know that with a belief in the creation of the world in time, all the miracles become possible and the Law becomes possible, and all questions that may be asked on this subject, vanish.... For if creation in time were demonstrated—if only as Plato understands creation—all the overhasty claims made to us on this point by the philosophers would become void. In the same way, if the philosophers would succeed in demonstrating eternity as Aristotle understands it, the Law as a whole would become void. (*Guide* II 25, 329–30)⁴³

⁴² Leo Strauss, “On the Interpretation of Genesis,” *L’Homme, Revue française d’anthropologie* 21, no. 1 (Jan.–March 1981): 6. The essay is a posthumous publication of a lecture given by Strauss at the University of Chicago on January 25, 1957.

⁴³ It should be noted that while in this passage Maimonides seems to place Plato’s view on “creation or eternity” on the side of the Law, he states earlier in the same chapter that “if...one believed in eternity according to the second opinion we have explained [in II 13]—which is the opinion of Plato—according to which the heavens too are subject to generation and corruption, this opinion would not destroy the foundations of the Law” (*Guide* II 25, 328; cf. II 26, 330–31). According to Maimonides, “the second opinion is that of all the philosophers of whom we have heard reports and whose discourses we have seen.... They say that it is absurd that God would bring a thing into existence out of nothing.... This is also the belief of Plato” (*Guide* II 13, 282–83). In other words, it is more likely that Maimonides regards Plato’s view on the issue as siding with eternity.

The incompatibility between the Law and philosophy is nowhere made clearer than in this chapter of the *Guide*. Strauss refers to it in order to show, however indirectly, why progress beyond Moses, whose teaching is based on revelation, and therefore based on miracles,⁴⁴ is necessary. Yet, as Strauss says, Maimonides “is compelled...to leave it open whether it is not rather the imagination that ought to have the last word” (§38, 167). It is in this connection that Strauss calls into question Maimonides’s “enigmatic equation” of the Account of the Beginning and the Account of the Chariot with natural science and divine science respectively. He raises the rather surprising and dazzling question: “But this enigmatic equation leaves obscure the place or the status of the fact of God’s free creation of the world out of nothing: does this fact belong to the Account of the Beginning or to the Account of the Chariot or to both or to neither?” (§38, 167). It is not so easy to recognize that Strauss implies the answer in the way of presenting his question. Whereas traditionally creation belongs exactly to the Account of the Beginning, by bringing up this question, Strauss denies the association. How can creation out of nothing, one of the greatest miracles, be identical with natural science? On the other hand, Strauss states that “the Account of the Chariot deals with God’s governance of the world, in contradistinction not only to His providence...but also to His creation” (§38, 167). In a way, this statement, by differentiating “governance” from “providence” and “creation,” implies Maimonides’s subtle division of “providence” and “governance” on one hand, and the difference between divine intellect and divine will, on the other (cf. §54, 180–81). In other words, it gives hints regarding the connection of divine intellect to governance and divine will to providence that Maimonides made use of in the *Guide*. Now it is clear that according to Strauss’s understanding of Maimonides, creation does not belong to the Account of the Chariot either. Therefore, the only answer to his question is that “the fact of God’s free creation of the world out of nothing” belongs *neither* to the Account of the Beginning *nor* to the Account of the Chariot. Strauss picks up the topic of the two accounts in paragraph 38 again so as to bring about the question of “the rank between the Mosaic theophany and the Isaian theophany” (§38, 167). While it is quite clear that the Isaian theophany is related to the Account of the Chariot, the parallel Strauss draws between the two accounts and the two theophanies makes one wonder whether he is rather suggesting an association of the Account of Beginning with the Mosaic theophany or prophecy. However this may be, since from the perspective of the rabbinic tradition,

⁴⁴ Among other places, in his lecture “On the Interpretation of Genesis,” Strauss points out that “Revelation is a miracle” (6).

the Account of the Chariot is superior to the Account of the Beginning, and the latter “occurs in the Torah of Moses,” progress beyond Moses is possible as well as necessary (§38, 167).

Yet this conclusion does not satisfy Strauss. He proposes “a postbiblical progress” (§39, 168). He points out, as was shown and emphasized in the *Guide*, that the Aramaic translator of the Bible, Onqelos the Stranger,⁴⁵ as well as the talmudic Sages, were “freer from corporealism than the Bible” (§40, 169). Furthermore, since Maimonides has the knowledge of natural science that the talmudic Sages and Onqelos the Stranger did not have, Strauss claims, “progress beyond Onqelos the Stranger and the Talmud became possible” (§41, 169). This progress is possible for two reasons. The first, religious or political, reason lies in the habituation of the Jewish people to the Torah and “the rise and political victory of Christianity and Islam,” which made God’s existence generally accepted. The second reason is the introduction of philosophy and the art of demonstration into Judaism, which Strauss calls a “great progress.” However, in Strauss’s view, Maimonides does not “regard his age as the peak of wisdom. He never forgot the power of what one may call *the inverted Sabianism* that perpetuates corporealism through unqualified submission to the literal meaning of the Bible and thus even outdoes *Sabianism proper*” (§41, 170, emphasis added). If “Sabianism proper” signifies the Sabian practice of idolatry, talismans, and so on, Strauss means by “the inverted Sabianism” the submission to the literal, namely, corporeal understanding of the Bible, an understanding sanctioned by an authoritative book and a long tradition. Being, like Moses, a lawgiver, Maimonides had to make concessions to the “inverted Sabianism” or Sabian relics in his community. However, being, unlike Moses, a philosopher, he gave an allegorical interpretation of the “revered text” as a remedy for the perplexity of most readers in the face of the corporealism suggested by the Bible, and in the *Guide* took the decisive step “in the overcoming of Sabianism” (§41, 170). In other words, Strauss regards Maimonides as the peak of “progress beyond Moses,” declaring that “the *Torah for the Perplexed* thus marks a progress beyond the Torah for the Unperplexed” (§42, 171). By characterizing Maimonides’s *Guide* as the new “*Torah for the Perplexed*,” Strauss presents Maimonides as the new Moses (§42, 171).



⁴⁵ Aryeh Tepper suggests that Strauss’s translation of “Onqelos the Stranger...is subtly pointing in the direction of Plato’s *Laws*,” that is, to “the Athenian Stranger” (*Progressive Minds, Conservative Politics*, 56). In the Shlomo Pines translation, the name is rendered as “Onqelos the Proselyte.”

Progress is no doubt an important theme in Strauss's "How To Begin To Study." The essay undertakes the philosophic task of presenting Moses Maimonides in a position superior to that of the prophet Moses. In other words, in "How To Begin To Study," Strauss places Maimonides at the end of the "progress beyond Moses." To use his own words, "Maimonides regarded the step that he took in the *Guide* as the ultimate step in the decisive respect, namely, in the overcoming of Sabianism" (§41, 170). Philosophically, the inner Sabianism is the cause of the necessity of "progress beyond Moses," and it is because the step Maimonides took was decisively philosophic that it can be taken as ultimate.

However, progress is *not* the "leading theme" in "How To Begin To Study."⁴⁶ Strauss's primary intention is rather to give a *guide* to Maimonides's *Guide of the Perplexed*. By presenting the plan of the *Guide* and indicating "the How" and "the What," Strauss shows "the way toward" an adequate understanding of Maimonides's secret teaching in the *Guide*. As we have stated earlier, *the chief purpose* of Strauss's essay is to explain what Maimonides "means" by his identification of natural science with the Account of the Beginning and divine science with the Account of the Chariot. Strauss answers this question first by disconnecting "God's free creation of the world out of nothing" from these Accounts. The ultimate answer is implied in his suggestive association of the Account of the Beginning with Mosaic prophecy. Strauss states that "the nonidentity of the teaching of the philosophers as a whole and the thirteen roots of the Law as a whole are the first word and the last word of Maimonides" (§8, 145). Since "the thirteen roots of the Law" represent the whole teaching of the Law, it is safe to say that in Strauss's view, Maimonides regards the identification of the two sciences with the two Accounts as not literally true.

For Strauss, Maimonides's *Guide* is the philosophic work par excellence in responding to the theologico-political problem he had struggled with since his

⁴⁶ See, for instance, Aryeh Tepper, "'Progress' as a Leading Term and Theme in Leo Strauss's 'How To Begin To Study *The Guide of the Perplexed*,'" in *Homo Homini: Essays in Jewish Philosophy Presented by His Students to Professor Warren Zev Harvey*, ed. Shmuel Wygoda et al. (Jerusalem: Magnes, 2018), 127–51. See also Isadore Twersky, review of *The Guide of the Perplexed*, by Moses Maimonides, trans. Shlomo Pines, *Speculum* 41 (1966): 556. Tepper brilliantly points out the twofoldness of progress in Strauss's essay and the importance of the element of "progress in understanding." Yet it seems to me that "progress in understanding" is in fact implied in what he calls "progress in the historical sense": even in cases that involve the historical dimension, such as the progress of Onqelos the Stranger compared to the Bible, in Strauss's essay, "progress" is always pointing to "progress in understanding." The very term Strauss uses in the essay, "progress beyond Moses," refers first of all to "progress" from imagination to intellect, that is, "progress in understanding."

youth.⁴⁷ Maimonides knows and judiciously conveys to his attentive reader that there is no way to make peace between the Law and Philosophy theoretically. If it is from Plato's *Laws*, through a clue given by Avicenna, that Strauss learned how to decipher the secrets of prophecy,⁴⁸ then it is from Maimonides's *Guide* that he understood how to explore in depth the opposition of Jerusalem and Athens. Throughout his philosophic life, Strauss insists on their fundamental antagonism. From 1946 through 1967, Strauss gave at least on three occasions lectures with the title "Jerusalem and Athens." In the 1946 lecture, he states at the beginning: "During the second World War, it has been fairly common practice to proclaim the unity of Western civilization, or to assert the basic harmony of its two main elements, the Biblical tradition and the Greek tradition. . . . The time has come for reminding ourselves of the disharmony, the antagonism of the two pillars on which western civilization rests."⁴⁹ In the 1950 lecture he reiterates that Jerusalem and Athens are "in actual *conflict*—by which I mean the actual struggle going on between these two forces."⁵⁰ In 1967, Strauss presents his last lecture titled "Jerusalem and Athens" at the City College of New York. By the end of the first part of the lecture, Strauss points out more specifically that the "fundamental opposition of Athens at its peak to Jerusalem [is] the opposition of the God or gods of the philosophers to the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, the opposition of Reason and Revelation."⁵¹ Such opposition or antagonism is known only by philosophers and their opponents. While most scholars see in Maimonides's *Guide* the synthesis of Judaism and philosophy, Strauss discerns in it Maimonides's philosophic efforts to overcome the "inverted Sabianism" of adherence to the literal meaning of the Torah; he also sees in the *Guide* the highest type of philosophic education. In Maimonides's enchanted and enchanting forest, Strauss became the philosopher he was.⁵²

⁴⁷ Leo Strauss, "Vorwort," in *Hobbes' politische Wissenschaft in ihrer Genesis* (dated October 1964), in *GS* 3:8; cf. "Preface to *Spinoza's Critique of Religion*," in *LAM*, 224. See also Meier, "The Theologico-Political Problem: On the Theme of Leo Strauss," in *Leo Strauss and the Theologico-Political Problem*, 1–51.

⁴⁸ "A Giving of Accounts: Jacob Klein and Leo Strauss," 3.

⁴⁹ Leo Strauss, "Jerusalem and Athens (Lecture to be delivered in November 1946 in the General Seminar)," typescript generously supplied by Heinrich Meier. The lecture was delivered at the New School for Social Research, New York, on November 13, 1946.

⁵⁰ Leo Strauss, "Jerusalem and Athens" (lecture delivered at Hillel House, Chicago, on October 25, 1950). Transcript edited by David M. Kretz, https://www.academia.edu/29738143/Transcript_of_Leo_Strauss_Jerusalem_and_Athens_1950 Accessed August 10, 2019.

⁵¹ Leo Strauss, *Jerusalem and Athens: Some Preliminary Reflections* (New York: City College, 1967), 21.

⁵² See "How To Begin To Study," ¶3 (142); cf. ¶58 (184).

