



**A Dance of Two Companies:  
A Maimonidean Interpretation of the Revelation at Sinai in the Book of Exodus**

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To my soul-mate,  
Mark,

*We promise to try to be ever open to one another  
while cherishing each other's uniqueness;  
To comfort and challenge each other  
through life's sorrow and joy;  
To share our intuition and insight with one another;  
And above all,  
To do everything within our power  
to permit each of us to become  
the persons we are yet to be.  
(Our Ketubah)*

Thank you.

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To my teacher,  
Dr. Kogan,

*It is the supreme art of the teacher  
to awaken joy  
in creative expression and knowledge.  
(Albert Einstein)*

Thank you.

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## Digest

Moses Maimonides (1138-1204) wrote his major philosophical work, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, as a tool of instruction for his disciple, Joseph ibn Judah. In it, Maimonides attempted to provide the necessary lessons which would dispel the confusion of Joseph ibn Judah and others like him, students intellectually challenged by the apparent contradictions between revelation and reason.

My thesis is a study of the ideas and opinions of Moses Maimonides regarding prophecy and revelation. My goal is to present a model for Reform Jews which integrates the religious claims of the Jewish tradition and truth as revealed by reason. I focus on the Revelation at Sinai because it is, in Maimonides' opinion, the "pivot" of the Jewish religion and the "proof which demonstrates its veracity."<sup>1</sup>

Chapter One is an outline of Maimonides' conception of the universe and his theory of knowledge. Chapter Two is an exploration of Maimonides' opinions regarding prophecy, in general, and Mosaic prophecy, in particular. Chapter Three is a brief discussion of Maimonides' understanding of the figurative use of language and an extraction of the lexicon he provided in the *Guide* in order to explain the figurative use of language in the Torah. Chapter Four is an analytical translation, based on the lexicon of Chapter Three, of selected texts from the Book of Exodus which describe the Revelation at Sinai. Chapter Five is a summary of my findings and a look to future questions and tasks which ought to be addressed as a result of these findings.

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<sup>1</sup>Twersky, I., *A Maimonides Reader* (New York: Behrman House, 1972), p. 447.

## **Chapter One**

### **The Structure of the Universe and the Hierarchy of Knowledge**

Moses Maimonides (1138-1204) wrote his major philosophical work, *The Guide of the Perplexed*, as a tool of instruction for his disciple Joseph ibn Judah. His disciple was "perplexed" on account of the tension and apparent contradiction between his worldly knowledge (astronomy, mathematics, logic) and the religious claims of his Jewish tradition. Certainly Reform Jews of twentieth century America experience Joseph ibn Judah's perplexity. Faced with theories of astrophysics, quantum mechanics, biblical criticism, the anthropology and psychology of religion, many modern Reform Jews wonder what to make of the religious claims of the Jewish tradition and of the Torah.

Maimonides attempted in *The Guide of the Perplexed* to provide the necessary lessons which would dispel the confusion of Joseph ibn Judah and those like him. Maimonides hid many of the lessons of the *Guide* in its intentionally disjointed structure. For this reason many scholars today are still solving the puzzles of the *Guide* which are not clearly elucidated. My ultimate task in this thesis is to present the *Guide* as an example for Reform Jews who question the religious claims of our tradition in light of their beliefs based in science and reason. Working specifically with the Revelation at Mount Sinai and Maimonides treatment of it, I will attempt to present an analytical translation which opens to the modern Jewish mind new and exciting possibilities which support intellectual integrity rather than threaten it.

As our tradition and our Torah contain important religious claims, our first step is to determine how one approaches a given claim. Is there a set of criteria

for accepting a claim or a body of claims as true? The question might also be asked, what ultimately constitutes knowledge of any thing or concept?

I wish to answer these questions through the lens of Maimonides' instruction. In order to do so, I must first describe his view of the universe.<sup>1</sup> In the *Guide*<sup>2</sup>, Maimonides makes a connection between the categories of opinion held by individuals on the creation of the universe and the categories of opinion on prophecy.<sup>3</sup> (Prophecy in Maimonides' theory of knowledge is the highest form of knowledge.) Irrespective of the actual opinions held by individuals about cosmogony and about prophecy, Maimonides sees a relationship between one's view of the architecture and workings of the universe and the acquisition of knowledge. Maimonides' own mapping of the universe and its origin and discussion on the workings of the universe do indeed construct a mechanism for acquiring knowledge in general and ultimately acquiring knowledge of God.

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<sup>1</sup>This explanation follows the overview of Maimonides' cosmology and cosmogony in Reines, Alvin, "Maimonides Concepts of Providence and Theodicy," *HUCA* (1972) 174-177.

<sup>2</sup>All references to the *Guide* refer to the same edition: Pines, Shlomo, trans., *The Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963). Regarding the opinions on creation, see *Guide*, 2:13, pp. 281-285. Regarding the opinions on prophecy, see *Guide*, 2:32, pp. 360-361.

<sup>3</sup>The discussion on the puzzle of the relationship between cosmogony and prophecy is taken up in several articles. Lawrence Kaplan, "Maimonides on the Miraculous Element in Prophecy," *HTR* 70 (1977), 233-56; Herbert Davidson, "Maimonides' Secret Position on Creation," in Isadore Twersky, ed., *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University, 1979), 16-40; and Warren Z. Harvey, "A Third Approach to Maimonides' Cosmogony-Prophetology Puzzle," *HTR* 74 (1981), 287-301.

Maimonides' universe is comprised of three parts: Intellects, spheres (bodies made of substance called quintessence), and primary matter (the material of our sublunar world, of which we are made). God is the first cause<sup>4</sup>, an incorporeal being, the qualities of whose existence set the creation of the universe into motion. There are ten intellects and nine spheres. God, the first cause, emanates or overflows, causing the existence of the first intellect. The first intellect overflows, causing the existence of the first sphere and the second intellect. The second intellect overflows, causing the existence of the second sphere and the third intellect. The process continues in the same manner until the ninth intellect overflows, causing the existence of the ninth sphere and the tenth intellect which is called the Active Intellect. At this point the existence of the heavens is complete. Still the process continues. The overflow of the Active Intellect causes the existence of the earth and all that fills the earth. This emanation includes primary matter, fundamentally different than quintessence, the matter of the spheres (the heavens). Primary matter, through the overflow of the Active Intellect takes the forms of the four Aristotelian elements, fire, water, earth, and air.

**Diagram: Creation and Care of the Universe**

**God>(1)>(2)>(3)>(4)>(5)>(6)>(7)>(8)>(9)>(Active Intellect)>Earth**

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<sup>4</sup>Or Aristotle's "Prime Mover".

The overflow, from God into the first intellect, from each intellect into its sphere, and from the Active Intellect into the sublunar world (our world) is a constant and conscious act. The universe, which is not self sufficient, requires God's overflow, i.e., care or natural providence. In turn, each intellect deliberately overflows, and continually cares for its sphere. Because God is incorporeal, God is not subject to time, and is therefore eternal. The nature of aether or the quintessence, the material of the spheres, is eternal once it comes into existence. The sublunar world, however, because of the nature of matter cannot boast eternal existence of its bodies. Matter is subject to generation and to corruption. Therefore, we, creatures constructed of matter, are subject to generation and to corruption. The fact that we are formed from matter is an impediment to our directly knowing the intellects and certainly God, since they are entirely immaterial. Pleasure and pain, to which only bodies of matter are subject, distract us from the concentration required to know or to apprehend the intellects and God. Our challenge is to perfect our one incorporeal component, our intellectual potential, so that we might achieve recognition and perhaps direct knowledge of the intellects and of God.

In the *Guide*, Maimonides explains that God is

*...the intellect as well as the intellectually cognizing subject, and the intellectually cognized object, and that those three notions form in Him, may He be exalted, one single notion in which there is no multiplicity.<sup>5</sup>*

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<sup>5</sup>*Guide*, 1:63, p. 163.



God is the subject, act, and object of intellection. God, being incorporeal and without multiplicity, is changeless. God is always thinking, always thought of, and thought in process. Human beings, on the other hand, do change. Human beings move from states of potentiality to states of actuality.

*Know that before a man intellectually cognizes a thing, he is potentially the intellectually cognizing subject. Now if he has intellectually cognized a thing (it is as if you said that if a man has intellectually cognized this piece of wood to which one can point, has stripped its form from its matter, and has represented to himself the pure form - this being the action of the intellect), at that time the man would become one who has intellectual cognition in actu.<sup>6</sup>*

Once human beings are in this state of intellect in full actuality, their intellectual activity and the object (in this case the abstract form of the piece of wood) are synonymous. Human beings as cognizing subjects also are inseparable from their activity and the object of their activity. Prior to the state of active intellectual cognition, the state of potentiality, the subject capable of contemplating and the object capable of being contemplated are two separate things.

*It is as if you said the hylic intellect subsisting in Zayd is a potential intellect, and similarly this piece of wood is in potential an intellectually cognized object. Indubitably these are two things.<sup>7</sup>*

The intellectual coming together of subject, action, and object is called apprehension. Apprehension is the human intellect in a contemplative state, the activity of contemplation, and the abstract form of the object of contemplation united into one thing, "for the true reality and the quiddity of the intellect is

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<sup>6</sup>Guide, 1:68, pp. 163-164.

<sup>7</sup>Guide, 1:68, p. 165.

apprehension."<sup>8</sup> Human beings in the act of apprehending an object or an idea, transcend matter. They join, at least momentarily, with the Active Intellect from which cognition and the abstract forms of things and ideas emanate.

Objects and ideas, as they are apprehended by human intellect, are included within the Acquired Intellect. Human beings share their Acquired Intellect with the Active Intellect in that objects and ideas once apprehended are inseparable from their forms or their essences as they are cognized in the Active Intellect. It is in this manner that human beings may transcend matter by means of their intellectual exercise.

*Man's use of his capacity for intellectual love thus elevates him beyond the physical sphere, and unites him with the eternal spiritual forms. It is clear that this kind of love goes beyond that of the intellect only, though as 'intellectual' eternal love it does not dispense with intellect entirely. We have here a supposedly higher level of intelligence, non-discursive and bordering on the non-descriptive.<sup>9</sup>*

This exercise, known also as perfection of the intellect, ought to be our primary activity as human beings, i.e., rational animals. The intellect separates human beings from other animals. When the Torah states that human beings are created in the image (*tselem*) of God, the reference is not to our bodies because God is incorporeal. The reference is to apprehension. Human apprehension is

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<sup>8</sup>*Guide*, 1:68, p. 164. Pines notes, "It is, however, impossible to separate the two senses [intellectual cognition and apprehension]."

<sup>9</sup>Ivry, Alfred, "Neoplatonic Currents in Maimonides' Thought" in J. Kraemer (ed.), *Perspectives on Maimonides* (Oxford, 1991), p. 125.



likened to divine apprehension.<sup>10</sup> If human beings are to relate to God in any manner, it will be through the intellect, the one attribute that we share with God.

B. Kogan explains A. Altmann's position:

*What happens is that the more intelligible objects the mind understands, the more self-sufficient and independent of images and sense perception it becomes. To that extent it comes to be similar to or "in the image of" the Divine Intellect, and that similarity is what qualifies it for immortality.<sup>11</sup>*

Maimonides discusses four major areas of perfection<sup>12</sup> in which human beings engage during their lifetimes. First there is the perfection of possessions. This perfection is the most defective in its emphasis of material gains which are subject to corruption as are we, human beings, and it is the perfection with regard to which we, human beings, focus most of our time and effort. The second perfection is that of bodily constitution and shape. Also a material perfection, and therefore a lower level perfection, personal gains of a physical nature (beyond good health and appropriate strength) are useless,

*...if the strength of a human individual reached its greatest maximum, it would not attain the strength of a strong mule, and still less the strength of a lion or an elephant.<sup>13</sup>*

The third perfection is that of moral virtues. It is a higher perfection than the first two which deal with material and bodies. The perfection of moral virtues

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<sup>10</sup>Guide, 1:1, pp. 21-23.

<sup>11</sup>Kogan, B., "The Limits and Possibilities of Knowledge in Medieval Jewish Philosophy," *CCAR Journal* (Fall 1993), p. 16.

<sup>12</sup>Guide, 3:54, pp. 634-636.

<sup>13</sup>Guide, 3:54, p. 635.

occurs within the soul. It facilitates relations with other human beings. Maimonides notes that many of the commandments serve to perfect one's moral habits. The perfection of moral virtues, though, is not the highest perfection because it is contingent on relations with other human beings. The fourth perfection is the highest and most admirable; it is the perfection of rational virtues. The perfection of rational virtues, the intellectual movement toward apprehending truths which relate to the universe and to God, is the only perfection in which individuals engage themselves only for their own betterment. It is a truly independent pursuit and a truly independent experience. For this reason, that it belongs to the individual alone, it is the noblest of the human perfections. Maimonides claims that this perfection is also considered to be most important by the prophets and the philosophers:

*...neither the perfection of possession nor the perfection of health nor the perfection of moral habits is a perfection of which one should be proud or that one should desire; the perfection of which one should be proud and that one should desire is knowledge of Him, may He be exalted, which is the true science.<sup>14</sup>*

Maimonides does not suggest that all individuals act in accordance with his prioritization of the perfections. In fact, most individuals, i.e., the masses, barely master moral virtues in that while they may follow the commandments they do not necessarily ponder or understand the purpose of the commandments. Among the individuals who do engage in the most noble perfection, there is disparity with respect to the levels they reach. Individuals reach different stages of intellectual

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<sup>14</sup>Guide, 3:54, p. 636.

perfection according to the effort they expend as well as with respect to the instructional and moral limitations or gateways placed before them.

Plato's parable of the cave-dwellers is one example of the hierarchy of human beings with respect to knowledge or perfection of the intellect. Ibn Bajja<sup>15</sup> in one of his treatises interprets the myth of the cave.

*There are people dwelling in almost total darkness; there are people, they are the great majority, who are aware of the existence of the intellect; they are compared to the cave dwellers who do not see light as separate from colors. Then there are the men of speculation (or theoreticians, al-nazariyyun), who may be compared to people who have come out of the cave, and separately see the light and all the colors. Finally there are the happy ones who might be compared to people whose sight has been transmuted to light.<sup>16</sup>*

Plato's "happy ones" include figures such as Aristotle. Aristotle, and those like him, have consciously exercised and perfected their intellects to the extent that their intellects are in essence no longer subject to corruption like the human body.

Maimonides, too, indicates a hierarchy of intellectual perfection. In his introduction to the *Guide*, Maimonides writes about the flashes of lightning.

*We are like someone in a very dark night over whom lightning flashes time and time again. Among us there is one for whom the lightning flashes time and time again, so that he is always, as it were, in unceasing light. Thus night appears to him as day. That is the degree of the great one among the prophets... Among them there is one to whom the lightning flashes only once*

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<sup>15</sup>Ibn Bajja wrote a treatise which deals with a lost work by Al Farabi, his *Commentary on the Nicomachean Ethics*. Shlomo Pines writes in his article, "The Limitations of Human Knowledge According to Al-Farabi, ibn Bajja, and Maimonides," (in Twersky, I., *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, vol. I, 82-109) that this work influenced Maimonides' understanding of the limitations of human knowledge.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 87-88.

*in the whole of his night... There are others between whose lightning flashes there are greater or shorter intervals. Thereafter comes he who does not attain a degree in which his darkness is illumined by any lightning flash. It is illumined, however, by a polished body or something of that kind, stones or something else that give light in the darkness of the night... As for those who never even once see a light, but grope about in their night... They are the vulgar among the people.*<sup>17</sup>

Moses, the supreme prophet<sup>18</sup>, alone experiences the flashes so constantly that his night is like day. The other prophets experience either only one direct flash or some direct flashes of lightning. People of speculation and learning see light by means of the polished stones. And the masses, who do not actualize their intellects, never see even hints of light.

Maimonides deliberately refers to the moments of elucidation as "flashes" of light because, with the exception of the case of Moses, they disappeared as quickly as they appeared. The prophets are unable to articulate their apprehensions in common language. Apprehensions are abstract and difficult for the prophet to relate to others, especially to others who are weak in their intellectual ability. The prophets, even Moses, teach us through parables and riddles. The truths in the Torah are written in "equivocal language"<sup>19</sup>

*so that the multitude might comprehend them in accord with the capacity of their understanding and the weakness of their representation, whereas the perfect man, who is already informed, will comprehend them otherwise.*<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup>Guide, Introduction to Part I, p. 7-8.

<sup>18</sup>See below, Chapter Two.

<sup>19</sup>See below, Chapter Three.

<sup>20</sup>Guide, Introduction to Part I, p. 9.

The metaphor of the gold and silver filigree apple, also a part of Maimonides' Introduction to Part I of the *Guide*, further illustrates the hierarchy of what is knowable. With respect to the Torah, and more specifically the use of equivocal language, Maimonides writes:

*The Sage accordingly said that a saying uttered with a view to two meanings is like an apple of gold overlaid with silver filigree-work having very small holes... When looked at from a distance or with imperfect attention, it is deemed to be an apple of silver; but when a keen-sighted observer looks at it with full attention, its interior becomes clear to him and he knows that it is of gold.<sup>21</sup>*

Both the external layer of the apple and the internal body are valuable, silver and gold. The internal body, the apple of gold, is more valuable than the silver filigree. Accordingly the hidden truth conveyed by a saying ought to be more beneficial to the audience than the surface meaning of the words which is in and of itself beneficial when taken literally. Maimonides applies this metaphor to the parables of the prophets, as follows:

*Their external meaning contains wisdom that is useful in many respects, among which is the welfare of human societies, as is shown by the external meaning of Proverbs and of similar sayings. Their internal meaning, on the other hand, contains wisdom that is useful for beliefs concerned with the truth as it is.<sup>22</sup>*

Maimonides also applies his hierarchy of the knowledgeable to knowledge of God. He constructs the parable of the palace in the *Guide*, 3:51.

*The ruler is in his palace, and all his subjects are partly within the city and partly outside the city. Of those who are within the city, some have turned their backs upon the ruler's habitation, their faces being turned another way.*

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<sup>21</sup>*Guide*, Introduction to Part I, p. 12.

<sup>22</sup>*Guide*, Introduction to Part I, p. 12.



*Others seek to reach the ruler's habitation, turn toward it, and desire to enter it and to stand before him, but up to now they have not yet seen the wall of the habitation. Some of those who seek to reach it have come up to the habitation and walk around it searching for its gate. Some of them have entered the gate and walk about in the antechambers. Some of them have entered the inner court of the habitation and have come to be with the king, in one and the same palace with him, namely, in the ruler's habitation. But their having come into the inner part of the habitation does not mean that they see the ruler or speak to him. For after their coming into the inner part of the habitation, it is indispensable that they should make another effort; then they will be in the presence of the ruler, see him from afar or from nearby, or hear the ruler's speech or speak to him.<sup>23</sup>*

The subjects whose backs are turned to the ruler's habitation represent those among humanity who hold incorrect beliefs. The subjects who seek to reach the ruler's habitation but have not even seen the wall of the palace are the multitude of Jews, who observe the commandments, though with false opinions about them. The subjects who walk around the palace walls searching for the gate are those who hold true opinions yet do not engage in speculation. The subjects who enter the gate and walk about in the antechambers and even in the inner court are those individuals who engage in speculation and have perfected their intellects. They may or may not gain access to the ruler. Those subjects who do acquire access to the ruler are the prophets. And only Moses poses questions and "hears" the ruler's speech.

We should pay attention to those who do not enter the habitation of the ruler, to those who gain entry into the palace, and to those who gain access to the ruler. The masses of Jews, observant Jews, do not even see the wall of the palace.

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<sup>23</sup>Guide, 3:51, p. 618.

For Maimonides, it is no virtue in and of itself to be an observant Jew. Following the commandments (a moral perfection) is necessary, though nothing of which to boast. Speculation warrants entrance through the gateway. It is important to note here that even those who have perfected their intellects may not receive direct access to the ruler. The prophet is not only intellectually perfected but singled out.<sup>24</sup>

Individuals acquire knowledge in proportion to their commitment to the act of speculation and also according to their ability.

*This is what happens to all beings: Some of them achieve perfections to an extent which enables them to govern others, whereas others achieve perfection only in a measure that allows them to be governed by others.*<sup>25</sup>

When there are those who are intellectually advanced, and those who are not, and those who are somewhere in between, what does one make of the biblical account of a revelation which occurred at Mount Sinai before 600,000 "witnesses"?

Certainly, according to Maimonides' teaching thus far, there must have been some disparity among the 600,000 in terms of who perceived what and who apprehended what.

Maimonides takes up this issue in the *Guide*, 2:32-33. His first statement with regard to the event at Mount Sinai is not surprisingly an admission that among the masses only a few were prepared to apprehend the revelation. And among those who apprehended the event, they did so at different levels.

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<sup>24</sup>See below, Chapter Two.

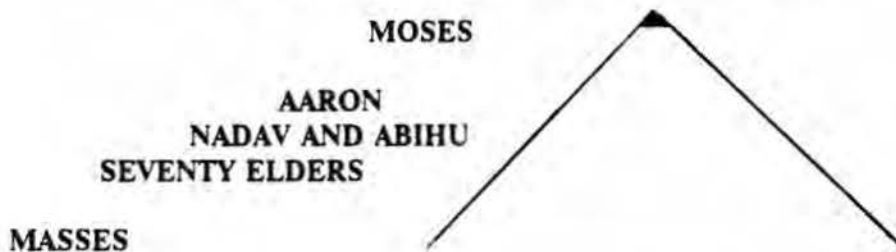
<sup>25</sup>*Guide*, 2:37, p. 374.

*As for the Gathering at Mount Sinai, though through a miracle all the people saw the great fire and heard the frightening and terrifying voices, only those which were fit for it achieved the rank of prophecy, and even those in various degrees.<sup>26</sup>*

Were we to see an image of the event at Mount Sinai, Moses would be atop the mountain receiving direct speech from God. Aaron would be below Moses.

Below Aaron would be his sons Nadab and Abihu. Then would stand the Seventy Elders. And below the Seventy Elders would be the masses.

Diagram: The Gathering at Mount Sinai



Maimonides does claim that the masses did in fact apprehend the first and second commandments. The principles underlying these commandments, however, can be understood through demonstration and speculation.

*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; there is no superiority of the one over the other.<sup>27</sup>*

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<sup>26</sup>Guide, 2:32, p. 363.

<sup>27</sup>Guide, 2:33, pp. 364.



So the masses did not achieve apprehension of the existence and the unity of God by means of prophecy and certainly not by means of hearing direct speech from God. Only Moses heard direct speech from God. The masses heard a *kol*, 'a sound'. It frightened them so that they pleaded to never hear the sound again.

*Behold the Lord our God hath shown us His glory and His greatness, and we have heard His voice out of the midst of the fire; we have seen this day that God doth speak with man and he liveth. Now wherefore why should we die? For this great fire will consume us; if we hear the voice of the Lord our God any more, then we shall die. For who is there of all flesh, that hath heard the voice of the living God speaking out of the midst of the fire as we have, and lived? Go thou (Moses) near and hear all that the Lord our God may say; and thou shalt speak unto us all that the Lord our God may speak unto thee; and we will hear it and do it.<sup>28</sup>*

Still, having heard the sound and having apprehended the first two commandments, albeit by means of demonstration, the masses, all Jews, at the very least must affirm that YHWH is our God and that we are strictly forbidden to place any other gods before YHWH. Hence in other chapters in the *Guide*<sup>29</sup>, we read of the importance of shedding the remnants of idolatry even among contemporary Jewish practices. Of course one should not be so mistaken as to think that the masses apprehended the sound as direct speech as did Moses.

*Know that with regard to that voice too, their rank was not equal to the rank of Moses our Master.<sup>30</sup>*

According to the Torah and to the Sages, all that can be clear about the revelation is that:

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<sup>28</sup>Deuteronomy 5:21-24.

<sup>29</sup>*Guide*, 1:36, pp. 82-85; 3:29, pp. 514-522; 3:37, pp. 540-550.

<sup>30</sup>*Guide*, 2:33, p. 365.

*Speech was addressed to Moses alone; for this reason, in the whole Decalogue the second person singular is used, and he, peace be on him, went to the foot of the mountain and communicated to the people what he had heard.*<sup>31</sup>

Though the people heard a sound and apprehended the first two commandments on their own, Moses' report, the Torah, is the reliable tradition from which we, the masses, and especially we, the speculative few, first acquire knowledge of the universe and of God, *Ma'aseh Bereishit* and *Ma'aseh Merkavah* respectively. The revelation, God's overflow is perfect. Moses' apprehension is perfect. And the transmission of the report is perfect. The resulting Torah is perfect as well. We, whose understanding of the Torah is imperfect, must strive to achieve higher levels of understanding so that we may grasp what Moses understood. Understanding, as mentioned above, is our purpose as human beings i.e., rational animals. Each truth we apprehend activates that much more of our intellect. That much more of our rational faculty joins with the Active Intellect. We transcend matter, and we become more God-like.

Maimonides not only believes that intellectual perfection is our most noble aim as human beings, he intends to help those who are ready for the highest levels of perfection, i.e., the perplexed. Maimonides' *Guide* is not just a philosophical treatise, but a "guide". He intends that "the perplexed" use the *Guide* to unlock the internal or hidden meanings of the words, verses, and parables in the Torah.

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<sup>31</sup>*Guide*, 2:33, p. 363-364.

*The first purpose of this Treatise is to explain the meanings of certain terms occurring in books of prophecy... This Treatise also has a second purpose: namely, the explanation of very obscure parables occurring in the books of the prophets, but not explicitly identified there as such. Hence an ignorant or heedless individual might think that they possess only an external sense, but no internal one. However, even when one who truly possesses knowledge considers these parables and interprets them according to their external meaning, he too is overtaken by great perplexity. But if we explain these parables to him or if we draw his attention to their being parables, he will take the right road and be delivered from this perplexity. That is why I have called this Treatise "The Guide of the Perplexed."<sup>32</sup>*

It is my hope that the following chapters of this thesis will uncover Maimonides' teaching with respect to the Gathering at Mount Sinai. I believe that if we are going to set out to discover the internal meanings found in the reliable tradition, we must begin with the beginning, that is, the giving of Torah. Now that I have laid out the main elements of Maimonides' theory of knowledge and of the knowledgeable, I will establish the groundwork for Moses' authority with respect to receiving and transmitting the Torah. I will do so by discussing Maimonides' understanding of prophets in general and of Moses in particular. Having established the groundwork for Moses' authority as the intermediary between God and the Jewish masses, I will employ Maimonides' lexicon of the inner meaning of commonly used words from the *Guide*. Finally, in interpreting the biblical accounts of the revelation I will attempt to produce an analytical translation of the revelation text in the Torah, using Maimonides' lexicon of inner meanings as my dictionary.

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<sup>32</sup>*Guide*, Introduction to Part I, pp. 5-6.

## **Chapter Two**

### **General Prophecy and Mosaic Prophecy**

Maimonides' opinions on prophecy, and other matters I have encountered, are difficult to ascertain. Maimonides' readers can only understand his opinions on prophecy to the extent to which they are prepared. In this chapter, I will attempt to present Maimonides' understanding and account of prophecy in general, the relation between his account of prophecy and his view on miracles, the various degrees of prophecy, and the uniqueness of the prophecy of Moses.

Averroes' *Epitome of Parva Naturalia* is the reconstruction of Aristotle's *On Divination in Sleep* with which medieval Arab philosophers were acquainted. This work teaches the following with respect to veridical dreams, which are similar to prophecy:

*Veridical dreams are bestowed by divine Providence, through the Active Intelligence, upon the human imagination which thereby receives the knowledge of future events either in clear terms or in a "hidden," i.e., figurized form.<sup>33</sup>*

Alexander Altmann points out that Maimonides' own view on veridical dreams is quite similar to the Arabic version of Aristotle despite the fact that Maimonides was not familiar with Averroes' *Epitome*.

*You know, too, the actions of the imaginative faculty that are in its nature, such as retaining things perceived by the senses, combining these things, and imitating them. And you know that its greatest and noblest action takes place only when the senses rest and do not perform their actions. It is then that a certain overflow overflows to this faculty according to its disposition, and it is the cause of the veridical dreams.<sup>34</sup>*

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<sup>33</sup>Altmann, Alexander, "Maimonides and Thomas Aquinas: Natural or Divine Prophecy?" in *AJSR* 3 (1978), p. 4.

<sup>34</sup>*Guide*, 2:36, p. 370.

Maimonides continues his explanation of veridical dreams:

*This same overflow is the cause of prophecy. There is only a difference in degree, not in kind.*<sup>35</sup>

Thus far, veridical dreams and prophecy both involve an overflow or an emanation from the Active Intellect into the imaginative faculty of the human being. As we are about to discover, the difference between veridical dreams and prophecy is more than the degree to which Maimonides refers in this context, but also the utilization of the intellect, the rational faculty.

As I have noted in the previous chapter, the Active Intellect overflows into the sublunar world, our world. Its overflow contains the forms or essences of all objects and ideas. The Active Intellect, like all of the celestial Intellects and God for that matter, is in a state of constant, conscious overflow. We human beings who have received our rational faculty from the Active Intellect (the rational faculty is our essence inasmuch as human beings created in the image *tselem* of God), have the capacity to exercise that rational faculty in order to achieve a relationship, i.e., conjunction or union with the Active Intellect. In the words of the philosophers:

*in the case of man this soul is capable of growth and development and as it grows and develops it becomes gradually independent of the body. In the course of its development and its growing independence of the body, it may reach a stage wherein it becomes separated from the body, and reunites itself*

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<sup>35</sup>Guide, 2:36, p. 370.

*with the Active Intellect whence it had its origin. When that union occurs, man is said by the philosophers to reach the state of prophecy.*<sup>36</sup>

Prophecy, according to the medieval Arab philosophers, is a necessary culmination of proper "growth" and "development" of the rational faculty. H.A. Wolfson delineates five characteristic features of this philosophic understanding of prophecy.<sup>37</sup>

- 1 It is a natural process. Prophecy must occur when all the conditions are right.
- 2 It is not directly effected by God, rather indirectly through the Active Intellect which serves as an intermediary.
- 3 There are three qualifications for the human being in order to receive prophecy: (a) rational faculty; (b) "training" which refers to perfection of the moral and practical virtues; (c) "instruction" which refers to perfection of the intellectual virtues.
- 4 Moral and practical virtues are only auxiliary to the attainment of intellectual virtues, they are not ends in and of themselves.
- 5 No one religious or ethical system stands above another as a means of attaining prophecy.

The philosophers points 2, 3, and 4 pose no difficulty for Maimonides. In fact they are principles to which I would say Maimonides not only adheres, but

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<sup>36</sup>Wolfson, H.A., "Hallevi and Maimonides on Prophecy," *JQR* 32 (1942), pp. 348-

<sup>37</sup>Wolfson, p. 350.



fleshes out in the chapters of the *Guide* on intellect, perfection, and prophecy<sup>38</sup>. We ought to note that Maimonides adds another condition to the philosophers' point 3. Maimonides supplements the natural qualifications for prophecy, and the necessary preparation and perfection of moral and intellectual virtues with another condition:

*There is still needed in addition the highest possible degree of perfection of the imaginative faculty in respect to its original natural disposition.*<sup>39</sup>

Points 1 and 5 on the other hand present problems for Maimonides as Wolfson discusses.<sup>40</sup>

First of all, Maimonides does not believe that prophecy is a necessary result of preparation. It is possible, in Maimonides' construct, that certain individuals prepare themselves accordingly and still do not receive prophecy.

*For we believe that it may happen that one who is fit for prophecy and prepared for it should not become a prophet, namely, on account of the divine will.*<sup>41</sup>

Maimonides compares this prerogative of the divine will to withhold prophecy to the role of the divine will in miracles. The relationship between prophecy and miracles will be discussed below. At any rate, according to Maimonides, prophecy is not a necessary process in that the Divine Will is the final condition, which cannot be forced to overflow toward particular individuals who have perfected

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<sup>38</sup>*Guide*, 1:31-34, 49-51, 63, 68; 2:2, 6-7, 10-11, 29, 32-39, 41-48; 3:3-6, 50-51.

<sup>39</sup>*Guide*, 2:36, p. 369.

<sup>40</sup>Wolfson, H.A., "Hallevi and Maimonides on Prophecy," *JQR* 33 (1942), pp. 70-5.

<sup>41</sup>*Guide*, 2:32, p. 361.



their speculative skills. Taking into account Wolfson's examination of Maimonides' view on prophecy, we might question whether or not Maimonides really disagrees with the natural quality of prophecy. I think Maimonides believes that prophecy is a natural process. The withholding of prophecy from those who are apparently fit and properly prepared may be the "unnatural event" in Maimonides' instruction regarding prophecy.

The philosophers' fifth point is difficult to assess with respect to Maimonides' instruction. On the one hand Maimonides teaches that Jewish tradition, i.e., the Torah, is the key to the various perfections.

*The true Law then, which as we have already made clear is unique - namely, the Law of Moses our Master - has come to bring us both perfections, I mean the welfare of the states of people in their relations with one another through the abolition of reciprocal wrongdoing and through the acquisition of a noble and excellent character. In this way the preservation of the population of the country and their permanent existence in the same order become possible, so that every one of them achieves his first perfection; I mean also the soundness of the beliefs and the giving of correct opinions through which ultimate perfection is achieved. The letter of the Torah speaks of both perfections and informs us that the end of this Law in its entirety is the achievement of these two perfections.<sup>42</sup>*

The Torah is the tool for acquiring knowledge of both natural and divine science (*Ma'aseh Bereishit* and *Ma'aseh Merkavah*) and the tool for governing society so that individuals are relatively safe, and their basic material needs are met. The function Maimonides attributes to the Torah, for those bound by its commandments, i.e., Jews, does not preclude non-Jews who meet the moral and intellectual qualifications from receiving prophecy. In fact Wolfson points to

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<sup>42</sup>*Guide*, 3:27, p.511.

Maimonides' *Iggeret Teman* where Maimonides "argues against what he describes as the vulgar view that no non-Jew can become a prophet."

*We believe a prophet or we reject him only on the ground of the nature of his prophecy and not on the ground of his descent.*<sup>43</sup>

Still, of the eleven degrees of prophecy which Maimonides lays out in the *Guide* 2:45, non-Jews who might be understood to be recipients of prophecy (Balaam, Job and his friends) only fall into the first two degrees. Of these first two degrees Maimonides notes:

*For the first and second degree are steppingstones toward prophecy, and someone who has attained one of them is not to be considered as a prophet belonging to the class of prophets discussed in the preceding chapters. And even though he may sometimes be called a prophet, this term is applied to him in a general sort of way, because he is very close to the prophets.*<sup>44</sup>

I think that Maimonides considers Jewish tradition to be superior to other religious and ethical systems as a tool for the perfections which prepare one to engage in prophecy. He allows, however, for non-Jews to receive lower forms of prophecy, i.e., "steppingstones towards prophecy."

Now that we have seen where Maimonides differs from other philosophers in his opinion on prophecy, we turn to Maimonides' own definition of prophecy.

*Know that the true reality and quiddity of prophecy consist in its being an overflow overflowing from God, May He be cherished and honored, through the intermediation of the Active Intellect, toward the rational faculty in the first place and thereafter toward the imaginative faculty. This is the highest degree of man and the ultimate term of perfection that can exist for his species; and this state is the ultimate term of perfection for the imaginative faculty. This is*

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<sup>43</sup>Wolfson, pp. 73-74.

<sup>44</sup>*Guide*, 2:45, p. 395.

*something that cannot by any means exist in every man. And it is not something that may be attained solely through perfection in the speculative sciences and through improvement of moral habits, even if all of them have become as fine and good as can be. There is still needed in addition to the highest possible degree of perfection of the imaginative faculty in respect to its original natural disposition.<sup>45</sup>*

Prophecy comes from God, as does everything in the universe. The Active Intellect overflows first into the rational faculty of prepared individuals which then overflows into the imaginative faculty. The rational faculty, an individual's intellect, is perfected by means of speculation and apprehension of things and ideas. The imaginative faculty is perfect only by natural disposition.

*Now you know that the perfection of the bodily faculties, to which the imaginative faculty belongs, is consequent upon the best possible temperament, the best possible size, and the purest possible matter, of the part of the body that is the substratum for the faculty in question. It is not a thing whose lack could be made good or whose deficiency could be remedied in any way by means of a regimen.<sup>46</sup>*

The functions of the intellect and the imagination during prophecy complement one another. The intellect apprehends, the imagination describes various processes and causal sequences, and the prophets predict future events. Without the role played by the imagination, prophets would be useless to the rest of humanity, for they would be unable to communicate in a manner that we might understand, i.e., imagery, parables, allegory, etc. Without the prophets' intellectual apprehension of things, the information disclosed by the imagination would be whimsical and often inaccurate as is the case with respect to soothsaying

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<sup>45</sup>Guide, 2:36, p. 369.

<sup>46</sup>Guide, 2:36, p. 369.

and veridical dreams. During a prophetic occurrence not only are the two faculties, intellect and imagination, actualized, they imitate the greater cosmos. The actualized human intellect behaves like the Intellects of the celestial spheres by overflowing into the imaginative faculty.

*For the overflow of the Active Intellect goes in its true reality only to it [that is, to the rational faculty], causing it to pass from potentiality to actuality. It is from the rational faculty that the overflow comes to the imaginative faculty.<sup>47</sup>*

This interpretation of the process of overflow is adopted by A. Reines in his reconstruction of Maimonides' definition of prophecy in *Maimonides and Abrabanel on Prophecy*.

*Prophecy is an effluence that emanates from the Active Intellect primarily upon the rational faculty, which the effluence brings to an actualized state, and then, from the perfection of the rational faculty produced by the effluence of the Active Intellect, an effluence emanates upon the imagination, which, while under the influence of the continuing emanation from the rational faculty, is reduced to intellectual control, and during this time produces rational phantasy.<sup>48</sup>*

The more control the intellect exercises over the imagination, the better the quality of prophecy and vice versa. The imagination, while necessary for prophecy, may also be an impediment to prophecy. If the imagination acts on its own, resisting the control of the intellect, the prophecy loses its reliability and may even cease to be prophecy.

*The imagination contributes to prophecy through its imagery when it provides the images that direct the syllogism to particular knowledge, and by producing*

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<sup>47</sup>Guide, 2:38, p. 377.

<sup>48</sup>Reines, A., *Maimonides and Abrabanel on Prophecy* (Cincinnati: HUC Press, 1970), pp. xliii-xliv.

*the combinations of images necessary for the parable. However, the imagination imparts a negative quality to prophecy when the imagery it produces is excessive and extravagant. Contrary to the opinion of mystics and cabalists, the florid imagery reported by the prophets in Scripture is due not to prophetic genius but to prophetic defect. Excessive phantasy in prophecy arises when the prophetic intellect lacks the comprehension necessary to understand fully the abstractions of metaphysics or such abstrusities of cosmology as the heavens. In its areas of weakness, the intellect is unable to subdue adequately the action of the imagination and bring it under rational control. As a result the prophet's imagination is free to attempt to supplement the deficiencies in his understanding with phantasies about the subject his intellect has failed fully to grasp.<sup>49</sup>*

The imagination seems, if Reines is correct, to serve two different purposes. On the one hand it is a tool for prophets to teach what they apprehend. And it is also a tool for prophets to understand themselves what they have received.

Returning to the parable of the flashes of lightning from Maimonides'

Introduction to Part I of the *Guide*, it would be possible for prophets to apprehend notions during the prophetic event and cease to understand the same notion once the prophetic event has passed. If this is the case, prophets might be subject to rely on their imaginative faculty to relate their prophecy not only to the masses but to themselves as well.

Maimonides makes a similar observation in comparing the prophecies of Ezekiel and Isaiah. He compares the imaginative qualities of each's prophecy of the same apprehension.

*Know that the great and sublime notion that Ezekiel, peace be on him, being moved by the prophetic motive force that incited him to let us know this began to teach us in describing the Chariot is the very notion that Isaiah, peace be on him, let us know summarily without having the need to go into these details...*

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<sup>49</sup>Reines, p. liii.



*The Sages has explained all this to us and have called our attention to this subject. They said that the apprehension grasped by Ezekiel was identical with that grasped by Isaiah.<sup>50</sup>*

The passage continues with the explanation that Isaiah's prophecy required less imagery because his audience was comprised of city-dwellers. Ezekiel's audience was nomadic, presumably less perfect in intellectual pursuits. The degree of involvement of the imaginative faculty in prophecy in this case depends on the perfection of the audience. The question remains as to whether or not the imaginative involvement reflects on the perfection of the prophets themselves. This matter will be discussed further as we enter the discussion of the supremacy of Moses' prophecy.

Before turning to the prophecy of Moses, we must explore the differences between speculative knowledge and prophetic knowledge. The prophets, though perfect in their speculative abilities, know things intuitively. They apprehend matters, i.e., future events which others cannot possibly apprehend through speculation alone.

*For the very overflow that affects the imaginative faculty with a result of rendering it perfect so that its act brings about its giving information about what will happen and its apprehending those future events as if they were things that had been perceived by the senses and had reached the imaginative faculty from the senses is also the overflow that renders perfect the act of the rational faculty, so that its act brings about apprehension as if it had apprehended it by starting from speculative premises.<sup>51</sup>*

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<sup>50</sup>Guide, 3:6, p. 427.

<sup>51</sup>Guide, 2:38, p. 377.

So information in the form of abstract notions, emanates from the Active Intellect, into the rational faculty actualizing it and therefore bringing about more perfect apprehension in the individual. The still actualized rational faculty overflows into the imaginative faculty, allowing the prophet to see imagery and to tell particular events which will occur. Because the rational faculty is in a perfect and actualized state, it understands the import and the abstract truths of the particular events before they occur. The special quality of the prophets, then, is that they apprehend things intuitively through the interplay of the perfected rational and imaginative faculties.

In the cases where the overflow from the Active Intellect reaches only one faculty, either the rational faculty or the imaginative faculty, the individuals are either persons of speculation or legislators, soothsayers, and the like:

*the case in which the intellectual overflow overflows only toward the rational faculty and does not overflow at all toward the imaginative faculty -either because of the scantiness of what overflows or because of some deficiency existing in the imaginative faculty in its natural disposition, a deficiency that makes it impossible for it to receive the overflow of the intellect- is characteristic of the class of men of science engaged in speculation... If again the overflow only reaches the imaginative faculty, the defect of the rational faculty deriving either from its original natural disposition or from insufficiency of training, this is characteristic of the class of those who govern cities, while being the legislators, the soothsayers, the augurs, and the dreamers of veridical dreams.<sup>52</sup>*

Clearly from Maimonides' distinction among prophets, persons of science, and those who govern cities the key determination for the status of prophet is preparation. But we know that Maimonides argues that preparation and

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<sup>52</sup>Guide, 2:38, p. 374.

perfection do not necessarily bring about prophecy. What absolutely distinguishes the prophet from other kinds of knowers?

Consider Maimonides' discussion on the three opinions regarding prophecy. The first opinion, held by both pagans and some *common people professing our Law* is as follows:

*God, may He be exalted, chooses whom He wishes from among men, turns him into a prophet, and sends him with a mission.*<sup>33</sup>

This opinion, Maimonides contends, is characteristic of ignoramuses. Its adherents show no concern for the so-called prophets' moral or intellectual perfection. Any individual can be called upon by the will of God.

The second opinion is that of the philosophers.

*Prophecy is a certain perfection in the nature of man. This perfection is not achieved in any individual from among men except after a training that makes that which exists in the potentiality of the species pass into actuality, provided an obstacle due to temperament or to some external cause does not hinder this...*<sup>34</sup>

Maimonides seems to disagree with this opinion as well. He argues that in fact there are individuals who are properly prepared and perfected for prophecy who do not receive prophecy.

The third opinion, according to Maimonides, is the opinion of the Law.

*The third opinion is the opinion of our Law and the foundation of our doctrine. It is identical with the philosophic opinion except in one thing. For*

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<sup>33</sup>Guide, 2:32, p. 360.

<sup>34</sup>Guide, 2:32, p. 361.



*we believe that it may happen that one who is fit for prophecy and prepared for it should not become a prophet, namely, on account of the divine will. To my mind this is like all the miracles and takes the same course as they.<sup>33</sup>*

Maimonides accepts the philosophers' opinion with just one difference, the role of the Divine Will in preventing prophecy as some sort of miraculous occurrence.

Of interest to many scholars is the fact that Maimonides links these three opinions regarding prophecy with the three opinions regarding Creation. Scholars do not agree how the opinions match up, which of the opinions on prophecy correlates to which of the opinions on creation. The correlation of the opinions is not important to this thesis. I am interested in the overall relationship between the two sets of opinions. What do creation and prophecy have in common if not the particular and miraculous expression of the Divine Will? A. Reines argues that,

*A miracle, according to Maimonides' apparent concept of miracles, is an event that is produced by the special will of God, who, having created the universe ex nihilo, has the power to bring into existence without natural causation whatever He wishes and to suspend or otherwise interrupt natural causation wherever and whenever He pleases. Furthermore, according to the apparent concept of miracles, nonnatural events are of two kinds: miracles proper, which occur once or for a limited period of time, and usually produce changes in the natural properties of physical objects; and such ongoing or repetitive events as prophecy and providence.<sup>34</sup>*

This explanation of miracles, as Reines points out, is eventually rejected by Maimonides. It is the manner in which the philosophically uneducated masses view miracles and prophecy.

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<sup>33</sup>Guide, 2:32, p. 361.

<sup>34</sup>Reines, A., "Maimonides' Concept of Miracles" in *HUCA* 43 (1974), pp. 255-6.

Maimonides, according to Reines, places miracles within the realm of nature. They are embedded in the act of creation, set "in advance" to occur at the appropriate time and in the appropriate place. Maimonides derives this lesson from the sages in *Bereishit Rabbah*<sup>57</sup>, he cites V.16:

*Rabbi Jonathan said: The Holy One, blessed be He, has posed conditions to the sea: [to wit,] that it should divide before Israel. That is [the meaning of the words]: And the sea returned to its strength when the morning appeared (Exodus 14:27). Rabbi Jeremiah, son of Elazar, said: The Holy One, blessed be He, has posed conditions not only to the sea, but to all that has been created in the six days of the Beginning. That is [the meaning of the words]: I, even My hands have stretched out the heavens, and all their hosts have I commanded (Isaiah 45:12). I have commanded the sea to divide; the fire not to harm Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah; the lions not to harm Daniel; and the fish to spit out Jonah.<sup>58</sup>*

The rabbis teach that all of these miracles, i.e., the parting of the Red Sea, the protection of Daniel and his three friends, and the survival of Jonah were set into motion during the six days of creation. Maimonides concludes, "All the other miracles can be explained in an analogous manner."<sup>59</sup> Reines explains:

*When God created the several primary parts of the universe, and He impressed upon them their various natural properties, He inserted into these natures certain characteristics which would make them produce anomalies at various times in the course of history. These anomalies are what we call miracles, and*

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<sup>57</sup>Maimonides makes the same point in his *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Avot, 5:6 where he interprets the following text: *Ten things were created on the eve of Sabbath at twilight, and these are they: the mouth of the earth, the mouth of the well, the mouth of the donkey, the bow, the manna, the rod, the Shamir, the letters, the writing, and the tablets. Some say also the evil spirits, the grave of Moses, and the ram of Abraham our Father. Some say also the tongs made with tongs.* Taken from Twersky, I., ed., *A Maimonides Reader* (New York: Behrman House, 1972), pp. 399-400.

<sup>58</sup>Guide, 2:29, pp. 345-346.

<sup>59</sup>Guide, 2:29, p. 346.

*they are produced by the unfolding of nature itself. In a certain sense, therefore, miracles are produced by nature.<sup>60</sup>*

Miracles are essentially natural anomalies programed into the system "in advance." We recognize them as miracles in contrast to other unusual events in nature such as volcanos and earthquakes (which in some contexts may be recognized as miracles) because they are drawn to our attention by prophecy. Prophets do not bring miracles about; at most they foretell such events.

*Indeed, inasmuch as the miracle is stamped upon nature and constitutes part of its unfolding, miracles will occur regardless of whatever event in human history might be taking place. Thus the miracle is called a "sign" given by God to a prophet not because God interrupts nature at the need and petition of the prophet, but because the prophet possesses information necessary to predict that a certain anomaly will be produced by nature. This information, Maimonides says, is made known to the prophet by God. Accordingly Moses' part in the Jews' crossing of the sea was not in calling upon God for supernatural intervention but in knowing beforehand that nature would produce an anomaly that would enable the Jews to cross on dry land.<sup>61</sup>*

The miracle is a natural event, embedded into the unfolding of nature by God during the six days of creation. The miracle is a sign given to the prophet by God, knowledge which emanates from the Active Intellect into the rational faculty and then into the imaginative faculty of the prophet. What is the miraculous component of prophecy?

The role of the Divine Will in nature is set out at the very beginning in creation. The role of the Divine Will in prophecy must also be set out at the very

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<sup>60</sup>Reines, p. 264.

<sup>61</sup>Reines, p. 265.

beginning. Even in the case of so-called miracles, we have learned that God does not supernaturally intervene in the natural order. How is it that in the case of prophecy, according to the opinion of Maimonides and our Law, some perfected individuals receive prophecy and others do not?

In Maimonides' construct it seems impossible for the Divine Will to choose this individual and not that individual at whim. S. Atlas states:

*The area of operation of the divine will is in the metaphysical realm, i.e., at the moment of creation; it is not operative in the form of intervention in the natural process.*<sup>62</sup>

If we determine the role of the Divine Will with respect to prophecy by drawing an analogy to the role of the Divine Will with respect to miracles, our result is something like a natural form of prophecy (i.e., the opinion of the philosophers, see above) sometimes interrupted by an unusual event which affects the overflow from the Active Intellect. The interruption of overflow from the Active Intellect would be considered the natural anomaly. This point may be the meaning of the highlighted statement below in Maimonides' opinion on prophecy:

*For we believe that it may happen that one who is fit for prophecy and prepared for it should not become a prophet, namely, on account of the divine will. To my mind this is like all the miracles and takes the same course as they.*<sup>63</sup>

Essentially Maimonides agrees with the philosophers' definition of prophecy as a natural occurrence. Believing that it is possible for prophecy not to occur when

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<sup>62</sup>Atlas, S., "Moses in the Philosophy of Maimonides, Spinoza, and Solomon Maimon," *HUCA* 25 (1954), p. 375.

<sup>63</sup>*Guide*, 2:32, p. 361. Boldface is mine.

all the conditions are met, i.e., perfection of the faculties and moral temperament, Maimonides does not exclude the possibility of a miraculous element in prophecy, that is the possibility of a natural obstacle which prevents prophecy from occurring. Examples include temperament as in the case of Baruch, son of Neriah and those prophets who lived in the Exile<sup>64</sup>.

Now, prophetic knowledge, though different from speculative knowledge because it is intuitive and processed through both the rational and imaginative faculties, is like speculative knowledge in that it is acquired in many different degrees. Not only do some prophets achieve higher levels of prophecy than others, the moments of prophetic revelation occurring for the same prophet at different times vary in degree.

In the *Guide*, 2:45, Maimonides instructs us that there are eleven degrees of prophecy not including Mosaic prophecy. In the following paragraphs I will identify and discuss Maimonides' eleven degrees of general prophecy.<sup>65</sup>

Interestingly the first two degrees are *steppingstones toward prophecy* and not actual prophecy. If the person who achieves one or both of only the first two degrees of prophecy is called a prophet, it is meant only in a general manner *because he is very close to the prophets*.

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<sup>64</sup>*Guide*, 2:36, p. 362.

<sup>65</sup>I will italicize the distinguishing characteristic of each of the eleven degrees of prophecy as quoted from the *Guide*, 2:45, pp. 395-403. I will not note each quotation because they are all from this same chapter and it would involve an excessive use of footnotes.



The first degree of prophecy consists in the fact that an individual receives a divine help that moves and activates him to perform a great, righteous, and important action. These individuals might rescue a righteous community or individual from evil or danger. They are said to be moved to act by the spirit of the Lord. The judges and kings of Israel are included in this category.

The second degree of prophecy consists in the fact that an individual finds that a certain thing has descended upon him and that another force has come over him and has made him speak; so that he talks in wise sayings, in words of praise, in useful admonitory dicta, or concerning governmental or divine matters - and all this while he is awake and his senses function as usual. These individuals are said to speak through the Holy Spirit. They are the composers of the Books of Writings such as David with respect to the Psalms, Solomon with respect to the Proverbs. The seventy elders belonged to this group as well. Some of the members of this category of prophecy (or pre-prophecy) received knowledge through dreams, Daniel and Solomon for example. Their apprehension through dreams was not the same as actual prophets to be discussed in higher degrees. The prophet, after awaking from the dream describes the experience as prophecy while the inferior Degree One and Degree Two prophets describe their own experience as dreams.

Actual prophecy occurs in a dream state or in a vision. The lower degrees of prophecy (the third through seventh degrees) occur during the dream state. Vision prophecy (the eighth through eleventh degrees) occurs when the prophet is awake. A. Reines claims that "vision prophecy" is superior to "dream prophecy"



because the rational faculty has more control over the imaginative faculty when the prophet is awake.

*Dream prophecy takes place during sleep, which is a state of deep unconsciousness, when the strength of the imagination relative to the intellect is great. Vision prophecy, on the other hand, arises when the prophet is awake and the intellect powerful, although owing to intense concentration involved, the prophet is in a trancelike state of unawareness. The difference between the relative strength of the imagination in dream and vision prophecy is significantly illustrated by its action with respect to God. In dream prophecy, the imagination will venture to represent God anthropomorphically, as corporeal and speaking to the prophets, which is absolutely contrary to His true nature as incorporeal and unrelational. Such imaginative excesses cannot occur in vision prophecy.<sup>66</sup>*

The third degree of prophecy is recognizable in the biblical text by the expression, *The word of the Lord came to me*, or similar expressions. This class tends to be represented through a prophet's seeing a parable in a dream. The prophet learns the meaning of the parable in the dream as well.

The fourth degree consists in the prophet's hearing articulate and clear speech in the dream of prophecy, but without seeing the speaker. It is superior to the third degree because the prophet hears speech. An example is Samuel, who when he received prophecy for the first time thought that Eli the priest was speaking to him. Samuel did not realize, at first, that God was revealing speech.

The fifth degree consists in the prophet's being addressed by a man in a dream.

The sixth degree consists in the prophet's being addressed by an angel in a dream. The majority of prophets receive prophecy in this manner. Usually the

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<sup>66</sup>Reines, A., *Maimonides and Abrabanel on Prophecy*, pp. liv-lv.

prophet introduces the prophecy with the phrase, *And the angel of God said unto me in the dream...*

The seventh degree consists in the fact that in the dream of prophecy the prophet sees, as it were, that He, may He be exalted, addresses him. This prophecy is usually introduced with the phrase, *I saw the Lord... And He said...*

The eighth degree of prophecy consists in the fact that a prophetic revelation comes to the prophet in a vision of prophecy and that he sees parables. It is parallel to the third degree of prophecy except that it occurs while the prophet is awake.

The ninth degree of prophecy consists in the prophet's hearing speech in a vision. As in the case in the fourth degree of prophecy, the prophet does not know who is speaking. Contrary to the fourth degree, the prophet is awake in the ninth degree.

The tenth degree consists in the prophet's seeing a man who addresses him in a vision of prophecy. It is like the fifth degree, except that the prophet is awake.

The eleventh degree consists in the prophet's seeing an angel who addresses him in a vision. According to Maimonides, this degree is the highest level of non-Mosaic prophecy. It is parallel to the sixth degree of prophecy which occurs in a dream rather than a vision.

One might ask about a twelfth degree of prophecy to parallel the seventh degree. It would consist in a prophet's seeing God as the speaker. Maimonides maintains that this event would be impossible according to the verse, *I do make myself known to him in a vision, I do speak with him in a dream* (Numbers 12:6).

*Thus it assigns speech to dreams only, assigning to visions the union and overflow of the intellect, this being signified by the words elav ethvada, for ["ethvada"] is a reflexive form of the verb yado'a [to know]. Thus it is not explicitly stated that speech coming from God can be heard in a vision."*

Maimonides' teaching on this matter also informs us that the prophets who experience visions of prophecy do not actually hear speech at all. According to Maimonides, the Torah's use of the formula, "vayomer adonai el mosheh lemor" is figurative. Rather the prophets apprehend things. The prophets who experience dreams of prophecy hear speech, invented by the imaginative faculty which is freed from the influence of the senses by the unconscious state of sleep and is under less control of the intellect than in the state of being awake. Reines' argument regarding the supremacy of vision prophecy versus dream prophecy probably stems from this view. The freedom of the imagination during sleep renders dream prophecy inferior to vision prophecy.

Mosaic prophecy does not stem from imaginative activity at all. Therefore, we might conclude that it is superior even to vision prophecy, during which the imaginative faculty is active but strictly governed by the intellect. While the conclusion that Mosaic prophecy is superior to general prophecy is correct, the argument is not yet complete. Mosaic prophecy according to Maimonides cannot even be compared to general prophecy.

*As for the prophecy of Moses our Master, I shall not touch upon it in these chapters with even a single word, either in explicit fashion or in a flash. For to*

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<sup>a</sup>Guide, 2:45, p.402.

my mind the term prophecy used with reference to Moses and to the others is amphibolous.<sup>6</sup>

In the *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Sanhedrin 10, in the seventh of Maimonides' thirteen fundamental principles of Judaism, Maimonides explains the four qualities which distinguish Moses' prophecy from the prophecy of others.

1. ***All other prophets were addressed by God through intermediaries, only Moses immediately. This is indicated by the phrase, "mouth to mouth I addressed him."***
2. ***Prophecy came to all others in sleep or in daytime when a trance fell on the prophet so that his senses and intellect would be as useless as in a dream. This state is called "vision" or "insight" as in the expression "visions of God." But the Word came to Moses in broad daylight when he stood by the two cherubs.***
3. ***Even if another prophet should receive a vision of God through an angel, his powers would fail; he would be overcome with dread, and nearly lose his mind... This never happened to Moses. When the Word came to him he would neither shiver nor tremble. "God spoke to Moses face to face, as a man to his friend" (Exodus 33:11). This means that, since a friendly talk produces no anxiety, Moses had no fear. Face to face with God, he had no terror of the revelation, because he clung to Him in a wholly conscious way, as we have implied.***
4. ***The other prophets could not attain a vision whenever they pleased. All depended on God's will. A prophet might wait days or years before prophecy would come to him. He would beg God to reveal Himself in prophecy, but he would have to wait for days or months before the prophecy came. Sometimes God would not reveal Himself at all... Moses, our teacher, on the other hand, could say whenever he wished: "Wait, and I shall hear what the Lord commands you" (Numbers 9:8). Scripture says: "Tell Aaron, you brother, not to enter the holy place anytime at all" (Leviticus 16:2). Our sages interpret this to mean that Aaron could not come to God whenever he pleased, but Moses might (Midrash to Acharei Mot).<sup>7</sup>***

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<sup>6</sup>Guide, 2:35, p. 367.

<sup>7</sup>Twersky, I., *op cit.* pp. 419-140. Boldface is mine.

These four points which separate Mosaic prophecy from general prophecy are consequences of the fact that Moses prophesied without the mediation of the imaginative faculty.

*...all prophets hear speech only through the intermediary of an angel, the sole exception being Moses our Master, of whom it is said: "With him do I speak mouth to mouth" (Numbers 12:8). Know then that this is in fact so, and that in these cases the intermediary is the imaginative faculty. For a prophet can hear only in a dream of prophecy that God has spoken to him. Moses our Master, on the other hand, heard him "from above the ark-cover, from between the two cherubim" (Exodus 25:22), without action on the part of the imaginative faculty.<sup>70</sup>*

The four qualities mentioned in the *Commentary on the Mishnah* can be explained by the prophets' use of the imaginative faculty. The imagination is responsible for the inferior nature of general prophecy. The imagination creates the image of the intermediary in the dream or in the vision to make the role of the Active Intellect understandable. Maimonides even calls the imaginative faculty an intermediary, an angel in the *Guide* 2:6.<sup>71</sup>

The ordinary prophets could only prophesy in states other than ordinary consciousness, either dreams or visions. Reines explains that the imaginative faculty drains the senses and the intellect, rendering the prophet's unconscious

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<sup>70</sup>*Guide*, 2:45, p. 403.

<sup>71</sup>*Guide*, 2:6, pp. 264-265. *...the imaginative faculty is likewise called an angel and the intellect is called a cherub.* The distinction here between the angel and the cherub is essential to understanding Mosaic prophecy. Moses receives prophecy by the two cherubs. One is understood to be the Active Intellect and the other is understood to represent Moses' intellect.



state. Moses is not sapped by his imaginative faculty because he does not rely on it for receiving prophecy.

The imagination, overwhelmed by the awesome nature of prophetic revelation, causes ordinary prophets to be frightened. Moses, awake and conscious, is not frightened because his intellect directly apprehends the content of each prophetic experience.

Finally, the imagination is a part of the human being's corporeal self while the actualized intellect transcends the body. Because the imaginative faculty is corporeal, it can become exhausted or strained on account of moral temperament, and physical health. Therefore, the ordinary prophet cannot prophesy at will. Moses, who prophesies by means of the immaterial and inexhaustible intellect alone, can receive prophecy at any time he pleases.

Reines explains the difference between general prophecy and Mosaic prophecy as follows:

*The fact that in both Mosaic and ordinary prophecy the Active Intellect emanates upon the rational faculty constitutes only an accidental similarity, since in the former the prophecy itself is pure concept, whereas in the latter, owing to the participation of the imagination in assisting the intellect to apprehend the prophetic emanation, the actual prophecy is intellectualized phantasy. Between prophetic knowledge that is pure concept and prophecy containing material representations there exists an essential difference.<sup>72</sup>*

Sarcastically, in a response to Reines' article, N. Samuelson asks if the absence of imagination in Mosaic prophecy is a superior or inferior quality.

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<sup>72</sup>Reines, pp. 332-333.



*Both Mosaic and "ordinary" prophecy are defined as emanations that flow from God through the medium of the Active Intellect upon the rational faculty. In addition to this in the case of "ordinary" prophecy the emanation also flows upon the imaginative faculty. But Mosaic prophecy by the stated definition does not share in this bonus. Furthermore, if we are to take Reines' statement of the definitions seriously, whereas an "ordinary" prophet requires as a precondition for prophecy both a perfect intellect and a perfect imagination, the demands are less for Moses who, since his prophecy does not involve the imaginative faculty, need not have a perfect imagination in addition to a perfect intellect.<sup>73</sup>*

Samuelson tries to demonstrate that Reines renders Mosaic prophecy less perfect than general prophecy. It seems to me that the focus on the imaginative faculty is incomplete without determining its actual function. Does the imaginative faculty assist the prophets', other than Moses', apprehension of the content of revelation? Or does the imaginative faculty assist the prophets in sharing revelation with the masses? Do both cases require the perfection of the imaginative faculty? Are both cases necessary for prophecy itself?

Reines explains in another work<sup>74</sup> that the imagination has five functions with regard to prophecy. The first two functions are preparatory.

- 1 The imagination abstracts images from the senses and the common sense.
- 2 The imagination stores imagery. Individuals call upon these two functions of the imagination any time they engage in speculation, even in the most simple contexts. When holding a pillow, for example, the imagination abstracts notions such as soft, large, fluffy. When the pillow is removed

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<sup>73</sup>Samuelson, N., "Comments on Maimonides' Concept of Mosaic Prophecy" in *CCAR Journal* 18,1 (1971), p. 17.

<sup>74</sup>Reines, A., *Maimonides and Abrabanel on Prophecy*.

from sight and touch, the individual prompted by the name pillow or by the abstract qualities soft, large, and fluffy can recall the image of the pillow.

- 3 The imagination enables individuals to draw a conclusion from a syllogism. Universal or general knowledge must be applied to a particular situation. The knowledge of the particular situation comes from the imagination. If it may be generally stated that a tornado has very strong winds, we learn from our imagination that the winds of the tornado may tear down a weak structure such as an abandoned barn, or worse, an inhabited house.
- 4 The intellect employs the imagination to communicate prophetic knowledge in the form of a parable. This form, the parable, teaches the unsophisticated yet faithful masses moral conduct through its exoteric meaning. Through its esoteric meaning, the more insightful, perfected individuals learn theological and scientific truths.
- 5 The imaginative faculty in prophecy provides the imagery for the parable, the communicated lesson. Reines concludes that this function employed in excess, touched upon earlier in the chapter in the comparison of Isaiah to Ezekiel, reveals the inferiority of the ordinary prophet.

*Excessive phantasy in prophecy arises when the prophetic intellect lacks the comprehension necessary to understand fully the abstractions of metaphysics or such abstrusities of cosmology as the heavens.<sup>75</sup>*

Reines argues that the lesson of Maimonides' comparison of the prophecies of Isaiah and Ezekiel in the *Guide*, 3:6 is that Isaiah's prophecy was

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<sup>75</sup>Reines, p. liii.

superior to Ezekiel's because there was less excess of imagery. The question which Maimonides leaves to the reader is whether imagery is employed for the sake of the audience or on account of the lack of perfection of the prophet. Maimonides comments:

*It is possible that this text [All that was seen by Ezekiel was seen by Isaiah. Isaiah is like unto a city man who saw the king; whereas Ezekiel is like unto a villager who saw the king (Babylonian Talmud, Hagigah 13b).] was interpreted by its author in accordance with what I have said at the beginning of the chapter: namely, that the contemporaries of Isaiah had no need of his expounding those details to them, it being sufficient for them...; whereas the people of the Exile required these details. It is also possible that the author of this remark believed that Isaiah was more perfect than Ezekiel, and that the apprehension that amazed Ezekiel and was regarded by him as terrible was known by Isaiah through a knowledge the exposition of which did not require extraordinary language, the subject being well known to those who are perfect.<sup>76</sup>*

Reines chooses the latter explanation for Isaiah's superiority over Ezekiel. And he notes that it is the complete absence of imagination which deems Moses the greatest prophet of all.

When we read the Torah, the product of Moses' prophecy, it is clear that Moses employed the imaginative faculty because the Torah is full of parables and equivocal language. Difficulty arises when we attempt to reconcile the Torah's clearly imaginative quality with Maimonides' claim that Moses prophesied without engaging the imaginative faculty. B. Kogan demonstrates that this difficulty is not necessarily a contradiction.

*For when Moses achieved union with the Agent Intelligence, his imagination no longer acted spontaneously upon him as is the case in ordinary prophecy. On the contrary, Moses, or the divine overflow operating in him, acted upon it,*

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<sup>76</sup>Guide, 3:6, p. 427.

*using the imagination with complete lucidity to formulate those beliefs and rules which lead to the actualization of the intellect, and thus to salvation.*<sup>77</sup>

When Moses engages his imaginative faculty, it is completely under the control of the intellect.

Reines deals with this difficulty by making a distinction between what he calls prophetic activity and subprophetic activity.

*The Mosaic experience was twofold: prophetic and subprophetic. A subprophetic experience is defined as one that is not prophetic but which bears a special relation to prophecy. The Torah was produced by Moses as a subprophetic experience.*<sup>78</sup>

Moses' prophecy contains the knowledge that God's essence is unknowable by means of the human intellect (negative theology) and that even the most perfected human being's knowledge of God is limited to knowledge of divine actions (theology of the attributes of action). In apprehending the divine actions Moses discovers the actions by which God governs humanity, giving life to human beings and preserving human existence. This apprehension is abstract and universal and does not include the particulars of divine rulership. Inasmuch as the role of the state is comparable to that of the divine rulership, i.e., to promote the existence and welfare of human beings, Moses discovers that the ideal state ought to imitate the divine rulership. Moses goes on to formulate the Law, the Torah, in order to particularize the abstract notions he apprehends during his special prophecy. Moses' engagement of the imaginative faculty differs from that

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<sup>77</sup>Kogan, B., "Disclosure and Discovery," pp. 21-22.

<sup>78</sup>Reines, "Maimonides' Concept of Mosaic Prophecy," p. 348.

of the other prophets (see above, the third function of the imagination with respect to prophecy) in that he employs his imaginative faculty after the prophetic experience has already occurred.

*With the essence of the ideal law apprehended by his reason to guide him, Moses then wrote the Torah, creating the particular laws that reify the essence of the ideal law and which serve best to order society and further the spiritual and physical well being of man. In writing the Torah, which was not prophecy, Moses employed his imagination to fulfill the twofold function of divine law: the teaching of true theological beliefs; and the establishment of the just and moral society.<sup>79</sup>*

Whether Moses' Torah is prophetic or subprophetic text, it is clear that his use of the imaginative faculty cannot be compared to that of the other prophets because it is under the complete control of the intellect. This conclusion supports and may with further exposition help to explain Maimonides' claim that the word "prophet" is applied to Moses and all other prophets in an amphibolous manner.<sup>80</sup> Moses' special prophecy entitles him to become the "Lawgiver-Prophet". Having apprehended the Divine rulership, Moses is in a unique position to formulate a Law for humanity which is in harmony with the natural processes of the universe, i.e., imitating the actions of God. Moses writes this Law, the Torah, using equivocal language and parables so that individuals will learn from the exposition according to their intellectual capabilities.

As for the Sinaitic Revelation itself, it is presented as a dialogue between God and Moses, and to a limited extent the entire 600,000. This representation is

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<sup>79</sup>Reines, p. 355.

<sup>80</sup>Kogan, n.96.

clearly for the sake of the unsophisticated masses, so that they might accept Moses' authority and learn that which is necessary for functioning in a just and moral society. In the following chapters, I will present Maimonides' lexicon of the words which are commonly used in an equivocal way and I will attempt to decode those portions of the biblical narrative depicting the Sinaitic Revelation which pertain to the content of Moses' prophecy, i.e., negative theology and theology of the attributes of action.



## **Chapter Three**

### **The Figurative Use of Language**

The sages of the Babylonian Talmud teach in *Yebamoth* 71a and in *Baba Metzia* 31b that *the Torah speaketh in the language of the sons of man*. Maimonides refers to this passage repeatedly<sup>81</sup> in order to teach that human beings ascribe human qualities to God for the lack of another method of describing God or referring to God.

*The meaning of this [the Torah speaketh in the language of the sons of man] is that everything that all men are capable of understanding and representing to themselves at first thought has been ascribed to Him as necessarily belonging to God, may He be exalted. Hence attributes indicating corporeality have been predicated of Him in order to indicate that He, may He be exalted exists, inasmuch as the multitude cannot at first conceive of any existence save that of a body alone; thus that which is neither a body nor existent in a body does not exist in their opinion.*<sup>82</sup>

As individuals engage in philosophical activity by perfecting their intellectual faculties, and in doing so they must come to understand that God is a totally incorporeal being. Any act which introduces multiplicity into God is an impossibility. This apprehension may bring about perplexity when such individuals are confronted with the expressions in the Torah which pertain to God's modes of apprehension and communication as well as God's emotions. Those individuals who correctly reach the conclusion that God is an incorporeal being, know that even though the literal meaning of the Torah's words speak otherwise, God does not see in the manner that human beings see. In the same way, God does not speak in the manner that human beings speak. Nor does God become jealous in the manner that human beings become jealous.

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<sup>81</sup>See *Guide*, 1:26, 29, 33, 46, 53, 59; 3:13.

<sup>82</sup>*Guide*, 1:26, p. 56.

*Similarly apprehension, as it is habitually known among us, comes about through the instrumentality of the senses, I mean to say through hearing and seeing. And similarly we do not know nor can we represent to ourselves how a notion can be transmitted from the soul of one individual who is among us to the soul of another individual except through the instrumentality of speech, which is a sound produced by the lips, the tongue, and the other organs of speech. Accordingly, as our minds are likewise guided to the belief that God, may He be exalted, apprehends and that notions are communicated from Him to the prophets in order that they should communicate them to us, He is described to us as hearing and seeing; the meaning thereof being that He apprehends and knows the visible and audible things. He is also described to us as speaking; the meaning thereof being that notions are communicated from Him, may He be exalted to the prophets. This is the meaning of prophecy.<sup>83</sup>*

Maimonides further explains:

*the negation of the doctrine of the corporeality of God and the denial of His having a likeness to created things and of His being subject to affections are matters that ought to be made clear and explained to everyone according to his capacity and ought to be inculcated in virtue of traditional authority upon children, women, stupid ones, and those of a defective natural disposition, just as they adopt the notion that God is one, that He is eternal, and that none but He should be worshipped. For there is no profession of unity unless the doctrine of God's corporeality is denied.<sup>84</sup>*

Maimonides concedes that for the purpose of governance, it is necessary for some people to believe the literal meaning of words which attribute anthropomorphic and anthropopathic traits to God. He refers to commandments in the Torah.

*In some cases a commandment communicates a correct belief, which is the one and only thing aimed at - as for instance, the belief in the unity and eternity of the deity and in His not being a body. In other cases the belief is necessary for the abolition of reciprocal wrongdoing or for the acquisition of a*

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<sup>83</sup>Guide, 1:46, pp. 98-99.

<sup>84</sup>Guide, 1:35, p. 81.

noble moral quality - as for instance, the belief that He, may He be exalted, has a violent anger against those who do injustice.<sup>85</sup>

As we have already discussed, Maimonides' objective in writing the *Guide of the Perplexed* is to provide instruction for the perplexed student by laying out the meaning of obscure language, and by pointing out the use of parables in the text. With respect to Maimonides' treatment of language A. Hyman writes:

*Maimonides' concern with religious language is part of his overall philosophic programme in which the correct understanding of language applied to God is one of the central themes. Not only is it obligatory for the intellectual elite to have a philosophically correct understanding of divine attributes, but even the unsophisticated masses must be taught that anthropomorphic and anthropopathic terms applied to God cannot be taken in their literal meaning.*<sup>86</sup>

This chapter of my thesis will focus on Maimonides' attempt to clarify the meaning of words in the Torah which have more than one possible definition. I will discuss his approach to language and I will provide a lexicon of the words to which he devotes a major portion of the *Guide*<sup>87</sup> in order to lay out their meanings.

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<sup>85</sup>*Guide*, 3:28, pp. 513-514.

<sup>86</sup>Hyman, A., "Maimonides on Religious Language," in J. Kraemer (ed.), *Perspectives on Maimonides*, (Oxford, 1991), p. 175.

<sup>87</sup>Maimonides discusses the meanings and uses of particular words in the following places in the *Guide*, 1:1-4, 6-16, 18-25, 28-30, 37-45, 47, 65-67, 70; 2:30, 32, 36, 41; 3:53-54.

In Chapter XIII of his *Treatise on Logic*<sup>88</sup>, Maimonides writes that there are three major classes of words in all languages. These classes are distinct terms, synonymous terms, and equivocal terms<sup>89</sup>.

*When several words have the same meaning they are synonyms; when one word has several meanings, it is a homonym [equivocal]; and when different words have different meanings they are distinct. For example, in Hebrew 'adam, 'ish, 'enosh all meaning man, sakin, ma'achelet both meaning knife, are synonyms; the word 'ain, meaning eye and a fountain, is a homonym [equivocal term]; whereas mayim (water), 'esh (fire), and 'ilon (tree) are distinct.*<sup>90</sup>

Equivocal terminology, or figurative language,<sup>91</sup> is the focus of this chapter and of Maimonides discussions on language in the *Guide*. Figurative language is divided into six classes: equivocal terms, univocal terms, amphibolous terms, terms used in general and in particular, metaphorical terms, and extended terms.<sup>92</sup>

An equivocal term

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<sup>88</sup>Efros, I. (trans.), "Maimonides' Treatise on Logic," in *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, vol. 8 (1938), pp. 58-60.

<sup>89</sup>Efros uses the word homonym. I will use the word equivocal because a homonym in English refers to two words which sound the same but have different meanings and are spelled differently. The term "equivocal" is adopted by most of the scholars I have encountered in my research. While equivocal and homonym mean the same thing, scholars use the word equivocal to refer to a term with two or more meanings even though it is spelled in the same manner in each case.

<sup>90</sup>Efros, p. 59.

<sup>91</sup>The general category of equivocal terms which will be divided into six classes may also be called "figurative language". In order to distinguish between the absolute equivocal term and the general category of equivocal terms, I will refer to the general category of equivocal terms as "figurative language."

<sup>92</sup>The following italicized explanations of the six classes of equivocal terms are all extracted from Efros' translation of Maimonides' *Treatise on Logic*, pp. 59-60.

*is a name given originally, in the basic usage of the language, to a certain thing, and subsequently applied to another thing which may or may not have any resemblance to the former... An example of this is tefillah, which in the basic usage of the language denotes a request but was subsequently extended to a special kind and special form of request.*

As pointed out by J. Cohen<sup>93</sup>, the first three classes of figurative language may be distinguished from one another by noting how their different meanings are or are not related. Univocal terms refer to things which share some part of their essence. Equivocal terms refer to things which have nothing in common. And amphibolous terms refer to things which share some non-essential trait.

H.A. Wolfson<sup>94</sup> argues that the amphibolous term, or the ambiguous term, is somewhere in between the univocal term and the equivocal term. In his study of the word class in the writings of Aristotle and the commentaries of Alexander, he lists five types of ambiguous terms.

- 1 *Terms applied to things having one end or else... proceeding from one source.*
- 2 *Terms applied to things which are contraries.*
- 3 *Terms applied to certain common accidents which exist in things according to a difference of primariness and subsequencey.*
- 4 *Relative and hence also analogical terms.*
- 5 *A fifth type of ambiguous terms... that which is used according to priority and posteriority or according to first and next.*<sup>95</sup>

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<sup>93</sup>Cohen, J., "Figurative Language, Philosophy, and Religious Belief: an Essay on Some Themes in Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*," in *Studies in Jewish Philosophy* 3 (1982), pp. 34-54.

<sup>94</sup>Wolfson, H.A., "The Amphibolous Terms in Aristotle, Arabic Philosophy and Maimonides," *HTR* 31,2 (1938), pp. 151-173.

<sup>95</sup>Wolfson, pp. 172-173.



Wolfson notes that Maimonides refers to the third type of amphibolous term, whose different meanings share an accidental trait. Maimonides states in his discussion in the *Guide* on amphibolous terms:

*For when terms are used amphibolously they are predicated of two things between which there is a likeness in respect to some notion, which notion is an accident attached to both of them and not a constituent element of the essence of each one of them.*<sup>96</sup>

Understanding the differences among the amphibolous term, the univocal term, and the equivocal term is crucial for understanding certain biblical expressions which refer both to God and to humanity. Terms which refer to God and human beings alike, whose essences are completely different and who cannot share accidental traits because God has no accidental traits, can only be understood as equivocal terms. Those individuals who mistakenly assume that words which refer to human beings and to God are either amphibolous terms or worse yet univocal terms ultimately commit acts of idolatry because they introduce multiplicity into the divine essence.

In decoding biblical expressions, the reader must first determine the usage of a given term. Some terms may be equivocally applied both to God and to human beings as well as other corporeal beings. Other terms may be amphibolously applied to human beings in different circumstances, to human beings and other corporeal beings, or to different descriptions of divine action. Finally many biblical expressions are simply to be taken literally. Maimonides'

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<sup>96</sup>*Guide* 1:56, p. 131.

intention in writing the *Guide* is to lead his student to the biblical expressions and passages where specific terms are used either equivocally or amphibolously.

The remainder of this chapter of my thesis is a presentation of Maimonides' lexicon of figurative language in the Bible. I have included a transliteration of the Hebrew term, citations in the *Guide*, a basic English translation of the word<sup>97</sup>, and the figurative meanings of the word labeled by their class (i.e., univocal, equivocal, amphibolous, metaphorical, general to particular, and extended meanings).

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<sup>97</sup>I am using the English translations suggested by S. Pines in his translation of the *Guide*.

Maimonides' Lexicon of Biblical Terms and Their Figurative Meanings  
Extracted from *The Guide of the Perplexed*

Entry	Hebrew Term <sup>98</sup>	Citation in Guide	Basic English Translation	Figurative Meanings <sup>99</sup>
1	<i>tselem</i>	1:1	image	(eq/amph) shape and configuration of a thing; natural, specific form of a thing
2	<i>demuth</i>	1:1	likeness	[amph] likeness with respect to a notion
3	<i>to'ar</i>	1:1	form	never applied to a deity
4	<i>Elohim</i>	1:2, 1:14, 2:6		(eq) deity; angels; rulers governing cities, i.e., the elite; judges
5	[ <i>p-q-ch</i> ]	1:2	to open	[amph/ext] to uncover mental vision
6a	<i>panim</i> <i>panoh</i>	1:2	face  to turn	[ext] behavior, course of action in that one "turns the face toward a desired objective" thereby either maintaining direction or shifting it

<sup>98</sup>The terms appear in the same order they appear in the *Guide*.

<sup>99</sup>When Maimonides specifically notes to which class the figurative meaning belongs, I will provide an abbreviation signifying that class in parentheses: (un) univocal; (eq) equivocal; (amph) amphibolous; (met) metaphorical; (gen-par) general to particular; (ext) extended meaning. Where Maimonides does not specifically note the class, I will signify my attempt at classification by placing the abbreviations in square brackets.

6b	<i>panim</i>	1:37, 1:54	face	(eq) anger; presence and station of an individual; hearing speech without an intermedeary, i.e., communication from God to Moses; true reality of God's existence; adverb of place, in front of, in the presence of; separate intellects; adverb of time, before or ancient; protection and providence
7	<i>temunah</i>	1:3	figure	(amph) shape and configuration of a thing; imaginary form of a thing; true notion of a thing grasped by the intellect
8	<i>tabnith banoh</i>	1:3	shape to build	shape of a thing
9	<i>ra'oh</i>	1:4	to see	[eq] intellectual apprehension
10	<i>habbit</i>	1:4	to look at	[eq] contemplation
11	<i>chazoh</i>	1:4	to envision	[eq]apprehension of the heart, i.e., mind
12	<i>'ish</i>	1:6, 1:7	man	[un] any male among any species of living beings; member of human species, demons; lowest rank of angels <sup>100</sup>

<sup>100</sup>The last suggested meaning of *'ish* is from the *Mishneh Torah, Book of Knowledge*, 1:7 and 4:6.

13	<i>'ishah</i>	1:6	woman	[un] any female among other species of living beings; [ext] any object in conjunction with another object, i.e., member of a pair;
14	<i>ach</i> <i>achot</i>	1:6	brother sister /	(eq) [un] male and female of other species of living beings and [ext] of objects according to the gender of the name
15	<i>yalod</i>	1:7	to bear children	[eq] bringing to existence of natural things; earth bringing forth her vegetal produce; happenings occurring in time; happenings within thought and the opinions and doctrines that they entail, instruction;
16	<i>maqom</i>	1:8	place	(ext) term denoting an individual's rank and situation; God's rank;
17	<i>kisse</i>	1:9, 1:28	throne	[ext] indicative of grandeur, high rank; the Sanctuary; Heaven; every place distinguished by God and singled out to receive God's created light and splendor; God's Indwelling

18	<i>yarod</i>	1:10	to descend	[ext] sublimity; [amph] lowering in rank; lower state of speculation; [eq] alighting of prophetic inspiration; coming down of the Indwelling;
19	<i>'aloh</i>	1:10	to ascend	[ext] greatness; [amph] lifting in rank; higher state of speculation; [eq] removal of prophetic state; cessation of the Indwelling; divine punishment;
20	<i>yeshibah</i>	1:11	sitting	[amph/eq] all steady, stable, and changeless states;
21	<i>qimah</i>	1:12	rising	(eq) stability and validity of a matter, carrying out of a decree or promise for another's benefit; revolt over some matter, carrying out of a decree or promise for another's demise;
22	<i>'amidah</i>	1:13	standing	(eq) to abstain and desist; to be stable and durable;
23	<i>'adam</i> <i>adamah</i>	1:14	Adam, the first man  land	[ext] term designating species; [amph] term designating multitude;
24	<i>natsob / yatsob</i>	1:15	to stand erect	(eq) to be stable and permanent;



25	<i>tsur</i>	1:16	rock	(eq) mountain; hard stone like flint; quarry, term used to designate the root and principle of every thing;
26	<i>qarob</i>	1:18	to approach	[eq] union of cognition with what is cognized; apprehension;
27	<i>nago'a</i>	1:18	to touch	[eq] union of cognition with what is cognized; apprehension;
28	<i>nagosh</i>	1:18	to come near	[eq] union of cognition with what is cognized; apprehension;
29	<i>malle</i>	1:19	to fill	(eq) coming to an end and completion of a measurable period of time; achievement of perfection in virtue;
30	<i>ram haramah</i>	1:20	high heightening	(eq) being elevated in degree;
31	<i>naso'</i>	1:20	to bear	[eq] elevation in degree; abundance of good fortune;
32	<i>'abor</i>	1:21	to pass	[eq] propagation of sounds in the air; descent of the light and of the Indwelling seen by the prophets in the vision of prophecy; [amph] one who has fallen into excess in accomplishing a task; one who has been caused to miss one objective and thereupon aimed at another objective;

33	<i>bo'</i> <i>bi'ah</i>	1:22	to come coming	[amph] a living being entering some place; [eq] coming about of something that is not at all corporeal; coming about of privations; descent of God's decree or of the Indwelling;
34	<i>yetsi'ah</i>	1:23	going out	[eq] manifestation of things that are in no way a body;
35	<i>shibbah</i>	1:23	returning	[eq] cessation of a manifestation; removal of the Indwelling, privation of providence;
36	<i>halikhah</i>	1:24	going	[eq] designate the extension of bodies more subtle than the bodies of living beings; designate the spread and manifestation of a certain thing even if the thing is not corporeal; withdrawal of providence; living a good life without in any way moving a body;
37	<i>shakhon</i>  <i>shekhinah</i>	1:25, 1:28, 1:64	to dwell  Indwelling	[amph] term applied to everything that is permanent and is attached to another thing; [eq] permanence of the Indwelling (created light), providence;  [amph] God's created light; Throne of Glory; God's essence, true reality;

38	<i>regel</i>	1:28	foot	(eq) following; causation,
39	<i>'etseb</i>	1:29	sorrow	(eq) anger; contrariety and disobedience;
40	<i>'akhol</i>          <i>ma'yene</i>	1:30	to eat   water  hunger / thirst  wells	[amph] destruction and undoing; [eq/met] knowledge, learning, intellectual apprehension through which the permanence of the human form endures in the most perfect of states;  [met] knowledge  [ext of met] lack of knowledge and apprehension  [ext of met] ( <i>me'eyne ha'edah</i> ) - notables, persons of knowledge
41	<i>'achor</i>	1:38, 1:54	back	(eq) adverb of time, after; following, imitating the conduct of some individual with respect to the conduct of life; that which follows necessarily from God's will; actions proceeding from God
42	<i>leb</i>	1:39, 1:46	heart	[ext] middle of everything;  [eq] thought; opinion; will; intellect; the principle of life in living beings, i.e., providence

43	<i>ruach</i>	1:40	air	(eq) blowing wind; animal spirit; the thing that remains of human beings after their death and does not undergo passing-away; divine intellectual overflow; purpose and will;
44	<i>nephesh</i>	1:41	soul	(eq) blood; rational soul; thing that remains of human beings after death; will; God's Will; providence
45	<i>chay</i>	1:42	living  life	[ext] recovery from a very severe illness; [eq] acquisition of knowledge;  [eq] correct opinions; good;
46	<i>maveth</i>	1:42	death	[ext] serious illness; [eq] false opinions; evil;
47	<i>kanaph</i>	1:43	wing	(eq) [ext] extremities and corners of garments; farthest ends and extremities of the habitable part of the earth; [eq] with reference to concealing;
48	<i>'ayin</i>	1:44	eye	(eq) well of water; providence; when paired with verbs which mean "to see" <i>'ayin</i> denotes intellectual apprehension;
49	<i>shamo'a</i>	1:45	to hear	(eq) to accept; science and knowledge;

50	<i>machshabah</i>	1:47	thought	[eq] reflection and understanding ascribed to God
51	<i>tebunah</i>	1:47	comprehension	[eq] reflection and understanding ascribed to God
52		1:65, 2:5, 2:48	speaking, saying, telling, calling, and commanding	(eq) notions represented by the intellect without being uttered; wishing; that which God has willed coming into being; series of cause and effect originating with God and culminating in circumstances of the created beings, i.e., creation, human behavior and actions
	<i>'amirah</i>	1:67	to say	the will in regard to everything that has been created, i.e., divine causation;
53	<i>shebithah</i>	1:67	to rest	(ext) reference to the Sabbath; [amph/eq] refraining from speech;
54	<i>nichah</i>	1:67	to repose	[amph/eq]refraining from speech; [eq] to establish, set into existence (transitive use of verb);
55	<i>rakhob</i>	1:70	to ride	(eq) designates dominance over a thing;
	[ <i>merkabah</i> ]		[chariot]	[dominance];
56	<i>techillah</i>	2:30	beginning	first



57	<i>reshith</i>	2:30	beginning	[ext] principle, [eq] origin;
58	<i>na'ar</i>	2:32	young	[eq] low level prophecy;
59	<i>mar'eh</i>	2:36	vision	[eq] level of perfection of the imaginative faculty that it sees the thing as if it were outside
60	<i>machazeh</i>	2:41	sight	[eq] fearful, terrifying state of prophecy while prophet is awake, exhaustion from this state often causes prophet to fall into deep sleep;
61	<i>chesed</i>	3:53	lovingkindness	practice of beneficence toward one who has no right at all to claim it;
62	<i>mishpat</i>	3:53	judgement	what ought to be done to one who is judged, benefit or punishment;
63	<i>tsedaqah</i>	3:53	righteousness	granting of something to everyone who has a right to it;
64	<i>chokhmah</i>	3:54	wisdom	[amph] apprehension of true realities; acquiring arts; acquiring moral virtues; aptitude for stratagems and ruses;



## **Chapter Four**

### **A Translation of Selected Texts from the Book of Exodus**

#### **The Revelation at Sinai**

## Biblical Text

### 19:1-3

*'bachodesh hashelishi letseit benei  
yisra'el mei'erets mitsrayim bayom  
hazeh ba'u midebar sinai: 'vayis'u  
meirefidim vayabo'u midbar sinai  
vayachanu bamidbar vayichan-sham  
yisra'el neged hahar: 'umosheh alah  
el ha'elohim vayiqra eilav yhwh min  
hahar leimor koh tomar leveit ya'agov  
vetageid livenai yisra'el:*

## Suggested Maimonidean Translation

<sup>1</sup>During the third month after the departure of the Israelites from the land [and idolatry] of Egypt, to the very day, they entered the wilderness of Sinai. <sup>2</sup>They travelled from Refidim, thereby coming into the wilderness of Sinai. They established a camp in the wilderness and they encamped facing the mountain. <sup>3</sup>Moses directed his thought upward to God, [the first cause in the universe. The overflow of] the Necessary Existent<sup>101</sup> caused Moses to have continuous flashes of insight<sup>102</sup>, through a chain of natural causes<sup>103</sup>, regarding fundamental principles<sup>104</sup> compelling<sup>105</sup> him to speak, "Thus shall you teach the house of Jacob, you must instruct the Israelites..."

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<sup>101</sup>Guide, 1:63, p. 155.

<sup>102</sup>Guide, Introduction to Part I, p. 7.

<sup>103</sup>Guide, 2:48, p. 410.

<sup>104</sup>Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 25.  
I have linked *har* to *tsur*.

<sup>105</sup>The prophets are compelled to teach that which they apprehend.

**19:9-11**

<sup>9</sup>vayomer yhwh el mosheh hineih  
anokhi ba eilekha be'av he'anan  
ba'avur yishma ha'am bedaberi imakh  
vegam-bekha ya'aminu le'olam  
vayageid mosheh et-divrei ha'am el-  
yhwh: <sup>10</sup>vayomer yhwh el-mosheh leikh  
el-ha'am vegidashtam hayom umachar  
vekhibesu simelotam: <sup>11</sup>vehayu  
nekhonim layom hashelishi ki bayom  
hashelishi yeireid yhwh le'einei khol-  
ha'am al-har sinai:

<sup>9</sup>Through intermediate causes, The Necessary Existent willed that the intellectual overflow reach Moses. "Right now, my Indwelling is descending towards you [to illuminate] your material circumstances<sup>106</sup> so that when the people understand my communicating with you through a chain of natural causes, they will believe in you forever. Moses responded with the Israelites' words [indicating their willingness to learn]<sup>107</sup>. <sup>10</sup>The Necessary Existent willed that the intellectual overflow reach Moses through intermediate causes, "Teach<sup>108</sup> the people and prepare them, today and tomorrow. They should take care of their material needs<sup>109</sup>. <sup>11</sup>They must be prepared by the third day. On the third day The Necessary Existent will cause prophecy to occur on Mount Sinai, before the eyes of all the people.

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<sup>106</sup>Literally, "in a cloud."

<sup>107</sup>Exodus 19:8, *kol asher diber yhwh na'aseh*.

<sup>108</sup>Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 36.

<sup>109</sup>Literally, "They should wash their garments."

**19:16-25**

*<sup>16</sup>vayehi vayom hashelishi biheyot haboqer vayehi qolot uvera'qim ve'anani kaveid al-hahar veqol shofar chazaq me'od vayeched kol-ha'am asher bamachaneh: <sup>17</sup>vayotsei mosheh et-ha'am liqerat ha'elohim min-hamachaneh vayityatsevu betachtit hahar: <sup>18</sup>vehar sinai ashan kulo mipenei asher yarad alav yehi ba'eish vaya'al ashano ke'eshen hakivshan vayeched kol-hahar me'od: <sup>19</sup>vayehi qol hashofar holeikh vechazeiq me'od mosheh yedabeir vaha'elohim ya'anenu veqol:*

<sup>16</sup>On the third day, during the morning, [according to the perception of the people] there were thunders and lightnings and the [appearance of] a dense cloud on the mountain and the incredibly intense blast of the shofar. All the people trembled in the camp. <sup>17</sup>Moses helped the people apprehend God, the first cause of the universe, by causing them to depart from their ordinary, material circumstances<sup>110</sup> [Their beliefs with respect to God] became firm<sup>111</sup>, though at a lower level [than Moses'<sup>112</sup> beliefs]. <sup>18</sup>Mount Sinai [according to the imaginative perception of the people] was completely [enveloped] in smoke because The Necessary Existent caused prophecy to become manifest<sup>113</sup> in [the form of] fire. This smoke ascended like the smoke of a furnace. The entire mountain was trembling intensely. <sup>19</sup>[According to the perception of the people] the blast of the shofar became more and more intense. Moses spoke and [the Indwelling of] The Necessary Existent answered with a thundering.

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<sup>110</sup>Literally, "from the camp."

<sup>111</sup>Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 24.

<sup>112</sup>Literally, "at the base of the mountain." The mountain and one's position on the mountain symbolize the various degrees of apprehension with respect to God.

<sup>113</sup>Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 18.

<sup>20</sup>vayeired yhwh al-har sinai el-rosh  
 hahar vayigera yhwh lemosheh el-rosh  
 hahar vaya'al mosheh: <sup>21</sup>vayomer yhwh  
 el-mosheh reid ha'eid ba'am pen-  
 yeheresu el-yhwh lire'ot venafal  
 mīmenu rav: <sup>22</sup>vegam hakohanim  
 hanigashim el-yhwh yitqadashu pen-  
 yiferots bahem yhwh:

<sup>20</sup>The Necessary Existent caused prophecy to become manifest to those having the highest degree of intellectual understanding<sup>114</sup>. The Necessary Existent willed that the intellectual overflow reach Moses through intermediate causes [such that Moses would reach the level of the] Acquired Intellect. Moses directed his attention to the most exalted object of contemplation.

<sup>21</sup>[The overflow of] The Necessary Existent emanated toward Moses [compelling him to temporarily stop contemplating], "Bear witness among the people, lest they [prematurely] attempt to apprehend [the essence of] The Necessary Existent and [consequently] many among them die.

<sup>22</sup>As for the priests, who also apprehend<sup>115</sup> The Necessary Existent, they must prepare themselves lest [the essence of] The Necessary Existent [be too great for them and] lashes out against them."

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<sup>114</sup>Literally, "to the top of the mountain." *Rosh hahar* may be the level of the Acquired Intellect.

<sup>115</sup>Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 28.

<sup>23</sup>vayomer mosheh el-yhwh lo-yukhal  
 ha'am la'alot el-har sinai ki-atah  
 ha'eidotah banu leimor hagebeil et-  
 hahar vegidashto: <sup>24</sup>vayomer eilav yhwh  
 lekh-reid ve'alita atah ve'aharon imakh  
 vehakohanim vecha'am al-yeheresu  
 la'alot el-yhwh pen-yiferats-bam:  
<sup>25</sup>vayeired mosheh el-ha'am vayomer  
 aleihem:

<sup>23</sup>Moses considered that which he apprehended from [the overflow he received from] The Necessary Existent, "The people cannot [infinitely] perfect their skills of apprehension<sup>116</sup> for You have testified by means of the emanation [of certain truths] that there are boundaries i.e., degrees of perfection pertaining to the ability of one's intellect to apprehend truths and individuals prepare themselves according to their ability." <sup>24</sup>The Necessary Existent willed that the intellectual overflow reach Moses through intermediate causes, "Teach, that is [temporarily] stop contemplating, then begin contemplating the most exalted object of thought [again], you and Aaron with you. The priests and the people must not attempt to prematurely engage in apprehending [the essence of] The Necessary Existent lest it lashes out against them." <sup>25</sup>Moses ceased his speculation in order to teach the people, saying to them...

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<sup>116</sup>Literally, "ascend Mount Sinai."



20:18-24

<sup>18</sup>*vekhoh-ha'am ro'im et-haqolot ve'et-halapidim ve'eit qol hashofar ve'et-hahar ashein vayar ha'am vayanu'u vaya'amdu meirachok: <sup>19</sup>vayomeru el-mosheh dabeir-atah imanu venishema'ah ve'al-yedabeir imanu elohim pen-namut: <sup>20</sup>vayomer mosheh el-ha'am al-tira'u ki lev'avur nasot etkhem ba ha'elohim uva'avur tiheyeh yire'ato al-peneikhem levilti techeta'u:*

<sup>18</sup>All the people apprehended the thunderings and the flashes, the blast of the shofar, and the mountain [enveloped in] smoke. The people apprehended [according to their ability]. [At first] they trembled<sup>117</sup>, and then they gained stability at their respective levels which were lower than that of Moses<sup>118</sup>. <sup>19</sup>The people said to Moses, "You teach us, and we will accept [your teaching]. God, the first cause of the universe, must not [directly] emanate toward us lest we die [on account of a lack of preparation]." <sup>20</sup>Moses said to the people, "Do not fear, God, the first cause of the universe, has entered your consciousness in order to test you [in your true beliefs thereby helping you to become firm in them<sup>119</sup>] and [the fire, smoke, and thundering is] in order that fear of God become part and parcel of your level of ability with respect to apprehending the true nature of God<sup>120</sup> so that you do not sin."

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<sup>117</sup>Unlike Moses, when others received prophecy they were overcome with dread. See Chapter 2.

<sup>118</sup>Literally, "from a distance." *Guide*, I:18, p. 45.

<sup>119</sup>*Guide*, 3:24, p. 500.

<sup>120</sup>Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 6b.

<sup>21</sup>vaya'amod ha'am meirachog  
 umosheh nigash el-ha'arafel asher-  
 sham ha'elohim: <sup>22</sup>vayomer yhwh el-  
 mosheh koh tomar el-benei yisra'eil  
 atem re'item ki min-hashamayim  
 dibareti imakhem: <sup>23</sup>lo ta'asun iti  
 elohei khesef veilohei zahav lo ta'asu  
 lakhem: <sup>24</sup>mizebach adamah ta'aseh-li  
 vezavacheta alav et-olotekha ve'et-  
 shelamekha et-tsonekha ve'et-  
 beqarekha bekhoh-hamaqom asher  
 azkir et-shemi avo eilekha  
 uveirakhtikha:

<sup>21</sup>The people became firm in their true beliefs according to their capacity for apprehension [which was] lower than that of Moses. Moses apprehended through cognitive union [what was perceived by the people as] the thick darkness in which was God, the first cause of the universe. <sup>22</sup>The Necessary Existent willed that the intellectual overflow reach Moses through intermediate causes, "Teach the Israelites, 'You have seen that I have caused the intellectual overflow to reach you by a chain of natural causes that originate from the heavens. <sup>23</sup>Do not make, so as to spite Me, gods of silver and gods of gold. Do not make them. <sup>24</sup>An altar of earth, you must make for Me. You must sacrifice your burnt offerings, your peace offerings, your sheep, and your cattle on it.' For with respect to whatever level of perfection<sup>121</sup> into which I direct My overflow<sup>122</sup>, awareness of Me will be acquired and a capacity for insight with respect to Me will be increased<sup>123</sup>."

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<sup>121</sup>Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 16.

<sup>122</sup>Literally, "I cause my name to be mentioned."

<sup>123</sup>Literally, "I will bless you."

24:1-3

*<sup>1</sup>ve'el-mosheh amar aleih el-yhwh ata  
ve'aharon nadav va'avihu veshive'im  
mizigenei yisra'eil vehishtachavitem  
meirachog: <sup>2</sup>venigash mosheh levado  
el-yhwh veheim lo yigashu vecha'am lo  
ya'alu imo: <sup>3</sup>vayavo mosheh vayasapeir  
la'am eit kol-diverei yhwh ve'eit kol-  
hamishpatim vaya'an kol-ha'am qol  
echad vayomeru kol-hadevarim asher-  
diber yhwh na'aseh:*

<sup>1</sup>[The intellectual overflow] emanated toward Moses through a series of intermediate natural causes, "Direct your intellect upward, you and Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, and Seventy of the Elite of Israel in order to reflect on the most exalted and sublime object possible. You should engage in the inferior degrees of speculation<sup>124</sup>. Moses alone will attain cognitive union with the [notion of] The Necessary Existent, while the others<sup>125</sup> will not. As for the people, they will not [be able to] direct their thought upward to contemplate the most exalted and sublime object along with Moses." <sup>3</sup>Moses went and taught the people all the notions that overflowed toward him from The Necessary Existent and all the judgements. The entire people responded in unison, "All that The Necessary Existent has caused to be known, we will do."

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<sup>124</sup>Literally, "Worship from a distance."

<sup>125</sup>Literally, "They."

24:9-18

<sup>9</sup>vaya'al mosheh ve'aharon nadav  
va'avihu veshive'im mizigenei yisra'eil:  
<sup>10</sup>vayire'u eit elohei yisra'eil vetachat  
ragelav kema'aseih livenat hasapir  
ukhe'etsem hashamayim latohar:

<sup>9</sup>Moses and Aaron, Nadav and Avihu, and Seventy of the Elite of Israel contemplated the most exalted and sublime object possible. <sup>10</sup>[The Seventy Elite<sup>126</sup>] apprehended the Indwelling [in a prophetic vision<sup>127</sup>. In addition, they apprehended], with respect to the sublunar world<sup>128</sup>, the [essence of] the created first matter<sup>129</sup> [which was perceived by the Seventy Elite of Israel to be] like the essence of the heavens with respect to transparency.

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<sup>126</sup>Guide, 1:5, p. 30.

<sup>127</sup>Indicated by the fact that their imaginations have provided them with an image of a corporeal God.

<sup>128</sup>Maimonides accepts Onkelos' translation of *vetachat regelav* as "under the Throne of God's Glory," *Guide*, 1:28, p. 60. The term "throne" is figuratively applied to the Heavens as well as the Indwelling, Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 17. That which is under the Heavens in Maimonides' conception of the universe is the sublunar world.

<sup>129</sup>Guide, 2:26, p. 331.

<sup>11</sup>*ve'el-atsilei benei yisra'eil lo shalach yado vayechezu et-ha'elohim vayokhelu vayishetu: <sup>12</sup>vayomer yhwh el-mosheh aleih eilai haharah veheyeh-sham ve'etena lekha et-luchot ha'even vehatorah vehamitsevah asher katavti lehorotam: <sup>13</sup>vayaqom mosheh vihoshu'a meshareto vaya'al mosheh el-har ha'elohim: <sup>14</sup>ve'el-hazeqeinim amar shevu-lanu vazeh ad asher-nashuv aleikhem vehineih aharon vechur imakhem mi-va'al devarim yigash aleihem:*

<sup>11</sup>God, the first cause in the universe, did not cause the Indwelling to flow directly toward the Seventy Elite<sup>130</sup> of the Israelites. Still they received prophecy in a fearful, terrifying state<sup>131</sup>, and they were nourished with knowledge<sup>132</sup>.<sup>12</sup>The Necessary Existent willed that the intellectual overflow reach Moses through intermediate causes, "Direct your thoughts upward towards the most exalted and sublime object possible and stay in that state. I will cause knowledge to emanate into your intellect [so clearly that it will be as if] I had written the law and the commandment on stone tablets in order to teach them.

<sup>13</sup>Moses acted in accordance with the Divine Will<sup>133</sup> along with Joshua, his servant. Moses engaged in a higher state of contemplating God, the first cause of the universe. <sup>14</sup>Moses said to the Elite, "Remain where you are with respect to contemplating God<sup>134</sup> until we are no longer in our prophetic state<sup>135</sup>. Aaron and Hur are with you. Whoever has a question should approach them."

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<sup>130</sup>Guide, 1:5, p. 30.

<sup>131</sup>Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 60.

<sup>132</sup>Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 40.

<sup>133</sup>Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 21.

<sup>134</sup>Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 20.

<sup>135</sup>Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 35.

<sup>15</sup>vaya'al mosheh el-hahar vayekhas  
 he'anan et-hahar: <sup>16</sup>vayishkon kevod-  
 yhwh al-har sinai vayekhaseihu  
 he'anan sheishet yamim vayigera el-  
 mosheh bayom hashevi'i mitokh  
 he'anan: <sup>17</sup>umare'eih kevod yhwh  
 ke'eish okhelet berosh hahar le'einei  
 benei yisra'eil: <sup>18</sup>vayavo mosheh  
 betokh he'anan vaya'al el-hahar vayehi  
 mosheh bahar arba'im yom ve'arba'im  
 lailah:

<sup>15</sup>Moses progressed in his contemplation and [according to the perception of the Elite and Aaron and Hur] the cloud covered the mountain. <sup>16</sup>The Indwelling of The Necessary Existent is permanently present<sup>136</sup> in the highest stages of intellectual perfection. [According to the perception of those in lower levels of intellectual perfection] the cloud covered Mount Sinai for six days. The Necessary Existent willed that the intellectual overflow reach Moses through intermediate causes on the seventh day from within the cloud. <sup>17</sup>According to the perception of the Israelites, there was a highly imaginative prophetic vision<sup>137</sup> of the Glory of The Necessary Existent which was like a consuming fire on top of the mountain. <sup>18</sup>[According to the perception of the people] Moses entered the cloud. Moses directed his thought to the most exalted and sublime object, and stayed in that state for forty days and forty nights.

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<sup>136</sup>Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 37.

<sup>137</sup>Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 59.



25:8

*ve'asu li miqdash veshakhaneti  
betokham:*

They must make a sanctuary for Me so that My Indwelling will be permanently present among them, so that their memory of idolatry will be erased<sup>138</sup>.

25:22

*veno'adti lekha sham vedibarti itekha  
mei'al hakaporet mibein shenei  
hakeruvim asher al-aron ha'eidut eit  
kol-asher atsaveh otekha el-benei  
yisra'eil:*

I will cause the divine overflow to reach you, directly from the Active Intellect into your intellect<sup>139</sup>, with respect to the coming into being of My Will<sup>140</sup> regarding the Israelites.

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<sup>138</sup>*Guide*, 3:32, pp. 526-527.

<sup>139</sup>Literally, "There above the Ark cover, between the two cherubim on the Ark of Testimony." The cherubim represent the notion that prophecy flows directly into Moses' intellect without interference of the imagination, *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Sanhedrin 10, sixth fundamental principle of faith; *Guide*, 2:6, pp. 264-5; Reine, A., "Maimonides Concept of Mosaic Prophecy," p. 331.

<sup>140</sup>Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 52.

28:1-3

*<sup>1</sup>ve'atah haqereiv eilekha et-aharon  
achikha ve'et-banav ito mitokh benei  
yisra'eil lekhahano-li aharon nadav  
va'avihu elazar ve'itamar benei aharon:  
<sup>2</sup>ve'asita vigedei-qodesh le'aharon  
achikha lekhavod uletiferet: <sup>3</sup>ve'atah  
tedabeir el-kol-chakhemei-leiv asher  
mileitiv ruach chokhemah ve'asu et-  
bigedei aharon leqadesh lekhahano-li:*

<sup>1</sup>Assist Aaron, your brother and his sons, in apprehending truths<sup>141</sup> so that they will be closer to you rather than to the Israelites [with respect to their intellectual perfection]. [In this manner] Aaron and Nadav, Avihu, Elazar, and Ithamar his sons, will serve Me. <sup>2</sup>Make separate clothing for Aaron, your brother, in order [to demonstrate] the honor and glory [of reflecting on the most exalted and sublime object possible<sup>142</sup>]. <sup>3</sup>Teach all who have acquired the arts<sup>143</sup>, whom I have brought to perfection<sup>144</sup> by means of the divine overflow<sup>145</sup>, so that they prepare the clothing for Aaron, to separate him so that he will apprehend Me<sup>146</sup>.

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<sup>141</sup>Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 26.

<sup>142</sup>Perhaps elevating the priesthood in the eyes of the masses, with the beauty of the priestly garments, will encourage them to maintain true beliefs about The Necessary Existent and keep them from straying in the direction of idolatry.

<sup>143</sup>Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 64. I have selected this meaning because their task is to make special clothing.

<sup>144</sup>Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 29.

<sup>145</sup>Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 43.

<sup>146</sup>See above, Exodus 28:1.

29:43-46

<sup>43</sup>*veno'adti shamah livenei yisra'eil  
veni qdash bikhevodi: <sup>44</sup>veqidashti et-  
ohel mo'eid ve'et-hamizbeiach ve'et-  
aharon ve'et-banav aqadeish lekhaben  
li: <sup>45</sup>veshakhanti betokh benei yisra'eil  
vehayiti lahem leilohim: <sup>46</sup>veyade'u ki  
ani yhwh eloheihem asher hotseiti  
otam mei'erets mitsrayim leshokheni  
vetokham ani yhwh eloheihem:*

<sup>43</sup>There, I will cause the divine overflow to emanate towards the Israelites, who will be separated [from the nations] by means of My Glory. <sup>44</sup>I will set aside the Tent of Meeting, and the Altar. I will separate Aaron and his sons [from the Israelites] so that they will apprehend Me<sup>147</sup>. <sup>45</sup>I will cause my Indwelling to be among the Israelites, so that to them I shall be God, the first cause of the universe and all things. <sup>46</sup>They will know that I am The Necessary Existent, [who is] to them the first cause of the universe, who took them out of the land [and idolatry] of Egypt so that My Indwelling may be present among them. I am The Necessary Existent, [who is] to them the first cause of the universe.

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<sup>147</sup>See above, Exodus 28:1.

**31:1-6**

<sup>1</sup>vayedabeir yhw el-mosheh leimor:  
<sup>2</sup>re'eih qarati vesheim betsale'eil ben-uri  
ven-chur lemateih yehudah: <sup>3</sup>va'amalei  
oto ruach elohim bechokhemah  
uvitevunah uveda'at uvekhol-  
melakhah: <sup>4</sup>lacheshov machashavot  
la'asot bazahav uvakesef uvanechoshet:  
<sup>5</sup>uvacharoshet even lemalot  
uvacharoshet eits la'asot bekhoh-  
melakhah:

<sup>1</sup>The Necessary Existent willed that the intellectual overflow reach Moses through intermediate causes,

<sup>2</sup>"Know<sup>148</sup> that I have caused the divine overflow to emanate towards Betsalel ben-Uri ben-Hur of the tribe of Judah. <sup>3</sup>I have perfected [him], with the intellectual overflow, regarding God, the first cause of the universe, in the areas of moral virtues<sup>149</sup>, comprehension<sup>150</sup>, scientific knowledge, and all artisans' skills <sup>4</sup>so that he will devise plans<sup>151</sup> to make [things] with gold, silver, and copper, <sup>5</sup>in cutting stones for filling [settings], and in cutting wood; thereby he can create in any artisan's field.

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<sup>148</sup>Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 9.

<sup>149</sup>While the definition of *chokhemah* (Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 64 and *Guide*, 3:54, p. 635) which may best fit Betsalel is "artisans' skills," I have chosen "moral virtues" for two reasons. (a) The acquisition of moral virtues is a prerequisite for the acquisition of intellectual virtues and the series in the verse seems to be a hierarchical progression. (b) "Artisans' skills are clearly referred to later in the series.

<sup>150</sup>Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 51 in conjunction with entry 64. Analytical skills?

<sup>151</sup>Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 50 in conjunction with entry 64.

*‘va’ani hineih natati ito eit oholi’av  
ben-achisamakh lemateih-dan uveleiv  
kol-ckakham-leiv natati chokhemah  
ve’asu eit kol-asher tsivitikha:*

<sup>6</sup>With him I have also prepared  
Oholiav ben-Achisamakh from the  
tribe of Dan, who has acquired all of  
the arts<sup>152</sup>. They will work in  
accordance with the Divine Will.

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<sup>152</sup>See above, Exodus 28:3.

32:7-9

<sup>7</sup>vayedabeir yhwh el-mosheh lekh-reid  
ki shicheit amekha asher he'elleita  
mei'ereis mitsrayim: <sup>8</sup>saru maheir min-  
haderekh asher tsivitim asu lahem eigel  
maseikhah vayishtachavu-lo  
vayizbechu-lo vayomeru eileh eloheikha  
yisra'eil asher he'elukha mei'ereis  
mitsrayim: <sup>9</sup>vayomer yhwh el-mosheh  
ra'iti et-ha'am hazeh vehineih am-  
gesheih-oref hu:

<sup>7</sup>The Necessary Existent willed that  
the intellectual overflow reach Moses  
through intermediate causes, "Stop  
contemplating so intently because  
your people, whom you have elevated  
in rank from the land [and idolatry]  
of Egypt, has become corrupt.

<sup>8</sup>Abruptly they have turned from the  
way of the Divine Will. They made  
for themselves a molten calf and they  
are worshipping it and sacrificing to  
it. They say "This is your god, O  
Israel, who elevated you from the  
land [and idolatry] of Egypt." <sup>9</sup>The  
Necessary Existent willed that the  
intellectual overflow reach Moses  
through intermediate causes, "I know  
this people and they are stubborn."



32:31-35

<sup>31</sup>vayashov mosheh el-yhwh vayomar  
ana chata ha'am hazeh chata'ah  
gedolah vaya'asu lahem elohei zahav:  
<sup>32</sup>ve'atah im-tisa chatatam ve'im-ayin  
mecheini na misifrekha asher katavta:  
<sup>33</sup>vayomer yhwh el-mosheh mi asher  
chata-li emechenu misifri: <sup>34</sup>ve'atah  
leikh nechei et-ha'am el asher-dibarti  
lakh hineih mal'akhi yeileikh lefanekha  
uvayom poqedi ufaqadeti aleihem  
chatatam: <sup>35</sup>vayigof yhwh et-ha'am al  
asher asu et-ha'eigel asher asa aharon:

<sup>31</sup>Moses returned to [contemplating]  
The Necessary Existent knowing that  
this people committed a great  
transgression when they made for  
themselves a golden god. <sup>32</sup>"Now, if  
only You would elevate them to a  
higher level of perfection [from the  
ignorance and infidelity which  
caused] their sin. And if not, stop  
exercising providence over me<sup>153</sup>.

<sup>33</sup>The Necessary Existent willed that  
the intellectual overflow reach Moses  
through intermediate causes, "I will  
not exercise providence over those  
who have sinned against Me. <sup>34</sup>Now,  
offer guidance to the people  
regarding all the notions that I have  
caused to flow into you. The Active  
Intellect<sup>154</sup> will be manifest to  
exercise providence over you<sup>155</sup> even  
on the day that I exercise divine  
retribution over them for their sin.  
<sup>35</sup>[The Will of] The Necessary  
Existent results in the destruction of  
those people who made the calf  
along with Aaron."

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<sup>153</sup>Literally, "blot me out from  
Your Book which you have written."  
*Guide*, 3:17, p. 472.

<sup>154</sup>Angels may be, among other  
things, the spheres and intellects,  
*Guide* 2:6, p. 262. The Active  
Intellect is the intellect which  
overflows with the forms that govern  
and sustain the sublunar world, i.e.,  
us.

<sup>155</sup>Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 36.

33:7-23

*<sup>7</sup>umosheh yikach et-ha'ohel venatah-lo  
michuts lamachaneh harecheq min-  
hamachaneh vegara lo ohel mo'eid  
vehaya kol-mevaqeish yhwh yeitsei el-  
ohel mo'eid asher michuts  
lamachaneh: <sup>8</sup>vehayah ketseit mosheh  
el-ha'ohel yaqumu kol-ha'am venitsevu  
ish petach oholo vehibitu acharei  
mosheh ad-bo'o ha'ohelah: <sup>9</sup>vehayah  
kevo mosheh ha'ohelah yeireid amud  
he'anan ve'amad petach ha'ohel  
vediber im-mosheh: <sup>10</sup>vera'ah khol-  
ha'am et-amud he'anan omeid petach  
ha'ohel vegam kol-ha'am  
vehishetachavu ish petach oholo:*

<sup>7</sup>Moses took the Tent and pitched it outside the camp, some distance from the camp. He called it the Tent of Meeting. Everyone who inquired about The Necessary Existent would go out to the Tent of Meeting located outside the camp. <sup>8</sup>When Moses would go out to the Tent, all the people would remain<sup>156</sup>. Each individual stood at the opening of his tent, and contemplated Moses' actions and words<sup>157</sup> until he entered the Tent. <sup>9</sup>[According to the perception of the people] when Moses entered the Tent, a pillar of cloud descended, stood at the entrance, and spoke with Moses. <sup>10</sup>All the people saw the pillar of cloud standing at the entrance to the Tent. The people remained at the same level of perfection and contemplated God, each individual at the opening of his own tent.

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<sup>156</sup>Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 21.

<sup>157</sup>Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 10 and *Guide*, 1:4, p. 28.

<sup>11</sup>*vediber yhwh el-mosheh panim el-panim ka'asher yedabeir ish el-rei'eihu veshav el-hamachaneh umeshareto yehoshua bin-nun na'ar lo yamish mitokh hao'hel: <sup>12</sup>vayomer mosheh el-yhwh re'eh atah omeir eilai ha'al et-ha'am hazeh ve'atah lo hodatani eit asher-tishelach imi ve'atah amarta yedatikha vesheim vegam-matsata chein ve'einai: <sup>13</sup>ve'atah im-na matsati chein ve'einekha hodi'eini na et-derakhekha ve'eida'akha lema'an emetsa-chein ve'einekha ure'eih ki amekha hagai hazeh:*

<sup>11</sup>Through intermediate causes, The Necessary Existent would will that the intellectual overflow reach Moses, who was completely conscious and unafraid<sup>158</sup>, like when one human being speaks with another human being. He would then return to the camp, but his servant, Joshua bin-Nun, a lower-level prophet<sup>159</sup> would not depart from the Tent.<sup>12</sup>Moses contemplated The Necessary Existent, "Remember, You made Your will known to me, 'Guide this people and cause them to direct their thoughts to what is most exalted and sublime,' but you did not [permit Your overflow] to inform me who you would prepare with me. You [have permitted Your overflow] to emanate toward me [as if to establish a relationship of the highest order of prophecy], 'I know you by name, and you know Me. That is to say, you are steadfast in your knowledge of all the universe<sup>160</sup>.' <sup>13</sup>Now, if I [am beginning to] know You, allow me to apprehend Your Ways so that I will truly know You. Remember, this nation is Your people."

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<sup>158</sup>*Guide*, 1:37, p. 86 and *Commentary on the Mishnah*, Sanhedrin 10, Seventh fundamental principle.

<sup>159</sup>Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 58.

<sup>160</sup>*Guide*, 1:54, p. 123.

<sup>14</sup>vayomar panai yeileikhu vahanichoti lakh: <sup>15</sup>vayomer eilav im-ein panekha holekhim al-ta'aleinu mizeh: <sup>16</sup>uvameh yivada eifo ki-matsati chein ve'einekha ani ve'amekha halo velekhitekha imanu venifeleinu ani ve'amekha mikol-ha'am asher al-penei ha'adamah: <sup>17</sup>vayomer yhwh el-mosheh gam et-hadavar hazeh asher dibarta e'eseh ki-matsata chein ve'einai va'eda'akha besheim: <sup>18</sup>vayomar hare'eini na et-kevodekha:

<sup>14</sup>The Necessary Existent willed that the intellectual overflow reach Moses through intermediate causes, "I will withdraw My anger<sup>161</sup> and I will establish<sup>162</sup> [my Indwelling] for you." <sup>15</sup>[Moses contemplated] The Necessary Existent [further], "If Your providence<sup>163</sup> will not be manifest [with me], do not increase our levels of perfection any more. <sup>16</sup>How will it be known that I truly apprehend You, I and Your people? Is it not because Your [providence] is manifest among us, that I and Your people are distinct from every other people on the earth?"<sup>17</sup>The Necessary Existent willed that the intellectual overflow reach Moses through intermediate causes, "I will do what you have requested because you know Me and I know you thoroughly." <sup>18</sup>Moses contemplated The Necessary Existent, "Permit me to know Your essence<sup>164</sup>."

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<sup>161</sup>Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 36 and *Guide*, 1:37, p. 85.

<sup>162</sup>Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 54.

<sup>163</sup>Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 6b. I have selected this meaning because it seems to me that Moses is beseeching God's protection.

<sup>164</sup>*Guide*, 1:54, p. 124 and 1:64, p. 156.

<sup>19</sup>vayomer ani a'avir kol-tuvi al-  
panekha veqarati vesheim yhwh  
lefanekha vechanoti et-asher achon  
verichamti et-asher aracheim:

<sup>20</sup>vayomer lo tukhal lire'ot et-panai ki  
lo-yir'ani ha'adam vachai: <sup>21</sup>vayomer  
yhwh hineih maqom iti venitsavta al-  
hatsur:

<sup>19</sup>[The Necessary Existent] willed that  
the intellectual overflow reach  
[Moses] through intermediate causes,  
"I will display all existing things<sup>165</sup>  
before you. I will make known,  
through intermediate causes, the  
notion of The Necessary Existent,  
before you. I will permit those who  
know Me to know Me and I will  
exercise providence over those whom  
I exercise providence." <sup>20</sup>[The  
overflow of The Necessary Existent]  
emanated [toward Moses,  
continuing], "You are not capable of  
knowing My essence<sup>166</sup> for human  
beings cannot know My essence  
correctly<sup>167</sup>." <sup>21</sup>[The Necessary  
Existent] willed that the intellectual  
overflow reach [Moses], "There is a  
supreme level of perfection of the  
intellect<sup>168</sup> with respect to knowing  
me. Ground yourself firmly<sup>169</sup> in the  
fundamental principles of all things<sup>170</sup>.

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<sup>165</sup>Guide, 1:54, p. 124.

Corresponding to Moses' request to  
learn God's ways, Exodus 33:13.

<sup>166</sup>Ibid.

<sup>167</sup>Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 45.

<sup>168</sup>Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 16.

<sup>169</sup>Guide, 1:15, p. 41. *natsob*  
and *'amod* are synonymous. For  
meaning, Chapter 3, Lexicon entries  
22 and 24 respectively.

<sup>170</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>*vehayah ba'avur kevodi vesamtikha  
beniqerat hatsur vesakoti khapi alekha  
ad-overi: <sup>23</sup>vahasiroti et-kapi vera'ita  
et-achorai ufanai lo yeira'u:*

<sup>22</sup>[By means of the intellectual overflow] I will cause you to know the most inferior apprehensions of the roots and principles of all things<sup>171</sup>. In this way I will exercise protection over you because My essence is too much to ask for as a goal of apprehension<sup>172</sup>. <sup>23</sup>When I withdraw My protection, you will apprehend all that follows necessarily from the Divine Will<sup>173</sup>, i.e., all existing things<sup>174</sup>, although you will not apprehend my essence."

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<sup>171</sup>Literally, "I will place you in a crevice in the rock."

<sup>172</sup>Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 32 and *Guide*, 1:21, p. 48.

<sup>173</sup>Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 41.

<sup>174</sup>*Guide*, 1:54, p. 124 and 1:64, p. 156.



34:1-9

<sup>1</sup>vayomer yhwh el-mosheh pesal-lekha  
shenei-luchot avanim karishonim  
vekhataveti al-haluchot et-hadevarim  
asher hayu al-haluchot harishonim  
asher shibarta: <sup>2</sup>veheyeih nakhon  
laboqer ve'alita vaboqer el-har sinai  
venitsavta li sham al-rosh hahar:  
<sup>3</sup>ve'ish lo-ya'aleh imakh vegam-ish al-  
yeira bekhoh-hahar gam-hatson  
vehabaqar al-yir'u el-mul hahar hahu:  
<sup>4</sup>vayifsol shenei-luchot avanim  
karishonim vayashkeim mosheh  
vaboqer vaya'al el-har sinai ka'asher  
tsivah yhwh oto vayiqach beyado  
shenei luchot avanim:

<sup>1</sup>The Necessary Existent willed that the intellectual overflow reach Moses through intermediate causes, "Carve two stone tablets similar to the first ones. [I will cause knowledge to flow to you so clearly that it will be as if] I were writing the words that were on the first tablets that you smashed, onto [these] tablets. <sup>2</sup>Be prepared in the morning, and reflect on the most exalted and sublime object, and maintain the level of the Acquired Intellect. <sup>3</sup>No other human being will attain your level of intellectual perfection. Other human beings are not capable of perfection near your level<sup>175</sup>. Those human beings who are like sheep and cattle<sup>176</sup> are not even capable of learning<sup>177</sup> at the lowest levels." <sup>4</sup>So Moses carved the two stone tablets like the first ones. He woke up early in the morning and directed his thoughts to the highest levels of contemplation, fulfilling the Will of The Necessary Existent concerning him. He held in his hands the two stone tablets.

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<sup>175</sup>Literally, "No individual may be seen throughout the mountain."

<sup>176</sup>*Guide*, 2:36, p. 372.  
Maimonides states that people, according to their various states, are either like "domestic animals" or "beasts of prey."

<sup>177</sup>I linked the term *al yir'u* to *akhoh*, Chapter 3, Lexicon entry 40.

<sup>5</sup>vayeired yhwh be'anan vayityatseiv  
 imo sham vayigera vesheim yhwh:  
<sup>6</sup>vaya'avor yhwh al-panav vayigera  
 yhwh yhwh eil rachum vechanun  
 eirekh apayim verav-chesed ve'emet:  
<sup>7</sup>notseir chesed la'alafim nosei avon  
 vafesha vechata'ah venageih lo  
 yenaqeh poqeid avon avot al-banim  
 ve'al-benai vanim al-shileishim ve'al-  
 ribei'im: <sup>8</sup>vayemahir mosheh vayiqod  
 artsah vayishtachu:

<sup>5</sup>[The Indwelling] of The Necessary  
 Existent caused prophecy to become  
 manifest [according to the perception  
 of the people] in [the form of] a  
 cloud. The Necessary Existent  
 continued to will that the intellectual  
 overflow reach Moses, [illuminating  
 his understating of] the notion of  
 The Necessary Existent. <sup>6</sup>The  
 Necessary Existent caused the divine  
 essence<sup>178</sup> to be by-passed<sup>179</sup> and  
 [instead] made the intermediary  
 causes culminate in Moses  
 understanding perfectly the following  
 relationship between the attributes  
 and God. The Necessary Existent is  
 the God of mercy, grace, patience,  
 abundant beneficence and truth<sup>180</sup>,  
<sup>7</sup>maintaining beneficence to the  
 thousandth generation, forgiving  
 wrongdoing, criminal activity, and  
 transgression, though not  
 [inappropriately] declaring innocence,  
 punishing the children and the  
 children's children until the third and  
 fourth generations, for the  
 wrongdoing of the parents.  
<sup>8</sup>Abruptly, Moses bowed to the  
 ground and continued contemplating.

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<sup>178</sup>*Guide*, 1:21, p. 48, the  
 pronominal suffix on *panav* refers to  
 The Necessary Existent and not  
 Moses.

<sup>179</sup>*Guide*, 1:21, p. 48.

<sup>180</sup>*Guide*, 1:54, p. 125, actions  
 and characteristics are identical.

*vayomer im-na matsati chein  
be'einekha adonai yeilekh-na adonai  
beqirebeinu ki am-qeshieh-oref hu  
vesalachta la'avoneinu ulechatateinu  
unechaltanu:*

<sup>9</sup>Moses engaged in contemplation [so intently, as if to make a request from one's master], "If I truly know You, my Lord, make your Indwelling manifest among us, Lord. Though we are a stubborn people, forgive our wrongdoing and our transgression. Keep a special relationship with us<sup>181</sup>."

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<sup>181</sup>Literally, "And You shall inherit us."

## **Chapter Five**

### **Conclusion**

The title of my thesis, "A Dance of Two Companies," comes from Maimonides' interpretation of Song of Songs 7:1 in his *Epistle to Yemen*.

*Return, return, O Shulammite; return, return, that we may look upon thee. What will you see in the Shulammite? As it were, a dance of two companies.*

*Now "Shulammite" signifies the perfect one; "A dance of two companies" alludes to the joy of the theophany in Mt. Sinai... The fourfold occurrence of the word "return" is an allusion to the four empires, each of which will endeavor to coerce us to abandon our faith and embrace theirs. Incidentally, it may be mentioned that we are now living under the aegis of the Fourth Empire<sup>182</sup>.*

The "Fourth Empire" is a reference to Muslim rule, from which Maimonides escaped in his departure from Spain and regarding which the Jews of Yemen consulted him. Maimonides argues for continued loyalty to Judaism even under duress, because he believes that it is the one true religious expression and the one reliable religious tradition in the world. This claim is rooted in the veracity of the Revelation at Mount Sinai.

*Remember, my co-religionists, that this great, incomparable and unique historical event, is attested by the best of evidence. For never before or since, has a whole nation witnessed a revelation from God or beheld His splendor. The purpose of all this was to confirm us in the faith so that nothing can change it, and to reach a decree of certainty which will sustain us in these trying times of fierce persecution and absolute tyranny...<sup>183</sup>*

The Jews of the United States today certainly do not live under the yoke of tyranny and religious intolerance. We are free to practice Judaism in the privacy of our homes and synagogues and in the public eye. Still many of us ask the same questions that the Jews of Yemen asked Maimonides. Should we turn from our

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<sup>182</sup>Halkin, A. (ed.), *Moses Maimonides' Epistle to Yemen*, trans. B. Cohen, (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1952), p. vii.

<sup>183</sup>*Ibid.*

faith? Only today the question is asked not in the context of an environment in which there is no freedom of religion. Today the question is asked in a society which values freedom to the extent that Jews wonder, do I even need Judaism? Why should I pledge allegiance to a tradition that seems outdated in light of the Big Bang Theory? Why should I pledge allegiance to a tradition that seems outdated in light of modern archaeology's failure to prove that there was an event at Mount Sinai, let alone that we know what mountain is Mount Sinai.

I have researched and written my thesis with the intention of presenting Maimonides' opinion on the nature and meaning of the Revelation at Mount Sinai as a model for the Jew who finds it difficult to accept both the scientific world view and the religious claims of the Jewish tradition. Of course, Maimonides' interpretation is just one of many ideas concerning the Revelation at Mount Sinai. Nevertheless, his interpretation appeals to me, personally, in that he demonstrates that the scientific world view and the religious claims of the Jewish tradition are two expressions of the same underlying truth rather than two contradictory claims. In addition, Maimonides' notion of the hierarchy of the levels of intellectual understanding motivates me to prepare and perfect my own intellectual and contemplative skills.

Maimonides allows individuals to understand the text, the tradition, at whatever level they are willing and able to grasp it. While Maimonides' levels of apprehension reveal a certain elitism (he attaches a different value to the different levels at which individuals understand the text), his view is, in my opinion, a reflection of reality. Some people are satisfied with the external meaning of the Bible, while others are not. Among those who have difficulty intellectually



accepting the external meaning of the Bible as their "reliable tradition," there are those who search for deeper meaning and those who simply reject the Bible altogether as "reliable tradition." Many of the latter are eventually lost to Judaism. It is my hope that those who are undecided with respect to keeping or discarding the Biblical text will see Maimonides' example as one model for searching within the text for deeper meaning.

The highest expression of religiosity is the "intellectual love of God," that is, contemplation of the universe and its necessary causes leading up to its ultimate cause, i.e., God. Maimonides depicts prophecy as the necessary culmination of the intellectual love of God which begins with a process of perfecting the intellect. The Torah, Moses' prophecy, is an educational tool. On one level it is the law and history of the Jewish people. If the Jews follow the commandments contained in it, they will minimally devote themselves to monotheism and ethical conduct and they will necessarily separate themselves from whatever idolatries are revered by the nations. On another level, the Torah points to the truths of natural science and divine science (physics and metaphysics). If individual Jews discover the hidden meaning of the words and parables in the Torah, they will come to understand the universe and its causes (natural science). Ultimately they might even apprehend God, to the extent that human beings confined by the material world can apprehend God, that is, by means of negative theology and the theology of the attributes of action (which together comprise divine science).

The selection of texts, from the book of Exodus, regarding the Revelation at Sinai point to the different levels of apprehension and ultimately to both the

negative theology and the theology of the attributes of action. The translation which I have presented in light of Maimonides' lexicon of the figurative meaning of words and in light of his discussion on various verses from the text in the *Guide* demonstrate these levels of apprehension as well as the kinds of truths that Maimonides supposes to have been discovered only by Moses. The masses, the 600,000 Israelites, see and hear a fantastic event: fire, smoke, thundering, the blast of the shofar (Exodus 19:16-25; 20:18). From this experience, or perhaps out of the fear that this experience produced, the masses learn that there is but one God to whom they must pledge their entire allegiance (Exodus 20:23-24). They also learn that Moses is their teacher par excellence (Exodus 20:19; 33:7-10). The Seventy Elders, Aaron's sons, Aaron, Joshua and Moses acquire more knowledge about the universe and God, each one more than the former (Exodus 24:1-2; 9-11; 28:1-2; 33:11). Moses alone discovers the negative theology and the theology of the attributes of action (Exodus 33:12-24; 34:6-7 respectively)<sup>184</sup>.

Moses' apprehension must be examined closely. Negative theology is the result of God's refusal to show the divine face. Rather Moses is permitted only to see *achorai*, or all that follows necessarily from the Divine Will, that is, all existing things. Moses learns that direct knowledge of God is impossible. No human being, as a corporeal being, can apprehend God's essence. Human beings can only know what God is not or what is not God. This realization that God as an incorporeal being cannot be apprehended by the human intellect is the basic idea of negative theology.

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<sup>184</sup>*Guide*, 1:54, pp. 123-124.

The theology of the attributes of action is part and parcel of the apprehension that God is the formal, final, and efficient cause of the universe<sup>185</sup>. The creation of the universe and its maintenance through time are examples of God's benevolence. However, God does not act compassionately in the way that human beings sometimes do. Unfortunately as human beings, we are restricted by our language, which refers primarily to our own behavior and conduct. We can only describe God's action, namely the divine overflow, very narrowly. The results of that intentional overflow, our existence and subsequent preservation, demonstrate traits we can only describe as "benevolent," "merciful," "patient," and "forgiving." These traits characterize the divine action of overflow from a human point of view. As such, they comprise the main part of Maimonides' theology of the attributes of action. Moses discovers these attributes when he apprehends all of God's "goodness" namely the diverse cause-effect relationships and natural acts of the creation.

The next stage of the research which I have only begun in this thesis, will be to apply Maimonides' lexicon to other Biblical texts. Certainly his lexicon and teaching ought to be applied to the account of the Revelation at Mount Sinai in Deuteronomy. Other important texts would include chapters of the books of prophets that describe encounters with God, descriptions of God's nature and relationship to the Israelites and to the nations, and descriptions of God's plan to exile the Israelites and Judeans for their atrocious misconduct.

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<sup>185</sup>*Guide*, 1:69, p. 167.

With respect to Maimonides' lexicon, another important scholarly venture might be to apply Maimonides' figurative approach to more words that appear frequently in the Biblical text, especially in the prophetic books. In my own translation, I extended some of Maimonides definitions to words he did not specifically mention in the *Guide*. For example, I used the mountain (Mount Sinai) as a visual correlate for the degrees of ascent and descent in the contemplation of God by human beings (Exodus 19:17, 23). I translated *rechoq* similarly (Exodus 20:18).

The most pressing issue, to my mind, after completing my translation is what to do with it. It is as shocking as it is fascinating. The description of the Revelation at Sinai is transformed into the description of the various levels of human ability to intellectually apprehend the truths of the universe and the nature of God. With respect to the fascinating aspect of my translation, I am inspired to develop and perfect my own skills of contemplation and understanding. I want to identify with Moses rather than the masses. As a rabbi, I want to work with my congregation through sermons, liturgy, and educational programs, in order to lead them to higher levels of understanding the Bible and God.

The shock-value of my translation alleviates my discomfort with Maimonides' elitism. This translation of the selections in Exodus can only be presented to people who are prepared to understand them in light of Maimonides' teaching about the universe, about knowledge and prophecy, and about God and the role of Torah in Jewish civilization. This translation read out of context is not only unintelligible but could be harmful to the reader who has not really thought about creation, God, or prophecy.

The point of the translation, of my entire thesis, and all the more so with respect to Maimonides' *Guide*, is to demonstrate that the Bible and Jewish tradition, for that matter, do not stand in opposition to the truth as revealed by reason. Jewish texts survive generations of scientific discovery and religious evolution because our tradition permits and even encourages interpretation (whether it is exegesis or eisegesis) of the texts.

The Reform Movement's break with pre-modern Jewish orthodoxy was at some level based on the perceived need of modern Jews for drastic reinterpretation of the Jewish tradition. While in the early days much of the ritual and the laws of Judaism were rejected, the value of Jewish texts and learning was not. The early Reformers based their arguments for change on Rabbinic texts and on the Bible. Throughout the history of the Reform Movement there has always existed diversity with respect to beliefs. As a liberal religion, the Reform Movement supports this diversity. I hope that my thesis and the approach it explores can be a model for at least some Reform Jews who seek to understand God, prophecy, and revelation in a manner other than the manner in which they are presented in the external reading of the Biblical text. It is an example for some Reform Jews who wish to close the apparent gap between

science and Judaism. One could say that I present my thesis as an unfinished agenda for today's *Perplexed*.

*Cause me to know the way wherein I should walk,  
For unto Thee have I lifted my soul (Psalms 143:8).  
Unto you, O men, I call,  
And my advice is to the sons of men (Proverbs 8:4).  
Incline thine ear, and hear the words of the wise,  
And apply thy heart unto my knowledge (Proverbs 22:17).<sup>186</sup>*

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<sup>186</sup>*Guide*, Introduction to Part I, p. 5.



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