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THE THEOLOGY OF MALBIM  
AS IT APPEARS IN HIS COMMENTARIES

by

M. Arthur Oles

Submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the  
Master of Hebrew Letters Degree  
and Ordination.

Hebrew Union College  
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Referee:  
Professor Samuel S. Cohon

To my wife Eva, and to my daughters Miriam and Deborah, who so graciously relinquished their claims on my time in order to speed the completion of this paper.

## Thesis Digest

THE THEOLOGY OF MALBIM AS IT APPEARS IN HIS COMMENTARIES  
by M. Arthur Oles

### Chapter I:

The first part of this chapter is a biographical sketch of Malbim.

His purpose in writing the Bible commentaries, according to his own statement, was to answer the attacks of Reform Judaism on the truth and authenticity of the Bible. His method consists mainly in attempting to demonstrate that the Bible presents a unified system of thought and that Rabbinic interpretations are firmly rooted in the text. Textual differences are explained away.

The sources of Malbim's theology are mainly Maimonides and Cabbalah, and he often uses science in his exegesis.

The Torah is not only the true word of God, but it is binding for all times. Only God Himself has the power to change it. The Prophets, however, could temporarily suspend laws of the Torah according to the needs of the occasion.

There are a few direct attacks on Reform, but Malbim's method, for the most part, is to assert his own point of view.

Chapter II:

This chapter discusses Malbim's views of God's essence and attributes.

God is perfect and unchangeable. He is the creator of everything, even evil, though the latter only in a negative way. His essence is unknowable, but attributes can be perceived as His manifestations, and thus may change. There is an ultimate essence of God, En Sof, that is never mentioned in the Bible.

Chapter III:

This chapter discusses God's relationship with the world and man.

The world was created for the sake of man, who is in God's image. This image consists of man's dual nature of body and soul, and of his freedom to give dominance to the soul over the body. Immortality lies in the divine soul and in the spiritualization of the hylonic soul.

Evil does not exist in an absolute sense. What seems evil, or destructive, serves an ultimate good purpose, and man's suffering in this world is only illusory.

Chapter IV:

This chapter deals with God and Israel.

God has set Israel apart from the nations by His choice of them. This choice includes special providence and the possession of Palestine. Both depend on Israel's

obedience to God's commandments.

Prophecy occurs when a man can spiritualize himself and negate his body, but requires innate faculties.

Public, liturgical prayer is mainly a reminder to God of His obligation to provide for His creatures. Personal needs are expressed in the "Supplications."

Israel will return to Palestine, either when it repents, or when the appointed time comes. The Messiah who will arise will be of the Davidic line, but a purely spiritualized person.

## PREFACE

The study of Malbim's theology presented in the following pages represents more a survey than an exhaustive treatment of the subject. It is based primarily on his commentary on the Pentateuch, with supplementary material from his other commentaries. It is, to the best of my knowledge, the first systematic study of Malbim's work that has been undertaken. In fact, even biographical data are extremely scarce and often contradictory in the few sources where they appear.

I am deeply grateful to Professor Samuel S. Cohon, who so patiently guided me in the gathering of material and the preparation of the finished product. I am grateful also to other members of the faculty of the Hebrew Union College - Jewish Institute of Religion for their valuable suggestions and friendly interest.

M.A.O.



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I.

## MALBIM, HIS LIFE AND HIS WORK

Meir Leibush ben Jehiel Michael was born in Volochisk, Poland, in the summer of 1809. When he was only six years old his father died. Nothing else is known about his early youth, except that his mother, Simtzia, married again, her second husband being the rabbi of Volochisk, Rabbi Jehuda Leib.

Malbim received his early education from his stepfather as well as at the local Heder. At the age of twelve he became the pupil of Rabbi Moses Horwitz, famed as one of the outstanding scholars of the region. When Malbim was fourteen years old his stepfather arranged for him to marry the daughter of one of the rich men in town, but she seems to have been quarrelsome and not in favor of his scholarly pursuits, and he divorced her almost immediately.

Apparently under the influence of this sad experience he left his home and made his way to Warsaw, where he quickly became known as the "Volhyner Illui" (the Prodigy from Volhynia). From there he went to Lencziza where he so impressed the rabbi, Haim Auerbach, that the latter gave him his daughter for a wife and undertook to support him in his home. Unencumbered by economic worries Malbim wrote there, among others, the first work he was to publish, Artzoth Hahayim, a commentary on the first part of the Shulchan Aruch.

However, Malbim seems to have had some family difficulties in Lencziza, too. In addition, he was anxious to have his work approved by the Rabbinic authorities of his day and, perhaps, to gather funds for its publication. Whatever his reasons, he left Lencziza in 1834 and traveled to Pressburg, Amsterdam, Breslau, Berlin, Frankfurt, and other places. During his travels he acquired a considerable amount of secular knowledge. In the year 1837 his first work was finally published in Breslau, including letters of approval of such men as Moses Sofer, Salomon Tiktin, and others.

It was on the recommendation of Tiktin that Malbim was offered and accepted the rabbinic post in Wreschen. Immediately thereafter he refused an offer to fill the vacancy created by the death of Rabbi Akiba Eger in Posen. After three years there he was called to Kempen, where he remained<sup>1</sup> for seventeen years. It was during his stay in Kempen that he began to publish his major work, the Bible commentary. The first part to appear was the commentary on Canticles (1847), followed a year later by Isaiah.

In 1859 Malbim became rabbi of Bukarest, thus beginning the stormiest part of his life. Almost immediately after his arrival there he became embroiled in a running feud with the non-orthodox element, some of whom seem to have been<sup>2</sup> rather unsavory characters. Malbim writes that during his first year there, as he was sitting at the Purim meal, an anonymous group of "progressives" sent him as a gift a basket containing pork and crab meat. The feud came to a head in

the spring of 1864 when Malbim was denounced to the Rumanian government as subversive and anti-Christian, the first charge being based on his sermons and the second on his Isaiah commentary. Early on a Friday morning the police surrounded his house and arrested him.

It was only through the personal intervention of Moses Montefiore that Malbim was released from prison on condition that he leave the country immediately. He went to Turkey to seek the help of the Sublime Porte, then to Paris to appeal to the Alliance Israelite Universelle. Both attempts being unsuccessful, he returned to the house of his father-in-law in Lencziza. The latter died shortly afterwards, and Malbim succeeded him as rabbi. Because of internal discord in the community he left soon to go to Kherson, and later to Moghilef. There again he had difficulties and was ordered to leave town. He then settled with his son-in-law in Smolensk.

At the instigation of Dr. Lehman in Mainz a fund was established in that city to permit Malbim so settle there without communal obligations. As he traveled through Koenigsberg on the way to Mainz, he was offered a rabbinic post and remained for three years. In 1879 he was called to Krementchug as rabbi; at the same time he received an invitation to come to New York as chief rabbi. This latter invitation he declined, and while he was in Kiev, on the way to Krementchug, he died on the first day of Rosh Hashanah, 1879.

From the limited data available there appears the

picture of a man of tremendous mind and uncompromising character who was not, however, able to assume the role of mediator that is so often required of a rabbi. It is interesting to note that of the more than 40 years he spent in rabbinic posts he remained in only one place for more than five years, namely Kempen, where he spent 17 years.

Besides his Bible commentaries, which were completed in Koenigsberg toward the end of his life, there are the following published works of Malbim: Artzoth HaHayim, a commentary on the first part of the Shulhan Aruch; Artzoth HaShalom, a volume of homiletics; Mashal Umelitzah, religious poetry; Eretz Hemdah, a posthumous volume of sermons.

#### Purpose and Method

As Malbim tells in his introduction to Leviticus, he wrote his Bible commentary as an answer to the claims of the reformers. He was particularly incensed at the conference of Braunschweig in 1844. His general purpose was to demonstrate that the Rabbinic tradition and the Oral Law have their firm basis in the Bible. To this end he had to show that the Bible was not a mere pretext, but that its proper reading justified the Rabbinic conclusions.

Malbim's method of interpretation is based on three premises, which he discusses in his introduction to Isaiah:

1) There is never a duplication of expression or thoughts.

2) The vocabulary is not used haphazardly but is

carefully chosen.

3) Nothing is written unless it has a fundamental and important meaning.

His method, then, is clear from these premises. On the basis of them he makes use of the fine points of grammatical forms, syntax, and synonyms to show how each word adds to the total meaning, and how parallel or repeated expressions differ from each other. This use is explained in a little work called Ayeleth Hashahar, which is part of the preface to Leviticus, and which contains 613 grammatical and exegetical rules.

The total and desired effect of Malbim's commentary is to prove the theological and linguistic unity of the Bible. The linguistic aspect of his work is beyond the scope of this study. As to the theological aspect, it will be seen that he succeeds rather well, although certain contradictions remain and much of what he reads into the text requires great mental agility to read even between the lines.

### Sources

Aside from his own ingenuity, Malbim draws in his commentaries on different sources, some of which may be called major sources in that they are basic to his approach. Thus it is evident that for his theological and philosophical material he follows Maimonides very closely. To name just a few outstanding instances: Malbim's proof for the existence of God is the third proof of Maimonides. A similar dependence is shown in his view on the divine attributes, on man's

freedom and divine omniscience, on prophecy, and the treatment of the problem of evil. More basically, Malbim carefully explains, in his commentary on Isaiah 45:5, the theory of substances and accidents which is basic to the Aristotelian-Maimonidean system. Further details of the Maimonidean influence in Malbim will appear in the following chapters.

Combined with the philosophy of Maimonides are a number of Cabbalistic views. They appear in Malbim's discussion of the divine essence, the human soul, the primordial light, and other subjects. His full acceptance of them is typified by the fact that he explains the very motto of Judaism, *אֱלֹהֵינוּ יְחִיד*, as the anticipation of the eventual reunification of God's essence with His names or manifestations.<sup>3</sup> This partial listing will indicate the trend, to be supplemented by a fuller discussion in later chapters.

Except for instances where Malbim names the source of an interpretation or a statement, as he does often but not predominantly, it is not always possible to point with assurance to the provenance of his views. His knowledge of Jewish sources outside Rabbinic literature is attested by the number of writers he quotes at one time or another, ranging from Albo and Isaac Arama to Hayyim Vital and the Zohar. He was, of course, thoroughly familiar with Rabbinic sources and often uses them as starting points for lengthy discussions. At other times he cites them in support of his thesis, or merely brings them in because they may be clarified by a statement

he has just made.

In this connection it is interesting to note that there is one statement that obviously did not come from a Jewish source. In commenting on Genesis 2:19-20, Malbim states that there is in man a reflective and a practical mind (שכל המעשי and שכל העיוני), the first concerning itself with the knowledge of truth and distinguishing it from untruth, and the second being concerned with what is good and bad, proper and improper. The parallel to Kant's pure reason and practical reason is obvious and perhaps not too surprising, coming from the rabbi of Koenigsberg.

An important element in Malbim's commentary is the harmonization of the Bible with science. It both poses problems and solves them. Among the scientific problems with which Malbim has to cope is the central place given to the earth in the story of creation, which is contradicted by astronomical facts. Malbim answers that, though there are many suns in the universe, the Bible is concerned only with our solar system.<sup>4</sup> He also tells us that the heavenly bodies were in existence in their orbits from the beginning of creation<sup>5</sup> and only received their light on the fourth day.

Similarly he asserts that creation followed a strict evolutionary sequence, each succeeding thing being somewhat farther advanced than its predecessor. However, the Biblical account gives only the highlights.<sup>6</sup> Again, he tells us that although the rainbow is a natural phenomenon, it was



not until after the Flood that atmospheric conditions existed of such a nature as to produce a rainbow.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, the Flood created such upheavals in the earth's crust as to produce the geological formations that now seem to indicate the great age of the earth.<sup>8</sup> Examples of this sort could be multiplied.

To illustrate how Malbim attempts to use science to solve textual difficulties we may cite his comment on Exodus 31:18. There he explains the verse "And all the people SAW the voices" by stating that the air containing the vibrations of God's voice condensed into stone tablets, the vibrations being visible as engraved letters. This process, he says, also takes place in nature where gases in the course of many centuries may condense and change into solids, but was speeded up at Sinai

#### Truth and Eternity of Torah

One of the major problems that Malbim was faced with was Reform Judaism and its attack on both the historical authenticity and the eternal validity of the totality of Jewish tradition. It has already been stated that the major purpose of the creation of his commentary was to prove the textual unity and authenticity of the Pentateuch and the religious unity of the Bible as a whole. Such proof would not only furnish an answer to Reformers, but would also give the proper understanding to those who are puzzled by the apparent gap between the simple text and the traditions that are read into it.

Before going into his answer to Reform and the rest of his theological views, it may be well to remember that Malbim was above all, not the theologian but the commentator. It was thus his task to explain the Bible on the basis of his religious views, and not to prove his theology by means of Biblical quotations. With this distinction in mind we may be more readily inclined to forgive him his occasional inconsistencies and his refusal to walk the straight path of systematic theology, as well as his *petitio principii* in attempting to prove the truth of Scripture from its own claims. It is with this in mind also that it becomes important to discover his attitude toward the Bible before examining what he reads into it. While the Torah is part of God's covenant with Israel, which is discussed in chapter IV, that covenant itself becomes a historical reality only if one accepts the historical truth of the Torah.

On the question of textual unity we may mention how Malbim deals with stylistic differences between Deuteronomy<sup>9</sup> and the other four books of the Pentateuch. He tells us that Moses gave to Israel many commands and exhortations that were his own and had not come from God. As Moses was inspired by the Holy Spirit, however, such exhortations coincided with what God was to command through him before his death, and although he wrote them in Deuteronomy at the behest of God he was permitted to retain his own original style in the official text.

In the same context Malbim states that had Moses

written anything on his own, it would not have had the force of Torah and would have been no more authoritative than the writings of any man of inspiration. This is obviously in answer to those who saw in the Pentateuch a mere human creation.

10

Once he established the authenticity of the Torah he still had to show that its validity was not limited to its time. To this effect he states that any change of the Torah is impossible since it is the word of the perfect God: <sup>11</sup> אחר . שהם מצות ה' השלם בתכלית השלמות א"א להוסיף ולגרוע בהם Lest one think that the Torah was the perfect legislation in one period but allows for a change later, he tells us: שתחשוב שמה שצוה אותך במעמד הר סיני היה רק לזמן ושיצויר לשנות התורה : "If you think that what He commanded you on Mount Sinai was only temporary and that the Torah could conceivably be changed in the future...the commandments of the Torah will not be changed at any time."<sup>12</sup> The only exception would be if God Himself appeared once again to all Israel and informed them that He was repealing the Torah of Moses: רק כשיבא ה' שנית בעצמו ויגלה לפני כל הקהל ויאמר להם כי הוא ממנה שלית אחר <sup>13</sup> לבטל תורת משה.

The fact that we find prophets in later times acting contrary to the Torah as, for example, Elijah when he built an altar on Mount Carmel despite the prohibition of "high places," is justified with the statement that prophets had the right to suspend temporarily any laws of the Torah,

with the exception of idolatry. Such suspension on the part of a prophet was legitimate only as an expedient, but never<sup>14</sup> as repeal or replacement of Mosaic law, because only Moses was a "prophet of Torah", and no other prophet could tamper<sup>15</sup> with it.

Any idea that the Torah is a human creation is not Jewish: שבְּעֵינֵיהֶם יִדְמָה לָהֶם שֶׁהִיא חֲכָמָה וּבִינָה שְׁלָכֶם שְׁמָשָׁה וְחֲכָמִי Jewish: "For in their eyes (i.e. the Gentiles) it seems to them that it is your wisdom and understanding, that Moses and the sages of Israel produced these laws and statutes out of their own minds..."<sup>16</sup>

In addition to his various assertions about the truth of the Torah, Malbim also cites Jehuda Halevi's proof for its historicity: Israel would have contradicted Moses if the Torah had not agreed with the eye-witness accounts of the lives of the Patriarchs handed down to them in a straight line<sup>17</sup> of tradition. Nevertheless, certain things have to be taken on faith, such as the fact that the men appearing to<sup>18</sup> Abraham were angels.

#### Reform Judaism

All this is general. As regards particulars Malbim attacks the abandonment of the dietary laws. Commenting on the story of Eve and the serpent (Genesis 3:3-4) he claims that it was Eve's attempt to explain the divine prohibition that was responsible for her transgression. He goes on to state that the dissolute among the people (הַחֲפָרִיצִים בָּעַם) explain the dietary restrictions as hygienic measures.

Thereupon they discover that the forbidden foods are harmless to the body and forthwith discard the dietary laws.

A more pointed attack against reform is found in Malbim's introduction to Leviticus. Referring to the Braunschweig Conference of 1844, he speaks of those who "call themselves rabbis and preachers, and also cantors" and who make light of Jewish tradition. This "evil crowd likens the Torah to ancient folklore and its poetry to that of Homer and the Greeks," and as for the Oral Law, they claim that the Rabbis "did not know the simple meaning of the text and were ignorant of Hebrew grammar."

In a similar vein he speaks, in a commentary on the Passover Haggadah, of the Reformers who have united to "fix the Sabbath on Sunday, and have placed themselves outside of the community of Israel in every respect." He goes on to say: "The rabbis of the Reform group who answer and ask questions of nonsense in a spirit of denial and repudiation, they are meant by the 'Evil Son.'"

However, this type of attack is the exception. Malbim's normal reaction is positive in approach in that he affirms, and endeavors to prove, the historical truth and the eternal validity of the Torah.

## II.

## GOD, ESSENCE AND ATTRIBUTES

Religious thought begins with God, and the religious thinker seeks proof that his faith is justified. Although it is not Malbim's purpose to outline a systematic philosophy or theology, there is underlying his commentaries a fairly consistent system, and it is, thus, not surprising to find him quoting a proof for the existence of God:

אחר שאנו דנים במופת כשיש דבר אחר אפשרי המציאות בהכרח שנמצא  
 "As we : מחויב המציאות שאל"כ מי הוציא את האפשריות אל הפועל  
 can demonstrate, if there is one thing that is possible of  
 existence, there needs to exist a being of necessary exist-  
 ence, for if not, who made the possible actual?"<sup>1</sup> This is a  
 condensed version of Maimonides' third proof.

Malbim refers to it again in commenting on the use of the Tetragrammaton in the first commandment of the Decalogue: הודיע להם שהוא הנמצא מחויב המציאות שע"ז מורה שם הויה  
 "He made known to them : שבא בעתיד, ר"ל שאני מחויב להיות  
 that He exists as a necessary existence, for this is indicated by the Tetragrammaton which is in the imperfect tense,  
 that is to say: I am a necessary existence."<sup>2</sup> The proof  
 quoted above is given in connection with a comment on the  
 word אהיה<sup>3</sup> which, like the Tetragrammaton, is derived from  
 the root היה<sup>3</sup> and has the same significance.

Quoting from Albo<sup>4</sup> that the term "existence" can be

applied to God alone, since only His existence is permanent, he concludes that God's existence derives from His essence:  
 הוּמָצָא אֲשֶׁר מִצִּיּוּנוֹ חָלוּי בְּעֵצְמוֹתוֹ.<sup>5</sup>

The interpretation of the various divine names as references to different attributes is not original with Malbim. He himself quotes a number of Talmudic sources for such interpretations.<sup>6</sup> In fact, the method is suggested already in Exodus 6:3. It is hardly surprising, then, that Malbim should resort extensively to such interpretation, since a major part of his exegesis is based on a minute linguistic study of the text as to grammatical forms, syntax, and vocabulary.

The Tetragrammaton, יהוה, then, expresses the essence and the existence of God. Other divine names such as אלהים, שׁוֹפָר, etc., are designations of the various divine attributes. The variant of the Tetragrammaton, יהוה, connotes the necessary existence of God, as well as His perfection,<sup>7</sup> which is a corollary of the former. God is perfect unity, and attributes are only manifestations of God in the universe.<sup>8</sup> They denote relationships and exist only in the lower world.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, Malbim seems to admit some attributes that form<sup>9</sup> part of the divine essence, such as wisdom,<sup>10</sup> omniscience,<sup>11</sup> and perfection and unity mentioned above.

Implied in God's existence and perfection is the fact that God's essence is unchangeable. For existence in its ultimate meaning, such as it applies to God, is so com-

plete that any change would be alien to it: שמצד השם  
 12 המורה על אמת מצ'אוחו א"י הוה הכל' משחנה. Whatever  
 changed perception or experience of God might be found among  
 the Patriarchs and Prophets stems from the fact that God man-  
 ifests Himself in different ways to different generations:  
 12a שבכל דור ודור יש הנהגה חדשה ונוכרים את מעשיו באופן אחר.  
 In a word, there is an ever-changing revelation of the un-  
 changeable God.

The ideas described so far represent Malbim's ra-  
 tional views of God. They do not exhaust these views, and  
 more will be said about them in this and following chapters.  
 Though not original contributions to Jewish thought, they are  
 the products of clear thinking, based largely if not complete-  
 ly on Maimonides. There is, however, another side of Malbim's  
 theology that relies on Cabbalistic speculations. It is not  
 extensive, to be sure, but by no means a minor element when  
 it concerns itself with the nature of God. Thus Malbim  
 speaks of the א"י ד', the ultimate divine reality, that is  
 so far removed from the material world that it is not even  
 mentioned in the Bible.

The א"י ד', the limitless aspect of the divine es-  
 13 sence, existed before Creation. Omniscience is contained  
 14 within it. Since God's omnipotence also includes the pow-  
 er to create a limited world, it was possible for Him to  
 15 create space for the material world by limiting the א"י ד'.  
 It is clear that Malbim faced here the dilemma of God's omni-



potence as opposed to His (spatial) limitlessness which precluded the creation of space. His answer involves him in a contradiction with his statement, discussed in a previous paragraph, that the essence of God is unchangeable. It is quite apparent that he was aware of this contradiction, when we read the following: וְלִהְיוֹת מְצִיאוֹת זֶה עֵינֵי דְרָכֵי הַבְּלִיָּה בְּעָמָה  
שׁוֹה יִמְלִיץ שְׂמִינִים אֵת עֲצֻמֹּת : "In order to bring forth this reality He abandoned His way of being unlimited, for that is implied in His 'limiting Himself'..."<sup>15a</sup> The careful wording of this statement cannot hide the difficulty it creates.<sup>16</sup>

Attributes, as was mentioned earlier in this chapter, are only the ways in which God manifests Himself in the world. Some of these attributes are designated by various divine names. It is already the Talmudic view that אֱלֹהִים denotes the מִדַּת הַדִּין, the principle of justice in God, whereas the Tetragrammaton stands for the מִדַּת הַרַחֲמִים, the principle of kindness. Malbim adds to these interpretations the statement that יְהוָה, being expressive of God's existence, also contains the creative principle. In his own words: וּבְשִׁיקְרָא  
בֹּו מִצֵּד הַבְּרִיאָה יִצִּיָּן מִה שִׁמְחוֹה כֹּל הַהוּיּוֹת ; "And when He is called by it in relation to creation, it denotes that He imparts existence to all that exists."<sup>17</sup> אֱלֹהִים, on the other hand, designates the limiting force in God, which was necessary to give form to the world as we know it.<sup>18</sup> This point is basic to Malbim's treatment of the problem of Evil. God's essence is good, and He cannot produce, nor be associated with, evil, just as He, being a perfect existence, can never

be associated with non-existence. Goodness, then, becomes one of the divine attributes insofar as it was instrumental in creation. But creation arising out of God's essence could not produce a material world, nor a living one (in the biological sense), since, flowing out of an unlimited God, it could produce nothing limited. That would mean that no one form could be imparted to matter, since that would be a restriction or limitation of the extent of other forms; no growth or decay would be possible, because both of them imply, or rather presuppose, a lack of perfection, hence a limitation. The order of spheres and the various characteristics of beings in them would be unthinkable unless a differentiation, i.e. limitation, of their attributes were possible. Therefore, God applied a limiting principle to creation which enabled Him to limit the extent of forms, attributes, accidents etc., and it is this principle that is implied in the name אלהים.<sup>19</sup>

Out of this comes his answer to the problem of evil. Evil is not an entity, not a positive force, but rather the absence of good. Darkness is merely the absence of light, death (מֵת הַחַיּוֹת, as Malbim calls it in this connection in order to avoid any positive implication) is the absence of life. Thus God, in the words of Isaiah, can be the creator of darkness and of evil in that He set the limits beyond which light, or good, or life, cannot reach.<sup>20</sup> This answer is identical with that of Maimonides.<sup>21</sup>

Malbim finds no difficulty in harmonizing his in-

terpretation of the two divine names with that of the Rabbis. He points out that it is the  $\text{הוה}$  that gives of itself, so to speak, and that thus is the creative principle in God, whereas  $\text{יהוה}$  has the characteristic of categorizing and defining, hence is limiting in character.<sup>22</sup>

Evil, then, as stated above, is nothing but the non-application of Good, death the limitation of life, made possible by the limiting principle of  $\text{אלהים}$ . It is important to note the positive character of divinity, which Malbim stresses over and over. Although God can be said to cause evil by withholding the good, this is a purely negative process. It occurs because God has seen fit to allow or create the boundaries of His influence, but God Himself can never be associated with evil, or non-existence. Malbim develops this from the verse  $\text{וַיִּקְרָא אֱלֹהִים לְאוֹר יוֹם וּלְחֹשֶׁךְ קִרְא לַיְלָה}$ , "And God called the light day, and the darkness He called night."<sup>22a</sup> The name of God is here mentioned only with light, but not with darkness, the latter being merely a non-existence of the former.<sup>23</sup> Similarly, in Gen. 1:10 God's name is mentioned with the positive, but omitted with the negative.<sup>24</sup>

To restate briefly, then, God is the perfect being,<sup>25</sup> perfect in unity, perfect in existence, perfect in knowledge, and, because He is perfect, unchangeable. He is the creator of all that exists, even of evil, though the latter in an indirect way. His essence is unknowable, but attributes can be perceived as relationships with the created world. Though He

does not change, His manifestations, hence His attributes, may change in accordance with conditions and perceptive minds in different generations.

## III.

## THE WORLD, MAN, AND GOD

Any discussion of God must lead to the question of His relation to the world and man. Whether such a relation is denied or affirmed, it must be considered; if affirmed, it poses problems much more difficult and much more serious than an abstract study of the divine essence, because they are problems of man's social, ethical, and moral conduct. Since Judaism has always been a religion that stressed practice more than abstract doctrine, it is not surprising that Malbim has more to say about God in relation to His world, than about God in Himself. As a Jew who works entirely within the traditions of his faith, Malbim is faced with the additional problem of harmonizing them with the knowledge and thought of his time. It will be seen that, considering the context within which he worked, he succeeded rather well and can be said to have foreshadowed the modern Orthodox position.

This chapter will concern itself mainly with Malbim's position on the relationship between God and man, and between God and the world as a whole. It will, of course, touch on his reaction to the scientific and philosophical currents of his day, but a fuller discussion of this latter topic is found elsewhere in this study.

Creation

God's relation to the world begins with creation.

That creation was ex nihilo is axiomatic and requires for Malbim neither formal statement nor proof. He quotes <sup>1</sup> Maimonides that time also was created, so that the word מִשְׁכָּלֵי denotes no temporal sequence, but rather emphasizes the fundamental aspect of God's creative act. The significance of the names of God used in the Biblical account has been discussed in the previous chapter.

Creatio ex nihilo occurred only on the first day. On it God created the Heavens, i.e. all the heavenly bodies including the sun and the moon, and the worlds of the heavenly beings, i.e. the various types of angels etc., and the Earth, which contained within it the potential seeds of all plants and the material from which animals and man were formed. There were only two additional creations ex nihilo, and both of these are of a non-material nature. The one was <sup>2</sup> life, and the other the human soul.

In the above formulation we see Malbim reacting to scientific views. He is, of course, not a scientist, but an orthodox Jew whose purpose is to explain Scripture. We may, therefore, be indulgent if we find him blending together quasi-scientific exegesis and Cabbalistic speculation. Thus he states in a lengthy footnote to his commentary on Genesis 1:1 that the creation account speaks only of the world as it is known to us. Whatever gaps there seem to be in the story can be explained on the ground that the Torah is not a textbook of science and thus does not have to account for every <sup>3</sup> detail. Similarly, the Torah does not teach anything about

the upper worlds, for such things are a secret tradition of the initiates. Thereupon he proceeds to extract from the text a hidden meaning that describes in detail the heavenly setup, the respective equivalents on various angelic levels of heaven and earth, and the manner of heavenly creation beginning with the divine self-limitation.<sup>4</sup> Again, in discussing different layers of the atmosphere in a very sober manner he makes the statement that the Rabbis, through the Holy Spirit (רוח הקודש), had knowledge about the composition of the upper atmosphere that is unattainable by means of experience<sup>5</sup> or research.

In spite of this it must be acknowledged that Malbim, from his own point of view, succeeds remarkably well in reading scientific facts into a narrative that would seem so far removed from them. Thus he states that the light created on the first day may have represented the potentiality of the phenomenon of which the sun became the actual source on the fourth day. In keeping with his previous assertion, however, that there was no ex nihilo after the original act of creation he is forced to say finally that it was the ultimate filtrate of the purely spiritual divine light and as such was<sup>6</sup> of a perceptible quality. Although this transformation of light represented a lowering of its level to the physical realm, it could be called good because this lower form<sup>7</sup> is necessary for the existence of the material world. Since the light of the first day was not localized in the sun it could encompass the whole terrestrial globe at once and

disappear all over the earth at once, thus making a universal Day and Night possible.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, God saw fit to impart to this non-solar light the characteristics of the subsequent solar radiation in that he let dusk and dawn (evening and morning) intervene between light and darkness, though<sup>9</sup> there was no necessity for that in the physical setup.

Light is thus established as something already existing before it was brought into the physical world. However, Malbim is faced with an additional problem. It is his contention that the sequence of creation was not arbitrary but necessary, i.e. that every step was the necessary basis of the next one; הנריאה הלכה ממדרגה למדרגה... וכל הקדם הי' ;"Creation was step by step,... and each previous thing was a preparation for what followed it."<sup>10</sup>

On this basis, he must show why it was necessary to bring light into the world at this point rather than with the creation (or activation) of the sun. In order to do this he carefully lays the groundwork by defining ובהו as a formless mixture of air and water in a thick mist (תהו) and of water and earth in an opaque mud (בהו). This state represented only three of the four elements assumed by the ancients, namely earth, water, and air. Fire, which is a composite of light and heat, could not exist before there was light, hence light was necessary for the full material substance of the world.<sup>11</sup>

The next step was to create the firmament, רקיע,



which served to separate the elements of air and water, and then to separate the dry land (earth) from the water, thus completing the preparations for the creation of plant life on earth.<sup>12</sup>

It would be outside the province of this chapter to discuss fully the sequence of creation as interpreted by Malbim. Some of that appears elsewhere in this paper, insofar as it throws light on his attempt to "modernize" the Biblical account. Suffice it to say here that he works out a complete system to satisfy his requirement of a strict sequence. This sequence culminates in the Sabbath, without which even the creation of man would have been in vain.

#### Man in the Image of God

The goal of all creation is man. It is for his sake that plants and animals show imperfections, such as the lack of movement in plants and lack of intelligence in animals. If they were not deficient in these things they would not be available to man as sources of food and labor.<sup>13</sup> This latter point is in answer to those philosophers who claim that this is not the best possible world, and is based on Maimonides' statement that isolated instances of evil and imperfection actually serve the common good. As for man's own imperfections and the evils attending his life, such as sickness, death, and the Yezer Hara, they are necessary to make man human, for without them he would be an angel and would thus miss the purpose for which he was created.<sup>14</sup>

Man, being the goal of all creation, is here in

order to be the *צלם אלהים*, the divine image on earth. This fact implies three things: First, man's soul within his body is the equivalent of God within the physical universe; second, man's relationship to his physical side determines God's relationship to the material world; third, man has freedom, just as God is free. In these three aspects of man, Malbim sees the epitome of creation and the key to the understanding of God's working in the world.

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In commenting on the creation of man Malbim makes the following statement: *עשה אדם קטן שומצא בו כל מה שהמצא באדם הגדול ככל פרטיו עד שיהיה בצלמנו, שר"ל צלם של העולם הגדול*, ; "Let us make a small man in whom may be found all that is found in the large man<sup>16</sup> in every detail, so that he will be in Our image, i.e. the image of the large world, including the Godhead who brings to life this large world and is active within it."

This is not an original contribution of Malbim, but it seems to have much greater significance for him than it had in various rabbinic and apocryphal statements. The idea of man as a microcosm is, of course, an old and not exclusively Jewish one, but it attains prominence in Cabbalistic writings and thus in Malbim who, as has been seen already, is greatly influenced by them.

### The Soul

A particularly significant phrase in the statement just quoted is "including the Godhead." It is this phrase that justifies the contention that man's microcosmic nature

renders him the image of God. Without it there might be a mere superficial similarity of structure. But the soul really represents the divine in man, though the exact manner in which it does so is not entirely clear.

Here are several statements made by Malbim regarding the divine aspect of the human soul. In the commentary on Genesis 2:7 he tells us that the philosophers' questions about the pre-existence of the soul are answered simply by the fact that God breathed into man the breath of life and that the soul is a part of God Himself: וכשאומר פה ויפה ; "And when it says here 'and He breathed into his nostrils a soul' it is the very breath that issued from the spirit of the Lord, which is part of God on high." He is even more explicit on Psalm 90:1. שהרוחות והנשמות העתידים להבראות כבר היה להם ; "For the spirits and souls that are to be created have already had existence from eternity in their exalted source, the Lord God of the spirits." On this latter verse he goes on to say that the soul suffers no change whatsoever from its accidental stay within man's mortal body and returns to its source in its original state. We shall return to this latter statement later. In an exceptional outburst of verbosity Malbim characterizes the soul as man's true self with the following words, in the same passage: עצמות האדם כפי שהוא בעצמותו ; "The essence of man within himself, according to what he is in his essence, which

is his spiritual <sup>17</sup> soul that is the essence of man."

It appears, then, that the soul is neither a particular creation nor even a truly distinct entity, but rather a fragment of the divine Being himself. But this is modified by the statement that man is the image of God in the sense of a reflection of the divine light, just as the moon provides merely a reflection of the light of the sun: שמצד זה האדם הוא הצל שאור האלהי השופע בכל הבריאה יחזור כמנו באור חוזר מלמטה למעלה, כמו שיפלו אור השמש והוא צלם של השמש <sup>18</sup> Imme-  
diately preceding this he states that man's soul does not partake of God's essence, but only of that aspect of Him that is <sup>19</sup> manifest in the world. It is for this reason that he is a צלם ה' and not a צלם אלהים.

In another passage Malbim states that there are in man two souls, one a נפש הבהמית, an animal soul responsible for his biological existence as a living entity, which is the exact equivalent of the soul of all animals, and the other a <sup>20</sup> נשמה המשתכלת, a reasoning soul that is uniquely his. Man, then, deserves the designation as an עולם קטן, a microcosm, because his body derives from the material realm, and his soul from the world of the intelligences: שמצד נשמתו הוא מעולם <sup>21</sup> השכליים ומצד גופו הוא מעולם הגשמיים. The purpose of this arrangement is to offer testimony that both the upper world, שמים, and the lower, ארץ, are the work of one creator. Man is in the image of God only by reason of the fact that he has been granted freedom of choice, which derives from the

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Creator Himself.

It would seem from the last two passages quoted that the soul, while being definitely a non-earthly part of man, nevertheless is part of creation but not of the Divine Himself. It would also seem that Malbim endows man with two separate souls, one of which might be called the biological soul, and the other the rational one. On the other hand we find him telling us that the philosophers are wrong in thinking that there are three separate souls representing respectively the functions of growth, life, and reason, but that these are rather various functions of the one divine soul that operates through the organs of growth (liver), life (heart), and reason (brain). This soul physiology is cited <sup>23</sup> in the name of the Cabbalists.

An interesting sidelight to Malbim's treatment of the soul is the fact that he uses the Biblical terms indiscriminately. Although he takes cognizance of the three terms <sup>23a</sup> נפש, רוח, and שמה, he does not assign a specific connotation to each. On the contrary, he interchanges them as, for example, when he calls the spiritual soul <sup>23b</sup> ה'נשמה העליונה in one place <sup>24</sup> and <sup>24</sup> נשמת הרוחניות in another. While it is true that he uses the term נפש mostly for the manifestations of the soul, this usage is by no means consistent, and he does not state any distinction between the terms.

To complete the picture Malbim draws of the human soul, let us add here one more quotation: לכן אמר בו ויברא

אלהים שהוא הוצאת נפשו יש מאין שעדן לא היה כמוה בכל מ"ב ;

"Therefore it says 'God created,' for that is the bringing forth of his soul ex nihilo, for heretofore there had been nothing like it in all creation."<sup>24</sup> While this does not eliminate the possible pre-existence of the soul - at least since the sixth day of creation - it does clearly not accord with the statement on Psalm 90, quoted above, which ascribes to the soul eternal pre-existence within the divine essence.

It thus becomes very difficult to arrive at a clear understanding of what Malbim considers the soul to be. Whether it is a monadic soul, manifesting itself in various functions, or the composite of a spiritual and a biological part, whether it is under God or of God, whether it was created or had eternal pre-existence, cannot be ascertained from the conflicting statements. One thing, however, is clear: Man is a microcosm, a miniature replica of the world with a spiritual part and a material one. It is in this respect that he is in the image of God, for the soul, his essential self, is in the same relation to his body as God is to the world.

### Providence

This body-soul relationship brings us to the second aspect of man as a צלם אלהים. Since the world was created for the sake of man, it is not surprising that it is also managed in accordance with man's conduct. Malbim gives the example of the rich man who endows a school, and for the support of the students he builds a factory. As long as the

students are devoted to their work the factory functions at full speed. But when the students become lax in their studies the steam feeding the machines is reduced by means of valves, in order to keep the output of the machines in exact proportion to the students' merits.<sup>25</sup> In similar manner God transmits His blessings to the world in accordance with the merits of people, bringing providence into play in place of the normal workings of nature. The means whereby providence was introduced was the Sabbath, which Malbim likens to the steam valve just mentioned.<sup>26</sup> In another example Malbim speaks of a king who distributes to his officers every Saturday the wages to be paid out to his staff during the coming week.<sup>27</sup> The Sabbath, then, is the means whereby God adjusts the ways of the world to man's conduct.

Without entering deeply into the problem of reward and punishment, which will be discussed later, and without taking into account some apparent contradictions, we can state the way in which Malbim sees this adjustment as follows. Man's highest purpose is to give dominance to his spirit over his body, which represents nature. To the exact extent that man succeeds in overpowering his nature, God will overpower nature in the world and bring providence into play.<sup>27a</sup>

Reward, thus, is predictable, though not automatic in that it requires active intervention; punishment is both predictable and automatic growing out of God's non-intervention, for the world cannot exist on the processes of nature alone: ההנהגה<sup>28</sup>

הראשונה המבטית אלה מספרם וצריך אל ההנהגה השנייה.

The adjustment of man's fate to his manner of living is also made through another principle stated by Malbim. In discussing the sequence of creation he asserts that the higher species are increasingly weaker in physical endurance than the lower ones.<sup>29</sup> Man, being the most highly developed species, is lowest in physical vitality. He was given dominion over all creation by reason of his divine soul. In the measure that he diminishes his spiritual aspect and gives dominance to his body he becomes less of a ruler in the world and more subject to the physical laws of nature wherein his power is lowest. He thus affects the course of events in exact relationship to his conduct.<sup>30</sup>

### Freedom

The third aspect of man as a <sup>31</sup>צלם אלהים lies in his freedom. In a passage touched upon earlier Malbim states that man is made up of three things: the body, which derives from the physical world, the soul, which derives from the world of intelligences, and freedom, which issues from God Himself. וכאשר נבקש דבר שומצא באדם שלא נמצא דוונתו בכל העולמות. כולמו וזה הוא החלק שיתחת אל ה' לבדו ראינו שהוא כח הבחירה ; "And when we search for something in man the like of which is not found in all the worlds, i.e. that part that derives from God exclusively, we see that it is the power of choice that was given to man, the fact that he is free in his actions." He explains further that God has freedom of action in the world in that He can permit nature to run according to its laws, but can



intervene at will to make them inoperative. In a similar manner, man is given the freedom to overcome nature within himself, i.e. to negate his physical being and to spiritualize himself. The interaction between man's behavior and God's has been mentioned previously.

In this connection Malbim expresses the view, restated many times, that the body is the antithesis of godliness, that holiness is achieved through the negation of the body,<sup>32</sup> and that evil consists in giving in to the body. Man is in the image of God as long as he gives dominance to his spirituality and exercises his freedom to be good. Should he, however, do evil, he is no more in the Divine image, for God can do no evil, but has allied himself with physical nature.

The obvious implication of this would be that a purely spiritual state of man is most desirable. This, however, is true only conditionally. Malbim tells us in a passage already referred to that the lower world, ארץ,<sup>33</sup> was created in a manner to make change possible, whereas שמים, the upper world, was made fixed and unchangeable on the first day. Consequently, the spiritual beings of the upper world cannot sin, but the purpose of creation is achieved in the lower world where man can be given freedom: והטעם שנבראו התחתונים בעולם זה לפני שהם נבראו להיות בחי' רעים וחפשים וזה He states it even more clearly in this passage: ותכלית הבריאה שימצא אדם שהוא חפשי במעשיו לטוב ולרע "The pur-

pose of creation is the existence of man who is free in his actions, to do good or evil."<sup>34</sup> This latter passage appears in reference to the revelation on Mount Sinai, and Malbim states in connection with that event that the whole people of Israel were then miraculously lifted to the purely spiritual level of prophecy, a virtual disembodiment in that physical existence was practically suppressed.<sup>35</sup> But the qualification comes in this conclusion: ואם היו נשארים במעמד הזה להיות כמלאכי: השרה היו מוכרחים במעשיהם על הטוב ולא היה נשלם חפץ ה' שימצא "But if they had remained in this state of being like the angels their actions would have been good by necessity and the desire of God would have been unfulfilled that there be man who has a Yezer Hara and free choice."<sup>36</sup>

It appears, then, that no matter how desirable man's spirituality and how contemptible his physical aspect, his spirituality, to be of value, must be the result of his free choice, for in that freedom of choice lies the purpose of all creation.

Man is in the image of God by reason of his freedom. He is, however, subject to certain limitations due to his physical being: והראה ה' שנמצא כחות טבעיות באדם שאין לו מחשלה: "God showed that there exist in man physical forces over which he has no dominion to nullify them through his power of choice."<sup>37</sup> Malbim cites sleep as an example of such an insuperable bodily need. We conclude, thus, that man's freedom, while it is the equivalent

of God's, is not its equal but is limited to a certain extent.<sup>38</sup>

### Human Freedom and Divine Omniscience

Human freedom, even if it be somewhat limited, implies other things. If it is so basic to the world as Malbim makes it, a consequence equally basic is man's responsibility to make the right choice and the reward or punishment that follow his choice. This topic has already been touched upon and will be further discussed in the following chapter. Another problem created by the assumption of freedom is the conflict between God's omniscience and man's free choice. Malbim faces this conflict with the Maimonidean assertion that God's knowledge, being part of His essence, is incomprehensible to man but is presented in the Bible in terms applicable to human knowledge: ואין אנו יודעים ענין ידיעתו כמו שאין אנו יודעים את עצמותו, כי ידיעתו היא עצמותו, והכתובים ידברו לפי הנותנו שאנו משערים הידיעה כפי הידיעה שלנו<sup>39</sup>. He then proceeds to quote and approve the opinion of the Cabalists that God's omniscience resides in the אין סוף, that ultimate essence so far removed from human experience that nothing concerning it is ever mentioned in the Bible. His emanations, however, being His manifestations in our world, possess knowledge akin to ours. Since divine justice, including reward and punishment, operates in this world, it is not based on any prescience but must seek its evidence ex post facto. Human freedom is thus not involved in divine

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omniscience.

### Immortality

It has already been stated that the soul, according to Malbim's commentary on Psalm 90:1, suffers a mere change of environment when it is attached to the body. After death, it returns to its original habitat unchanged: כִּי נִפְשׁוֹ הָרוּחָנִית... עוֹדְנָה יִישָׁה וְנִמְצְאָה לֹא נִפְסְדָה וְלֹא קָבְלָה שְׁנוּי רַק שֶׁהִתְעַלְתָּה. It is, thus, immortal and completely unaffected by man's manner of living. On the other hand we find the statement that immortality of the soul is the result of serving God in this life: שְׂכָר עוֹה"ב שֶׁהוּא נִצְחִיית הַנֶּפֶשׁ וְהוֹדֵכָהּ: "The reward of the world-to-come, which is the eternity of the soul and its refinement and its return to the bond of life, results automatically from the service of God." 41 According to this latter quotation immortality of the soul is acquired and depends entirely on man's actions during his lifetime.

This apparent contradiction expresses Malbim's view of immortality and the world-to-come, which is as follows: The divine soul is immortal to begin with and remains so. The body is mortal and is destined without fail to perish. There is, however, a hylonic soul, נֶפֶשׁ הַהִיּוֹלָאֲנִית, which Malbim equates with "what the philosophers call acquired reason", also called רִוּחַ, and possibly identical with the animal soul mentioned earlier. This hylonic soul is purely physical in that it is the adjunct of the body and perishes with it. The right kind of living, however, i.e. a

life according to the will of God, brings about a chemical (sic) change in the hylonic soul so that it becomes immortal and remains forever in the Garden of Eden.<sup>42</sup> This view is credited to the Cabbalists.<sup>43</sup>

### The Problem of Evil

Since death enables the spiritual soul to return to its preferred place<sup>44</sup> it is not evil. In fact, when God says: "Lest he put forth his hand and take also from the tree of life and eat and live forever," (Gen.3:22), He is not trying to keep a good from Adam, but an evil. For, as Malbim tells us, eternal life on this earth benefits neither the soul nor the body in that the soul could not return to its proper station and the body would be forever subject to frustration and disease: <sup>45</sup> וזה רעה גדולה להנפש וגם להגוף... כי הנפש לא תוכל לשוב אל מדרגתה, והגוף יהיה חסיד שבע כעס ומכאובות.

The above statement may well serve as an introduction to Malbim's treatment of the problem of evil. In a nutshell, it is his contention that there is no evil at all, except insofar as man creates it. The problem is treated in his commentary on two levels: the subjective and the objective. His statement on death as a subjective evil has been quoted above, and it is clear from it that its evil nature is completely denied. As to the suffering man undergoes during his lifetime, Malbim ascribes to it no reality: והצלחה או היסורים שידמה לאדם שהוא מצליח או מתסור בימי חייו הבלו אינם דברים נמצאים בפעל כי הם נשואים על דברים בלתי נמצאים בעצמם רק

במקרה : "Success or suffering, man's impression that he is succeeding or suffering in his life of vanity, are things that do not actually exist, for they are predicated on things that in themselves have only accidental existence."<sup>46</sup> In another passage that has already been referred to Malbim quotes Maimonides to the effect that what an individual experiences as evil may well be for the good of the world as a whole.<sup>47</sup> The conclusion is, then, that what seems evil to man, on the subjective level, is no evil at all when viewed objectively because it is either for his individual good or for the good of the world. And insofar as he suffers he may be consoled by the fact that his suffering has only the reality of a dream.

On the objective level evil is defined as any im-<sup>48</sup>perfection or destruction (i.e. the removal of form from matter).<sup>49</sup> Since evil is incompatible with the Divine nature<sup>50</sup> it can be demonstrated that imperfection and destruction are found only where they serve an ultimate constructive purpose: ואין דרך ה' לעשות רע רק כשהוא לתכלית טוב, שאז לא נקרא שמשהית "It is not : ומותר רק שמטיב כי מותר כדי לבנות ומחוק ע"מ לתקן the way of God to do evil unless it is for a good end for then it cannot be said that He destroys and tears down but rather that He does good, for He tears down in order to build<sup>51</sup> and eliminates in order to improve." To give only a few instances: The benefit of death to the soul has already been mentioned above.

The curse of the earth (Gen. 3:17) was also for an

ultimate good, because the hard work necessary as a consequence of that curse gives man less time for sinful thought. 52  
 Similarly, the confusion of languages was actually a blessing in that it prevented the rapid spread of evil ideas and permitted Abraham to work in Palestine where the denial of God 53  
 had not yet become popular.

An interesting corollary appears in Malbim's commentary on the Flood. Since God destroys only for a constructive purpose, he tells us, He would have let the world continue in its perversity had it not been that Noah was to 54  
 be saved from being infected by it. In other words, it was Noah's righteousness as much as the corruption of the rest of the world that brought on the Flood.

Thus the problem of evil is solved in that on the cosmic plane it does not exist because what seems evil serves a good purpose, and on the empirical plane it is illusory.

To sum up, Malbim believes that God created the world for the sake of man who is in His image. This image consists of man's dual nature of body and soul, the latter being a part of the Divine, and in his freedom to give dominance to the soul, or spirit, over the body. Man's freedom is not hampered by God's omniscience because that is part of God's essence and does not extend to His relations with the world. Since evil is incompatible with God's nature there is no absolute evil in the world, only a means to a good end. Man's immortality lies in the divine soul and in the degree to which he is able to spiritualize his hylonic soul. Thus

הנא is a natural consequence of good living.



## IV.

## GOD AND ISRAEL

The idea of a chosen people is basic to Judaism. Israel was the first, and for a long time the only group to hold a belief in one supreme God, and it was chosen to carry His message to the world. The question of just what that choice entailed has been answered in many ways by the many thinkers in Judaism, from the earliest recorders of the Bible, through the Prophets and the Rabbis, to our own day.

Malbim takes his place among them with a conception of the relationship between God and Israel that is in many ways unique. The basic distinction of Israel lies in the fact that it is under the direct protection and providence of God. Where the fate of other nations is often determined by astrological factors, Israel is unaffected by them: **לא נמצא** **משפחה אחרת מן הארץ שתהיה ידיעתי והשגותי דבוקה בה כמוכם, כי** "There exists no other family on earth like you to whom My knowledge and providence are so closely related, for all of them are subject to the order of nature and the leadership of the heavenly hosts."<sup>1</sup> The same thought is expressed in numerous other places,<sup>2</sup> though not so succinctly.

Israel's Election

The special status of Israel derives from God's love for the Patriarchs, but has its more immediate source in the

Exodus. God chose Israel because He loved the Patriarchs:

<sup>3</sup> וּמִצֵּד אֲהַבָה אֲבוֹתֶיךָ בָּחַר בָּכֶם  
וְהַחֲשֵׁק הוּא דָּבָר בְּלֹא טַעַם רַק שְׂכָן

<sup>4</sup> . However, the regularized relationship between God  
and Israel begins with the Exodus:

אַחֲרֵי שְׁפִדְיָתִים מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים  
בְּאוֹתוֹת וּבְמוֹפְתִים מֵאֵל וְקָנוּ לִי לְהִיְתוֹת עֲבָדֵי אֵם לְשִׁמִּירַת הַתּוֹרָה וְהַמִּצְוֹת

הַמִּוֹחֲדוֹת לָהֶם אִם לְהַשְׁנֹחֵת עֲלֵיהֶם בִּיחֹד  
"From the time  
that I freed them from the house of bondage with signs and  
wonders they belong to Me as My servants, both as to the ob-  
servance of the Torah and the commandments that are specified  
for them, and My providence over them in particular."<sup>5</sup>

This relationship, then, implies a give-and-take.

Israel has the obligation to observe the divine commandments,  
and God obliges Himself to single it out for special treat-  
ment. It must be understood, however, that the observance of  
Torah is not a favor to God, but rather to Israel itself:

וּבְעֵבוֹר תְּכַלִּית זֶה צִוָּה אוֹתְךָ לַעֲשׂוֹת חֻקֵּי וּמִצְוֹתַי לְטוֹבָתְךָ לֹא לְצָרְכִי  
אֵל זֶה:

"For this end He commanded you to carry out His  
statutes and commandments, for your good, not because He has  
need of it."<sup>6</sup>

This brings us back to the purpose of man,  
discussed in the previous chapter, which is to lead the good  
life. But whereas God relates Himself to the nations as a  
master to his servant, His relationship with Israel is more  
in the nature of that of a physician with the patient. In  
other words, the commandments given to Israel serve a purpose  
beneficial to Israel. Their non-observance carries with it a  
penalty, but that penalty is not an act of punishment on the

part of God. It is rather the kind of penalty a patient pays for refusing the physician's medicine and thus depriving himself of its curative powers. The Gentile, however, who refuses to obey God's command to him thereby exposes himself to the punishment a master might mete out to a recalcitrant servant.<sup>7</sup>

### Reward and Punishment

This brings us to the question of reward and punishment. It has been seen in the previous chapter that Malbim does not consider שמח <sup>8</sup>דבר a reward because it is an automatic consequence of the good life. However, there are rewards in this world, consisting of God's miraculous intervention in the order of nature. Punishment, conversely, consists in the withdrawal of divine providence and intervention. This is catastrophic because the world cannot exist by nature alone.<sup>8</sup> There exists also a stronger kind of punishment, in which God actively destroys what He has created.<sup>9</sup>

Malbim also attacks the problem from a different angle. Divine justice requires that every good deed be rewarded and every sin punished. Any reward or punishment given in the true world in which man lives after his death is a true and eternal one. But God does not want to inflict eternal punishment upon the righteous for the few sins they may commit, nor does He wish to give eternal reward to the wicked for an occasional good deed. Therefore He heaps reward on the wicked and punishment on the righteous in this world, where suffering and well-being have no true reality.

The eternal reward awaits the Zaddik in the eternal world,<sup>10</sup> and the Rasha can look forward to eternal damnation. The exact nature of this damnation is somewhat hazy, expressed in these and similar words: יָמוֹת מֵיָתֵת נֶצַח וַיִּפֹּל לְגֵי הֶנֶם :<sup>11</sup> "He will die an eternal death and fall into Gehenna."

The nature of Gehenna is not explained to us, but we can glean the meaning of eternal death from Malbim's statements about the hylonic soul<sup>12</sup> which were discussed in the previous chapter. It should be noted in this connection that he differentiates between sinners, חַטָּאִים, and wicked men, רָשָׁעִים. The latter take delight in evildoing, whereas the former are merely too weak to withstand the promptings of the Yezer Hara: וְהַחַטָּאִים שֶׁהֵם הַחוֹטְאִים מֵצֵד הִתְאוּהוּ וְהֵם קְלִים מִן הַרְשָׁעִים.<sup>13</sup>

It has already been stated that, according to Malbim, the reward of spiritual living lies in the fact that God providentially intervenes in the workings of nature, and that without such intervention the world could not continue to exist.<sup>14</sup> From his several such statements this seems to be a cosmic effect and thus does not necessarily contradict his position that on the individual, empirical level, there is no true reality in the rewards and punishments of this world. To the good deeds as a cause of providence he also adds prayer and, curiously, physical labor, which latter supplements or perfects nature: וְצִרִיךְ אֶל הַהִנָּהגָה הַהִשְׁגָּחִית שֶׁהוּא לֹא יֵהִי רַק ע"י הָאָדָם שִׁיסִּיעַ לָזֶה אִם ע"י זְכוּתוֹ וְחַפְּלָתוֹ אִם<sup>15</sup> בְּמֵה שְׁעוֹזֵר לְהַשְׁלִים הַטֶּבַע ע"י מְלָאכָה וְיֵד חֲרוּצִים .

## Prayer

Prayer, according to Malbim, falls into two categories. One is the regular liturgy, which addresses itself to the general, and the other individual entreaty, which deals with details. Since God is good He cannot create a living being without providing for his needs. That means that He has the duty to provide at least a minimum subsistence. The regularly ordained prayers of the liturgy, specifically the "Eighteen Blessings", serve as a sort of reminder to God of this duty of His: התפלה על דברים הכוללים מחפלים מצד אמונתו שה' נאמן להקים החקים הכוללים שגבול לפרנסת החיים... : "Prayer about general matters is offered on account of His faithfulness, for God is faithful to uphold the general laws He set down for the support of the living..., and He is duty-bound to do so."<sup>16</sup>

Besides "prayer" in the technical sense there is also private prayer: ואחר התפלה אומר תחנונים, שהם צרכי היחיד שמבקש בעד עצמו דברים פרטיים : "After prayer one offers supplication, which concerns the particular needs of the individual that he requests for himself."<sup>17</sup> God's duty, as Malbim states in a different connection,<sup>18</sup> is limited only to the absolute minimum. The supplications, therefore, are requests for gifts above and beyond the minimum. And whereas the minimum is provided by reason of God's essence, which is good, all else<sup>19</sup> is given through His attributes of kindness, mercy, etc.

In this connection it is appropriate to consider a related matter, that of blessing bestowed by one person upon

another. Malbim tells us that three conditions must be fulfilled for such blessing to be effective. He who blesses must spiritualize himself so that his soul can rise to the source of blessing established by God and draw from it. The blessed must be made ready to receive by means of a similar spiritualization. Finally, there must be a rapport between the two people: <sup>א</sup> וְנוֹה צֶרֶךְ ג' עוֹנִיִּים. א) שִׁכִּין אֶת הַמַּתְבָּרָךְ שִׁיְהִי מוֹכֵן אֶל הַשֹּׁפֵעַ הַהוּא. ב) לַהֲכִין אֶת עַצְמוֹ שִׁיעֲלֶה בַּמּוֹלֵם הַדּוֹבִקוֹת עַד מְקוֹר הַבְּרָכָה. ג) שִׁיְהִי הַתְּקַרְבוֹת וְחִבּוּר בֵּין הַמַּתְבָּרָךְ וּבֵין <sup>20</sup> הַמַּתְבָּרָךְ. For this very reason it was customary in Biblical times to bring gifts to the prophets. Such gifts were a <sup>21</sup> bribe to the body to release the soul for its ascent.

### Prophecy

This brings us to the problem of prophecy. Prophecy, Malbim tells us, consists in a receptiveness to the divine spirit as consequence of the complete negation of the physical. Only Moses, however, of all the prophets was able to effect a complete separation of body and spirit, so that he alone was able to have a direct revelation without recourse to imagination. The imaginative faculty is rooted in the physical makeup, and it is part of the prophetic vision of all other prophets who, while attaining complete mastery over their physical side, could nevertheless not free their souls from it. Before eating from the Tree of Knowledge, Adam also was on the level of Moses; it was his transgression that <sup>23</sup> caused body and spirit to fuse.

The conditions of prophecy are two. One is a

highly developed mind and imagination; the other, a refinement of the personality by means of pious living. The first is present from the moment of conception in that it represents a physical characteristic beyond control. The second is a consequence of man's voluntary decision and leads to the subordination of the body to the spirit.<sup>24</sup> These conditions are absolute for those who aspire to prophecy as a means of partaking of the divine spirit. However, if God needs a messenger and cannot find a worthy one, He will choose a man and change his physical characteristics as well as his inclinations in order to prepare him for prophecy.<sup>25</sup> This miraculous preparation also took place for all Israel at Mount Sinai.<sup>26</sup>

### Palestine

Among the benefits accruing to Israel from its special relationship with God, not the least is their possession of Palestine. It became the Land of Israel for three reasons. First, because Israel deserved it for its moral conduct in Egypt: אֲתָם מִצְרַיִם עֲצַמְכֶם רְאוּיִם אֶל הָיְרוּשָׁה הַלְוִי מִצְרַיִם שְׂאֵתָם.<sup>27</sup> Second, because God saw fit to give it to them, regardless of their merit: שְׁחוּץ מִמָּה שְׂאֵתָם רְאוּיִם לֹזֶה אֲנִי אֲחֻנָּה לָכֶם.<sup>28</sup> This second reason insures the eternal validity of the gift, hence Israel's continued claim. Third, it is an inheritance from their fathers: שְׂאֵתָם הַיְּרוּשָׁיִם מִצְרַיִם וְחֵלֶת אֲבוֹת כִּי אֲתָם בְּנֵי שֵׁם.<sup>29</sup>

Ultimate ownership of the land, however, is with God, and Israel can occupy it only by His sufferance. This gives God the right to expect the observance of certain laws

concerning the land such as those governing the sale of the  
<sup>30</sup>land and the offering of the first fruit as a symbolic  
<sup>31</sup>rental. More than that, occupancy of Palestine is contin-  
 gent upon the observance of all divine laws: שאף שאין תצות  
<sup>32</sup>. תלויות בארץ, הארץ תלויה במצות The obverse is contained  
 in this statement: כי קישור אלהותו עמהם תלוי בישיבת הארץ  
 : "For the tieup of the Godhead with them is de-  
 pendent on the occupancy of the Land, for the Shechinah is  
<sup>33</sup>there."

Since Israel did not choose to observe the Torah it  
 forfeited the right to live in Palestine. It will return  
 there some day, but the length of its dispersion depends on  
 its conduct: שהנאולה הכללית יש לה שני זמנים... (א) הזמן הקצוב  
 אשר לא יעבור מן הוא והלאה, (ב) לפני הזמן ההוא אם יזכו ע'  
 : "The general redemption has two dates...  
 one, the predestined time beyond which it will not tarry, and  
 two, before that time, if they will merit it by their good  
<sup>34</sup>deeds." How the time is determined when Israel will be re-  
 deemed even if it be unworthy, Malbim does not reveal to us.  
<sup>35</sup>We may, however, glimpse it from his statement elsewhere  
<sup>36</sup>that astrological factors are operative in this respect.

The ultimate redemption will be permanent, regard-  
 less of Israel's merit: הנרית שאכרות עמהם לא יהיה עוד על  
 : "The covenant that I will make with them will not be  
<sup>37</sup>conditional any more." However God has to fashion their  
<sup>38</sup>hearts so that they will be unable to sin. The redemption  
 will be brought about by means of a Messiah, a descendant of



the House of David. He will be a human being, but so completely spiritualized that for all practical purposes he will be supernatural.<sup>39</sup> He will establish righteousness on earth by the power of his mouth and kill the stubborn evildoers with his breath.<sup>40</sup> After the war of Gog and Magog his peace<sup>41</sup> will be firmly established by popular good-will.

Israel, then, is set apart from the nations by God's election. Although there is no compelling reason for God's choice of Israel, the covenant entails certain obligations on His part in return for the observance of the Torah. God's demands are not arbitrary but are purely for Israel's benefit. In fact, God relates Himself to them not as a master but as a physician whose greatest concern is their welfare and spiritual health. So successful is the medication, Malbim tells us, that it has brought about a change in the nature of Israel which makes it unnatural for them to indulge in the immorality of the heathen: <sup>42</sup>שֶׁלֹּם מִצֻּת הַתּוֹרָה וְנִדְרֵיהָ וְחֻקֶּיהָ נַעֲשֶׂה הַבִּדּוּלָה טַבָּעִית .  
 בְּיָדֵיכֶם עַד שֶׁכֵּנֶר נִמְנָע מִטַּבְעֵכֶם שֶׁתַּעֲשׂוּ כַּמַּעֲשִׂים .

## NOTES TO CHAPTER I.

1. There is extant the text of a letter Malbim wrote to the community in Ujhel, Hungary, from Kempen. That community had asked him to come to Ujhel as rabbi, and offered to double his salary. In reply Malbim wrote that he felt his work in Kempen was too important for him to leave, and that his family also opposed the change since Kempen, too had doubled his salary.
2. Ha-Lebanon, Vol. 2, p. 233
3. On Deuteronomy 6:4
4. On Genesis 1:3
5. On Genesis 1:14
6. On Genesis 1:20
7. On Genesis 9:13
8. On Genesis 7:23
9. On Deuteronomy 1:3
10. The word is used here loosely. The proof of his statements lay for Malbim in the fact that he read them into the texts.
11. On Deuteronomy 4:2
12. On Deuteronomy 4:9
13. On Deuteronomy 4:10
14. On Deuteronomy 18:15, sec. 68
15. On Leviticus 27:34, sec. 120
16. On Deuteronomy 4:9
17. On Genesis 11:7
18. On Genesis 18:13

## NOTES TO CHAPTER II.

1. On Exodus 3:14
2. On Exodus 20:2
3. Exodus 3:13
4. Ikkarim II.27
5. On Exodus 3:14
6. See for example a list of quotations on Lev. 18:12, sec. 130
7. On Exodus 3:13
8. On Exodus 34:6
9. This statement might involve us in a problem of semantics that is beyond the scope of this paper. The word "attribute" is used here to denote a descriptive term of a specific quality.
10. On Genesis 1:26
11. On Genesis 22:1
12. On Exodus 3:15
- 12a. Ibid.
13. On Exodus 34:6
14. On Genesis 22:1
15. On Exodus 33:21
- 15a. Ibid.
16. Malbim quotes from the מִנְחָה לַי, of Hayyim Vital.
17. On Genesis 1:1
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid. and on Isaiah 45:5-7
21. Malbim refers to Maimonides, Guide I.73 and III.10, as

well as to Saadya, Emunoth I.4 for a fuller discussion. I have found only allusions in Guide I.73.

22. On Genesis 1:1

22a. Genesis 1:5

23. On Genesis 1:10

24. Ibid. The word "He" though necessary in the translation, does not appear in the Hebrew text. It should be noted that in 1:10 Malbim has to interpret מִן הַמַּיִם as the hollow space containing the water, in order to make his point.

25. More will be said about knowledge in a later chapter.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER III.

1. Guide II.30
2. On Genesis 1:27
3. However, Malbim tries to read as many details into the text as he possibly can.
4. See Chapter II.
5. On Genesis 1:6
6. On Genesis 1:3
7. On Genesis 1:4
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid.
10. On Genesis 1:20
11. On Genesis 1:2. Malbim denies the existence of fire and water as basic elements and shows that both are composite.
12. Ibid., and on 1:6,9
13. On Genesis 1:31
14. Ibid.
15. Genesis 1:26
16. Malbim has stated immediately preceding this passage that the world is called a "large man," אדם גדול.
17. The word הרוחניות here appears to be a misprint for הרוחנית.
18. On Genesis 1:27
19. Ibid.
20. On Genesis 1:24
21. On Genesis 1:26
22. Ibid. The problem of freedom will be discussed later in this chapter.

23. On Genesis 2:7
- 23a. Ibid.
- 23b. Ibid.
24. On Psalm 90:1. S.a. on Genesis 1:27
- 24a. On Genesis 1:27
25. On Genesis 2:1-2
26. Ibid. It is interesting to note the extreme literalness with which this homely example is translated into theological terms.
27. On Genesis 2:3. Here again there is an extraordinary literalness in transferring the idea to the Manna. Meeting the king on Saturdays, the officers are, of course, unavailable to their workers. Similarly, the heavens could not dispense Manna on the Sabbath as they were busy collecting the coming week's supply.
- 27a. On Leviticus 19:2, sec. 2; the passage is very lengthy.
28. On Genesis 2:6
29. On Genesis 1:25
30. On Genesis 1:26
31. Ibid.
32. On holiness, see Malbim's commentary on Leviticus 11:44 and 19:2
33. On Genesis 1:2
34. On Deuteronomy 5:25
35. This matter is discussed at length in the commentary on Exodus 19 and Deuteronomy 5, which cannot be quoted here in full.
36. On Deuteronomy 5:25
37. On Genesis 1:27
38. It is interesting to note Malbim's defense of freedom in the story of the Ten Plagues. Hardening Pharaoh's heart, he states on Exodus 4:22-23, was not a curtailment of his freedom. On the contrary, God thereby restored his

freedom when the plagues seemed to force him into submission.

39. On Genesis 22:1
40. Ibid.
41. On Genesis 15:1
42. On Canticles 8:8 and Genesis 3:24. The passages are too lengthy to be quoted here.
43. Malbim refers to them as האלהים in Genesis and as חכמי האמת in Canticles where he gives a list of Zohar references.
44. See commentary on Psalm 90:1
45. On Genesis 3:22; see also on Genesis 1:31
46. On Psalm 73:20. Life is here compared to a dream.
47. On Genesis 1:31. The whole quotation is too lengthy to be reproduced here. The Maimonides reference is to the second part of the Guide.
48. Ibid.
49. On Genesis 1:10 and many others. Another aspect of the problem has already been discussed in Chapter II.
50. On Genesis 1:26: לא להרע ולקלקל שהוא נגר מנע האלהות .
51. On Genesis 6:8
52. On Genesis 8:21
53. On Genesis 11:7. He proves it from the fact that there was a priest of God in Jerusalem (Gen. 14:18).
54. On Genesis 6:8.

## NOTES TO CHAPTER IV.

1. On Amos 3:2
2. E.g. on Genesis 15:5 and Deuteronomy 4:19-20
3. On Deuteronomy 10:15
4. Ibid.
5. On Leviticus 25:42, sec. 85
6. On Deuteronomy 10:15
7. On Exodus 15:26. The passage is too lengthy to be quoted here in full.
8. On Genesis 2:6 and Leviticus 26:16, sec. 19
9. Ibid. Malbim does not reconcile this with his view on Genesis 6:8, quoted in the preceding chapter, that God does not destroy except for a constructive purpose.
10. On Psalms 73:18 f. It is too lengthy to be quoted here.
11. Ibid.
12. On Canticles 8:8
13. On Psalms 1:5. S.a. on Psalms 104:35
14. E.g. on Genesis 2:6
15. Ibid.
16. On Psalms 143:1
17. Ibid.
18. Note on Exodus 16:7. He quotes there also a view that even one day's life is a boon, that God therefore would have no obligation whatsoever. He treats this as a valid view, though he disagrees with it.
19. On Psalms 143:1
20. On Genesis 27:3
21. On Genesis 27:4
22. On Genesis 2:9



23. Ibid. and on Exodus 3:3
24. On Jeremiah 1:5
25. Ibid. This latter point is stated in answer to those who would contradict Maimonides' requirements for prophecy by pointing to unworthy men like Gideon.
26. On Exodus 19 and Deuteronomy 5. The passages were already referred to in the previous chapter.
27. On Leviticus 20:24, sec. 126
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
30. On Leviticus 25:23
31. On Deuteronomy 26:3
32. On Deuteronomy 4:1
33. On Leviticus 25:38, sec. 77
34. On Isaiah 11:1. Malbim restates this theme many times. It is based on the Rabbinic interpretation of Isaiah 60:22.
35. On Jeremiah 25:9. It is too lengthy to be quoted here.
36. In explaining the 70 years of the Babylonian Exile Malbim states that 70 years of ascendancy were in the stars for Nebuchadnezzar. Had Israel merited providence, the constellations would have been inoperative. On this point see also the beginning of this chapter.
37. On Jeremiah 32:40; similarly in many other places.
38. Ibid.
39. On Isaiah 11:2-3
40. On Isaiah 11:4
41. On Isaiah 11:10
42. On Leviticus 20:24, sec. 127

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