Maimonides' Exoteric and Esoteric Biblical Interpretations in the *Guide of the Perplexed*

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Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed* is often considered as belonging to the genre of esoteric literature. In this paper I do not want to undermine this claim, which I have myself maintained in previous studies, but to moderate it. I will argue that in the *Guide* Maimonides also engages in exoteric biblical exegesis and offer some examples of it. Then I will focus on his treatment of the cosmological part of the Creation story and show that this interpretation, which deals with one of the esoteric subjects Maimonides promises to explain in the *Guide*, is not entirely esoteric.

Maimonides' biblical exegesis should be understood in the light of the aims of his book and its underlying postulates. One of the purposes of the *Guide* is to teach everyone that God is not a corporeal being. Maimonides explains the fact that the Bible speaks of God in corporeal terms by what he considers to be an exegetical rule formulated by the Sages:1 'The Torah speaks in the language of human beings'.2 He understands this rabbinic dictum to mean that the Torah teaches about God's existence and perfection in a way suitable to the mental capacity of the masses. In the age when the Torah was given, the Israelites

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1 B. Baba Mezi’a 31b, B. Berakhot 31a, B. Qiddushin 17b et passim.
could only comprehend the existence of corporeal beings and accept only qualities resembling their own. Consequently the Torah had to speak of God in anthropomorphic and anthropopathic language. Though Maimonides does not say so explicitly, it is most plausible that he understands the dictum in a way very similar to the educational myth in Alfarabi's perfect state. The Torah adapted the religious discourse about God to the mental capacity of the multitude at the time and the place it was given, just as the religion of the perfect state, according to Alfarabi, translates philosophical truths into figurative language that suits the multitude's understanding in a certain time and place. Because the religious discourse in the perfect state is time and place dependent, it varies from place to place and from one period to another. According to this implicit interpretation of the rabbinic dictum, the Sages' rule is dynamic: the Torah spoke 'the language of human beings' living at the time it was given to Israel. But with the passage of time and the advance of the people who read the Torah, the educational myth can and should be amended. In the case of the corporealization of God, the educational myth should be totally eliminated. The masses, too, are not to think of God as an incorporeal being. The demand that everyone adhere to the doctrine of an incorporeal deity, made in a normative chapter of the Guide (2:35), indicates that in Maimonides' mind all the people of his era are capable of understanding an incorporeal conception of God and hence can believe in His existence and perfection without having recourse to corporeal language. Speaking 'the language of human beings' in his age means, proclaiming explicitly that God is not a corporeal being.

In his 'Lecture on Maimonides' Guide of the Perplexed', Shlomo Pines argued that Maimonides' attitude towards the denial of God's corporealization was influenced by the dogmatic requirement by the

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3 I do not believe that the Sages' principle, understood this way, is identical with Alfarabi's educational myth. The educational myth conveys philosophical truths in figurative language, whereas the talmudic dictum refers to the teaching of a religious truth that is not necessarily philosophical. See, however, n. 7 below.

4 See H. Kreisel, Maimonides' Political Thought, Albany 1999, pp. 193-209.

5 Iyyun 47 (1998), pp. 115-128. The lecture was published from Pines' manuscript by S. Stroumsa and W. Z. Harvey.
Muwaḥḥidūn of his era that all people, including the masses, acknowledge the incorporeality of God. I think that Pines' explanation of Maimonides' attitude supports my understanding of his interpretation of the rabbinic dictum. Because this dictum states that the Torah is an educational myth, the dogmatic demand by a prominent contemporary theological movement persuaded him that the people of that age could believe in the existence of God and His perfection without having to use corporeal language.

In Guide 1:33, Maimonides attributes an esoteric character to this rabbinic dictum. He claims that the masses should not commence their studies with the science of metaphysics, seeing that they cannot understand it adequately. Metaphysical truths must be transmitted to them according to their mental capacity. According to this chapter, the metaphysical topics that should be withheld from the multitude are God's knowledge, God's will, His providence, and His attributes. All of these are 'truly the mysteries of the Torah'. Given that in chapter 33 he states that hiding the truth from the masses, 'is the cause of the fact that the Torah speaks in the language of the sons of men, as we have made clear', he evidently believes that when the Torah was given to Israel the masses might have been harmed by references to God as an incorporeal entity. Because they could apprehend only the existence of an incorporeal God, any negation of His corporeality might lead them to doubt His very existence. Maimonides explains the multitude's way of thinking in a similar way in Guide 1:1. Here he is not speaking of the style in which the Torah is written but of the masses' interpretation of the biblical verse, 'Let us make man in our image, after our likeness' (Gen. 1:26). Nevertheless, the explanation teaches us about the danger the doctrine of incorporeal God poses for the masses:

The pure doctrine of the corporeality of God was a necessary consequence to be accepted by them. They accordingly believed in it and deemed that if they abandoned this belief, they would give the lie to the biblical text, that they would even make the deity to be nothing at all unless they thought that God was a

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body provided with a face and a hand like them in shape and configuration. (p. 14; p. 21)\(^7\)

If my understanding of Maimonides' stance is right, we may conclude that in the *Guide* he restricts the scope of the esoteric teachings of the Bible and extracts the doctrine of God's in-corporeality from them. According to *Guide* 1:35:

> The negation 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. (p. 54; p. 81)

When those people become perplexed by the contradiction between the doctrine of the incorporeal God they received from traditional authority (though not by means of demonstration) and the biblical text, the meaning of the verses should be explained to them in a way that does not imply God's corporeality. Maimonides states explicitly that 'their attention should be drawn to the equivocality and figurative sense of the various terms - the exposition of which is contained in this Treatise' (*Guide*, p. 55; p. 81). Hence, the biblical-philosophical lexicon provided in the first part of the *Guide* is addressed to these readers as well as to the intellectual elite. There Maimonides explains equivocal terms that may entail the corporealization of God and provides a clear exoteric explanation of these words as well as of some of the verses in which they appear.\(^8\)

Another purpose of the *Guide* is to free the 'perplexed' from their perplexity. Here Maimonides addresses a limited audience - people

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7 I believe that in chapter 33 Maimonides applies the dictum 'the Torah speaks in the language of human beings' to a broader range of esoteric matters, such as God's knowledge, His will, His providence, and His attributes. There is a closer analogy between the talmudic dictum, as I understand it, and Alfarabi's educational myth in this chapter than there is in chapter 26.

8 I do not, however, maintain that Maimonides' entire biblical-philosophical lexicon is exoteric. The lexicographical chapters also contain esoteric hints, such as the interpretation of the term 'likeness' (*demut*) in chapter 1, which also alludes to the story of the chariot in Ezekiel 1:26.
who are familiar with Aristotelian philosophy and accept it as true, but are also believing Jews, who observe the commandments and accept the authority of the Bible. These readers find inconsistencies and contradictions between the literal meaning of the biblical texts and the philosophical doctrines they accept as true. The perplexed person described by Maimonides in the introduction to the Guide (p. 2; p. 5) is in fact the philosopher who lives in Alfarabi's perfect state, which Maimonides identifies with the state governed by the Law, but who is not aware of its character. He does not know that in the perfect state the philosophical truths are transmitted to the masses in form of educational myths adapted to their understanding, formulated in figurative language to facilitate their grasp in a non-philosophical manner. Consequently there is no real contradiction or inconsistency between philosophy and the biblical texts. The latter have an inner philosophical meaning and can be interpreted in a way that conforms to the philosophical doctrines.

The perplexity of the 'perplexed' is partially due to the anthropomorphic notion of God derived from the interpretation of equivocal terms whose primary or more common meanings refer to physical objects and their properties or to their sensory or imaginative apprehension. Thus the elimination of anthropomorphic and anthropopathic concepts of God by means of exoteric biblical interpretation, is intended for two audiences: the masses, who understand them according to their capacity, and the 'perplexed' philosophers. The explanation of the terms serves a dual purpose: teaching ordinary people of Maimonides' time that God is incorporeal and freeing the 'perplexed' of their perplexity.

Different readers grasp Maimonides' explanations of equivocal terms that may entail an anthropomorphic image of God and of the biblical verses he explains in the lexicographic chapters in different ways. The masses (and 'the beginners in speculation' whom Maimonides mentions in the introduction to the Guide, p. 2; p. 5) and the perplexed intellectuals understand them according to their respective capacities. Moreover,

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9 In Guide 1:35, Maimonides says that '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
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Maimonides does not regard his lexicon only as a means to convey authoritative interpretations of biblical terms and verses to his readers, but also as an exegetical tool. Unsophisticated readers will be satisfied with the interpretations of the biblical verses about God that Maimonides provides in the lexicographic chapters. The sophisticated, more perceptive readers will apply the explanations of the terms found in these chapters to other biblical verses and interpret them for themselves. Because the verses may contain more than one equivocal term, perceptive readers have the ability to employ different lexicographical chapters to arrive at a full understanding of verses that Maimonides did not explain in the Guide. Though such interpretations depend on perceptive reading and presuppose readers of greater intellectual capacity than the masses, they are still exoteric.

The exoteric biblical interpretations addressed to the philosophers, however, are broader in scope than those directed to the multitude as well, and deal with more philosophical topics. Hence the Guide contains two levels of exoteric interpretations: exoteric interpretations addressed to most of the people and those meant for the intellectual elite.

As already noted, the exoteric interpretations addressed to the intellectual elite are based on Alfarabi's idea of educational myth: in the perfect state, religion comes after philosophy. It teaches philosophical doctrines in figurative language so that the masses will be able to understand them according to their capacity. The identification of the 'state of the Law' with Alfarabi's perfect state justifies a philosophical reading of biblical texts written in figurative language, even if they do not appear to contradict philosophical doctrines and do

subject to affections are matters that ought to be made clear and explained to everyone according to his capacity (p. 54; p. 81).

10 See Guide 1:8 (p. 22; pp. 33-34).

11 Readers may interpret Michaiah's vision of God in 1 Kings 22:19 - 'I saw the Lord on his throne, and all the host of heaven standing beside him' - in accordance with Maimonides' explanations in the lexicographic chapters of the terms that figure in the vision. Maimonides interprets part of the vision in Guide 1:4, where he explains 'to see', but readers can complete the interpretation from chapter 9, which explains 'throne', and from chapter 11, which explains 'sitting'. Because 'throne' has two derivative senses, there are two possible interpretations to this part of Michaiah's vision.

12 Maimonides acknowledges this explicitly in Guide 3:27.
not cause perplexity. The philosophical reading proves that the true beliefs of the Law are in fact philosophical doctrines, albeit presented in figurative language.

The aim of freeing the perplexed of their perplexity should entail explicit and clear exegesis of biblical texts. But the Guide is based on another presupposition as well, the idea that the Bible contains esoteric teachings to be concealed from the masses and divulged only to a select group - the intellectual elite among whom the 'perplexed' are numbered. The main subjects of the esoteric teaching are the 'Account of the Beginning' and the 'Account of the Chariot,' which Maimonides identifies respectively with Aristotelian physics and metaphysics.13

Esotericism and educational myth may coexist. A text can be formulated in a way adapted to the understanding of the masses, and thus function as an educational myth, concealing the truth from that audience and hinting at it to the worthy. Esoteric doctrines must be transmitted in special esoteric ways. Because the interpretation of esoteric texts unlocks their secret doctrines, it must be done by the same esoteric methods of transmission. Hence, though Maimonides intends to free the perplexed of their perplexity by philosophical interpretations of the Bible, he cannot provide them with clear exoteric explanations only. He must have recourse to esoteric methods. Here, as in the case of biblical interpretations that presuppose that the Bible conveys philosophical doctrines in figurative language in order to adapt them to the comprehension of the multitude, the assumption that the Bible communicates esoteric doctrines entails esoteric philosophical interpretations of texts, even when their literal meaning does not contradict philosophy and does not cause perplexity.

Maimonides adopts the method of transmission of the 'Account of the Chariot' suggested by R. Hiyya (B. Ḥagigah 13a): 'only' chapter

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13 It is important to note that in Guide 1:35 Maimonides lists what are 'truly the mysteries of the Torah'. In addition to distinctly metaphysical issues, such as God's attributes, God's knowledge, His will, and His names, the list also includes issues associated with the relationships between God and the world, such as 'His creation of that which He created, the character of His governance of the world, the "how" of His providence in respect to what is other then He' (p. 54; p. 80) and prophecy. Maimonides regards these issues as being just as esoteric as the Account of the Chariot. See Klein-Braslavy, Creation, pp. 45-48.
headings may be transmitted to him'. Understanding 'chapter headings' to mean allusions, he employs the latter as a method for interpreting esoteric biblical texts. The method presupposes that readers are familiar with Aristotelian philosophy and hence able to understand the allusions in the light of Aristotelian physics (including anthropology and psychology) and metaphysics.

Maimonides employs another esoteric device, too: scattering allusion in different chapters of the Guide. In the introduction he explicitly describes the method: 'Even those [chapter headings] are not set down in order or arranged in coherent fashion in this treatise, but rather scattered and entangled with other subjects that are to be clarified' (p. 3; p. 6).

It needs to be emphasized, though, that not every biblical interpretation scattered in the various chapters of the Guide is necessarily esoteric; nor is every interpretation that appears in a single chapter and contributes to the understanding of a topic in another chapter or chapters necessarily esoteric. There are two types of 'scattering' in the Guide: intentional and unintentional. The first is a way to convey esoterica; the second is a result of the book's composition. The Guide, like most works of philosophy, has a certain plan. The different issues it deals with are subordinated to this plan. Maimonides is aware, however, that connecting the book's chapters in a different order than the original one may promote a better understanding of some of the issues it addresses. Moreover, other combinations of ideas and biblical interpretations might yield discourses that could not be treated within the original structure of the book. The guidelines he offers to readers in the 'instruction with respect to the treatise' direct them towards a more flexible reading of the book, enabling them to derive more benefit from it.

14 For the meaning of 'chapter headings' in the Guide, see S. Klein-Braslavy, King Solomon and Philosophical Esotericism in the Thought of Maimonides [Hebrew], Jerusalem 1996, p. 66 (hereafter, Philosophical Esotericism).
15 Maimonides learns this method, too, from the Sages. See Guide 2:29 (p. 244; p. 347).
16 It is interesting to note that most of Maimonides' esoteric interpretations that are conveyed by 'chapter heading' are continuous interpretations of the biblical texts, although they do not always interpret the whole passage or the entire biblical
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The most outstanding example of a non-esoteric interpretation dispersed over several chapters of the *Guide* is that dealing with God's promise to reveal Himself to Moses in the cleft of the rock (Ex. 33:21-23): 'Behold, there is a place by me where you shall stand upon the rock. And it shall come to pass while My glory pass by, and I will cover you with My hand until I have passed. And I will take away My hand and you shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen'. The fact that Maimonides does not interpret this promise in a continuous manner, but explains eight of the terms that appear in it (place, stand, rock, pass, glory, see, back, and face) in eight widely separated chapters, does not prove that he considers the description of the promised revelation to be esoteric and hence employs the esoteric method of 'scattering'. An incorrect understanding of the terms in which God's promise to reveal Himself in the cleft of the rock is written is liable to entail the corporealization of God. Consequently Maimonides explains to all readers that these are equivocal terms and also have incorporeal meanings. He instructs them to apply these meanings in verses related to God. Maimonides does not resort to allusion here. Rather, each term is clearly explained and each of its meanings is illustrated by biblical verses. Understanding his explanations and the various verses, however, depends on the readers' capacity. Some will not be able to comprehend them all, even though Maimonides does not explain them allusively. The scattering of the explanation of these terms is simply the result of structural constraints. Because Maimonides decided to begin the book with a series of lexicographic chapters, a continuous exposition of the promised revelation in the *Guide* was not possible. All the same, he regards this as one of the most important secondary exegetical subjects of the lexicographic chapters. This is evident from the fact that, in addition to elucidating eight terms that figure in the promise of the revelation in the cleft of the rock in the lexicographic chapters of the *Guide*, thereby enabling intelligent readers to arrive at the full understanding of the revelation on their own, he draws on it

17 'Place', chap. 8; 'to stand', chap. 15; 'rock', chap. 16; 'to pass', chap. 21; 'glory', chap. 64; 'to see', chap. 4; 'back', chap. 38; 'face', chap. 37.
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for the examples he provides for the use of these terms in their spiritual meaning. That is, Maimonides openly and clearly interprets parts of the revelation in the lexicographic chapters themselves. The choice of these very verses to illustrate the biblical use of the terms applied to God shows that Maimonides intended to provide an interpretation of the promised revelation in the cleft of the rock within the constraints set by the structure of the first part of the Guide. Still, the interpretation is meant for readers with a higher intellectual capacity than the masses. Maimonides assumes that some can read the chapters actively and arrive at a full interpretation of God's revelation in the cleft of the rock by themselves. Not all readers of the Guide have these intellectual capacities. It is plausible that many of them will not be able to accomplish it. But that does not mean that the interpretation itself is esoteric or that Maimonides intends to withhold it from the unworthy.

I think that the criterion we must use for distinguishing between biblical texts Maimonides considers to be esoteric and those he sees as non-esoteric for his age is the use of interpretation by 'chapter heading'. Only an interpretation conveyed through hints is an interpretation of an esoteric text. An overt and clear interpretation shows that Maimonides does not consider the verse or the passage in question to be esoteric, even though simple readers may not be able to understand it. Applying this criterion, we find that the Guide contains several interpretations that are not esoteric, even though they are addressed only to readers who have a philosophical education and high intellectual capacities. There is nothing in them that can damage the faith of the masses, in Maimonides' age. Hence they should not be withheld, even if the masses cannot understand them, in part or whole. In addition the interpretation of God's promise to reveal himself to Moses in the cleft

18 'There is a place by me', chaps. 8 and 16; 'Where you shall stand upon the rock', chaps. 15 and 16; 'And it shall come to pass while My glory pass by', chap. 21; 'And I will cover you with My hand until I have passed', chap. 21; 'And you shall see My back', chaps. 21 and 38; 'But My face shall not be seen', chaps. 21 and 37. The lexicographic chapters also contain interpretations of other verses in the revelation: 'My face shall go and I will give you rest' (Ex. 33:14), chap. 37; 'I beseech you, let me see Your glory' (v. 18), chaps. 4 and 64; 'But my face shall not be seen' (v. 20), chap. 37; 'and the Lord passed by before his face' (ibid. 34:6), chap. 21 (two interpretations).
of the rock, Maimonides' explanation of Moses' requests, God's answers, and of the actual revelation (Ex. 33:13-20 and 34:6-7) in Guide 1:54 are all exoteric.

*Guide* 1:54 is not a lexicographic chapter, but belongs to those that discuss God's attributes. In this chapter Maimonides asserts and completes the theoretical discussion of God's attributes found in *Guide* 1:51-53. He looks at this issue from a new perspective and uses a different method - the exegesis of a biblical text. Here he does not explain equivocal terms but biblical verses that raise difficulties and represent God in terms of moral qualities.

Maimonides begins with a lucid and systematic explanation of Moses' requests and God's answers, followed by a description of God's revelation in terms of moral qualities. He openly explains that the prophet as a political leader governs society by imitating God's attributes of action. He solves the contradiction between the notion of God as a spiritual, non-corporeal entity and His description in terms of moral qualities through a clear explanation of the mechanism that translates the apprehension of physical phenomena that he considers to be God's attributes of action into terms of affections of the soul or moral qualities.\(^1\)

First he explains the process of the 'translation': 'Whenever one of His actions is apprehended, the attribute from which this actions proceeds is predicated of Him, may He be exalted, and the name deriving from that action is applied to Him' (p. 85; p. 125). Then he illustrates the process of translation by an analysis of two properties by which Moses describes God's revelation in the cleft of the rock: 'merciful' and 'gracious'. At the end of the discussion, after interpreting 'negative' characteristics applied to God in the Bible - 'a jealous, avenging God; the Lord is vengeful and fierce in wrath' (Nah. 1:2) - he explains at length how the prophet who is a political leader should apply the apprehension of these attributes in his governance of the city.\(^2\)

The open explanation of this issue proves that Maimonides does

\[^{1}\text{It is worth noting that this interpretation is very similar to R. Judah Halevi's far-from-esoteric interpretation of God's attributes in *Kuzari* 2:2. Halevi interprets the attributes 'jealous and vengeful' and 'merciful and gracious' that Maimonides interprets in *Guide* 1:54.}\]

\[^{2}\text{See p. 86; p. 126.}\]
not consider the prophet-as-governor and his apprehension of God's attributes of action to be an esoteric matter, but a subject that should be explained to intelligent readers. He does not seem to believe that this interpretation of Exodus 33:13-20 and 34:6-7 can harm the masses of his era, even though they will not be able to understand it fully. Hence God's promise to reveal himself to Moses in the cleft of the rock, Moses' requests, God's reply, and the revelation itself are all non-esoteric and are not expounded by esoteric methods.21

Maimonides also provides a detailed and clear exoteric interpretation of the metaphor of the 'married harlot', which he formulates himself on the basis of Proverbs 6:26 (*Guide* 3:8, p. 310; p. 431), and of the parable built around it in Proverbs 7:6-21 (Introduction, pp. 8-9; pp. 13-14). In *Guide* 3:8 he suggests that the metaphor of the 'married harlot' concerns the physical world. It presents the principles of the sub-lunar world - matter, form, and privation - and their behavior:

> How extraordinary is what Solomon said in his wisdom when likening matter to a married harlot, for matter is in no way found without form and is consequently always like a married woman who is never separated from a man and is never free. However, notwithstanding her being a married woman, she never ceases to seek for another man to substitute for her husband, and she deceives and draws him on in every way until he obtains from her what her husband used to obtain. This is the state of matter. For whatever form is found in it, does but prepare it to receive another form. And it does not cease to move with a view to putting off that form that actually is in it and to obtaining another form; and the selfsame state obtains after that other form has been obtained in actu. (p. 310; p. 431)

Maimonides offers an explanation of the parable of the 'married harlot' in the introduction to the *Guide*. He understands that the parable deals with a practical issue: while its external meaning is a concrete warning,

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21 However, Maimonides does not explain how Moses gave the Law to the people of Israel. He seems to have considered this issue to be esoteric and does not even offer allusions for understanding it. The way in which Moses gave the Law is left for students of the *Guide* to guess.
the counsel not to follow a harlot, the inner meaning is a general warning based on the principles of Aristotelian anthropology:

The outcome of all this is a warning against the pursuit of bodily pleasures and desires. Accordingly he [Solomon] likens matter, which is the cause of all these bodily pleasures, to a harlot who is also a married woman. … For all the hindrances keeping man from his ultimate perfection, every deficiency affecting him and every disobedience, come to him from his matter alone, as we shall explain in this Treatise. This is the proposition that can be understood from this parable as a whole.

I mean that man should not follow his bestial nature; I mean his matter. (pp. 8-9; pp. 13-14)

After elucidating the parable, Maimonides states explicitly that he offers readers an exoteric explanation of the esoteric parable: 'And as I have explained this to you and disclosed the secret of this parable' (p. 9; p. 14; emphasis mine). Here again he reduces the scope of biblical esotericism and explains the meaning of an esoteric biblical text to everyone.

The Account of the Beginning is one of the two esoteric subjects Maimonides promises to explain in the Guide: In Guide 2:29 he declares: 'The first purpose of this Treatise is to explain what can be explained of the Account of the Beginning and of the Account of the Chariot' (p. 243; p. 346). According to Mishnah Ḥagigah 2:1, the Account of the Beginning is less esoteric than the Account of the Chariot. While the Account of the Beginning can be transmitted only to a single person, without however the stipulation of further qualifications, the Account of the Chariot can be conveyed to one only if he is 'wise and understands by himself'. In the introduction to the Guide, Maimonides at first seems to follow the distinction between the two levels of esotericism proclaimed by the Sages. He says: 'Know that with regard to natural matters as well, it is impossible to give a clear exposition when teaching some of their principles as they are. For you know the saying of [the Sages] may their memory be blessed: The Account of the Beginning

ought not to be taught in the presence of two men. Hence these matters too occur in parables in the books of prophecy' (p. 3; p. 7). At the end of the passage, though, he seems to blur this distinction. Pointing out that the Sages also 'spoke of them [the secrets of the Account of the Beginning] in riddles and parables', he says that 'there is a close connection between these matters and the divine science, and they too are secrets of that divine science' (ibid.; emphasis mine). If some of the principles of the natural matters 'are secrets of that divine science', they too should be conveyed by esoteric methods and the biblical texts that transmit them should be interpreted by esoteric methods, that is, by allusions. In Guide 2:29 Maimonides emphasizes the esoteric character of the Account of the Beginning: 'Not everything mentioned in the Torah concerning the Account of the Beginning is to be taken in its external sense as the vulgar imagine' (p. 243; p. 346). But if 'not everything' is to be taken in its external sense, we may infer that some things are to be so understood. In other words, some biblical texts associated with the Account of the Beginning should be interpreted literally.

At the end of chapter 29, Maimonides announces the subject of the following chapter: there will 'give several indications as to texts concerned with the Account of the Beginning' (p. 243; p. 346). These turn out to be the stories of the creation of the world, of the creation of man, of the Garden of Eden, and of Adam's sons - Cain, Abel, and Seth. The stories of the creation of man, of the Garden of Eden, and of Adam's sons are explained only by means of a 'hard' esoteric method, but the cosmological portion of the story is interpreted in various ways: exoteric, 'soft' esoteric, and a 'hard' esoteric interpretation.23 Let us proceed to analyze these methods.

Not all of the philosophical exoteric interpretations of the cosmological part of the story of creation are meant for the masses; some of them target persons who have some knowledge of Aristotelian philosophy, including the intellectual elite. For them, Maimonides demonstrates that the biblical texts concerning the Account of the

23 For an analysis of the cosmological part of the story of creation, see Klein-Braslavy, Creation. Here I consider Maimonides' interpretation from another point of view. The analysis that follows supplements the one I offered there.
Beginning conform to Aristotelian physics. Maimonides provides an exoteric interpretation of the word 'earth' (erez). He begins by noting that it is an equivocal term and explains it as he does in the biblical-philosophical lexicon in the first part of the Guide:

Among the things you ought to know is that 'earth' is an equivocal term used in a general and a particular sense. In a general sense it is applied to all that is beneath the sphere of the moon. I mean the four elements. In a particular sense it is applied to one element, the last among them, namely, earth. (p. 246; p. 350)

Then he offers a clear explanation of the senses in which the word 'earth' should be understood in the story of creation. In Genesis 1:1, 'In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth', it refers to the four elements; in Genesis 1:10, 'And God called the dry land earth', it means the element 'earth'.

Maimonides also explains that the Bible itself provides an 'interpretative key' to the equivocity of the term 'earth' and its meaning in verse 10. The phrase, 'God called A B' indicates that B is an equivocal term and that in its second appearance in the text it has a different meaning from its first. Given that the second occurrence of 'earth' in Genesis 1 is preceded by 'God called [the dry land earth]' (v. 10), 'earth' in this verse has a different meaning than in verse 1.24 Maimonides regards this 'interpretative key' as 'a great secret of the secrets' (p. 246; p. 351); nevertheless, it is a secret that he reveals to all readers. Here, as with the interpretation of anthropomorphic and anthropopathic terms in the Bible and the parable of the 'married harlot', Maimonides reduces the scope of the esoteric teaching of the Bible and reveals one of its secrets. I think that he reveals the 'secret' of a meta-linguistic device because he considers that it cannot damage the faith of the masses.

For readers acquainted with Aristotelian physics, Maimonides also offers an exoteric interpretation of Genesis 1:2: 'And the earth was unformed and void, and the darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God moves upon the face of the waters'. According to

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24 Maimonides finds this 'interpretative key' also in Genesis 1:8, 'and God called the firmament Heaven', and uses it to interpret the verse. See Klein-Braslavy, Creation, pp. 185-186.
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this interpretation, the verse describes the four elements - fire, air, water, and earth:

A proof of this [that earth in a particular sense is the element earth] is his saying: 'And the earth was unformed and void, and the darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God' and so on. Thus sometimes he called all the elements earth. Afterwards he said: 'and God called the dry land earth' (Gen. 1:10). (p. 246; pp. 350-351)

Maimonides adds that the story of creation mentions the elements in their order in the Aristotelian theory of natural place:

The elements are mentioned according to their natural position; namely, first the earth, then the water that is above it, then the air that adheres to the water, then the fire that is above the air. (ibid.)

Though these are philosophical interpretations, Maimonides considers them to be literal construals. These terms and verses do not have a meaning suited to the grasp of the multitude, unlike the 'married harlot' metaphor. Their only import is philosophical.25

Maimonides does not explain the word 'heaven.' He must have considered its meaning to be self-evident. He does, however, explain some astronomical points that can be learned from the wording of Genesis 1:17 - 'And God set them [the moon, the sun and the stars] in the firmament of the heaven' - taking for granted that 'heaven' means the spheres:26

In these words there is likewise a clear indication of what has already been demonstrated, namely, of the fact that all the stars as well as the sun and the moon are situated within the sphere -

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25 Maimonides explains the word maqom (place) in the same way in Guide 1:8. The philosophical or scientific meaning of this word is its only primary meaning. Maqom has no other physical meaning than 'particular and general place' (p. 22; p. 33).

26 This is also the interpretation that Maimonides assumes in Guide 1:4, 9, and 11. In Guide 1:70 he explains that shamayim (heavens) in the expression 'the rider of the heavens' (Deut. 33:26) is only one sphere, the sphere that encompasses the universe. See Klein-Braslavy, Creation, pp. 131-133.
as there is no vacuum in the world - and that they are not located upon the surface of a sphere, as the vulgar imagine. This appears from his saying: in the firmament of the heaven, and not upon the firmament of the heaven. (p. 247; p. 352)

The wording 'in the firmament of the heaven' shows that the biblical description conforms to an astronomical doctrine demonstrated in Aristotelian philosophy - that the stars are located inside the spheres and not on their surface. Maimonides explains that this doctrine is founded on the fact, as proven in Aristotle's physics, that there is no vacuum.

The masses imagine that the stars are located on the surface of the sphere. They make this mistake because they use imagination instead of intellect. From this comment we may infer that although the masses are incorrect about the location of the stars, they are acquainted with the doctrine of the spheres. Hence it is most plausible that Maimonides thought that even the multitude of his time understood that 'heaven' means the spheres. The term *shamayim* (heaven), like *maqom* (place) in its first sense, does not have a second non-scientific or non-philosophical meaning. On this point, the multitude differs from the philosophers only in the latter's understanding that the stars are located inside the spheres. For readers conversant with Aristotle, Maimonides explains that the biblical verse conforms to the principles of the Aristotelian astronomy. His explanation is exoteric and clear. Again,

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27 Because the music of the spheres results from the friction between the stars and the spheres, Maimonides' insistence that the stars are located inside the spheres and not upon their surface is a tacit rejection of the Pythagorean doctrine of the harmonic music of the spheres. See Aristotle, *On the Heavens* II, 9. For Maimonides' discussion of the issue, see: *Guide* 2:8; Klein-Braslavy, *Creation*, pp. 187-188.


29 In *Guide* 2:8 Maimonides attributes this notion to the Sages as well, but says that they changed their mind and accepted the opinion of the sages of the nations of the world (p. 186; p. 267).

30 According to *Guide* 1:73, premise ten, it is the intellect, and not the imagination, which is the criterion of the necessary and the impossible.

31 See *Guide* 1:8.
he evidently believes that knowing the correct location of the stars will not weaken the faith of the masses.

Thus far we have been considering interpretations based directly on the biblical text. In two other exoteric comments on the Account of the Beginning Maimonides relies on the Sages: *et ha-shamayim ve-et ha-are* [‘the heaven and the earth’] (Gen. 1:1) and the growth of grass and trees on the Third Day. Although midrashic interpretations of biblical texts are frequent in the *Guide*, most of them are esoteric and use the midrashim as comments that allude to the inner meaning of the text. Here Maimonides relies on explicit exoteric interpretations of the Sages and not on esoteric midrashic hints.

Expounding Genesis 1:1, Maimonides cites the Sages' understanding that the heaven and the earth were created together:

> Among the things that you ought to know is the fact that the Sages have explicitly stated in a number of passages that the word *et* figuring in his words *et ha-shamayim ve-et ha-are* [‘the heaven and the earth’] (Gen. 1:1), has in that verse the meaning: with. They mean by this that He created together with the heaven all that is in the heaven and together with the earth all that is in the earth. Maimonides is referring to the statement by R. Aqiba (Genesis Rabbah 1:14), who adopts the exegetical principle propounded by Naḥum Ish Gamzu.
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together because He says: 'I call unto them, they stand up together' (Isa. 48:13). Accordingly everything was created simultaneously.34 (p. 245; p. 350)

With regard to the growth of the grass and trees on the Third Day, he connects the biblical description in verses 11-12 with Genesis 2:6 - 'And there went up a mist from the earth' - and explains (on the basis of Genesis Rabbah 13:1) that the grass and the trees grew after God caused the rain to fall:

> Among the things that you ought to know is that the Sages have made it clear that God only made grass and trees grow from the earth after he had caused rain to fall upon them, and that its saying: 'And there went up a mist from the earth' (Gen. 2:6) is a description of the first state of matters obtaining before the command: Let the earth put forth grass. For this reason Onqelos translates: And there had gone up a mist from the earth. This is also clear from the [scriptural] text itself because of its saying: 'And no shrub of the field was yet in the earth' (Gen. 2:5); this is clear by now. (pp. 248-9; p. 354; emphasis mine)

The Sages' interpretation allows Maimonides to argue that the biblical description of the created beings corresponds to the natural order of the sublunar world according to Aristotelian physics. First he uses clear scientific language to describe the order of nature according to Aristotelian physics:

> You who are engaged in speculation, know that after the forces of the sphere, the first of the causes producing generation and passing-away are light and darkness - because of the heat and the cold consequent upon them. The elements intermix in consequence of the motion of the sphere, and their combinations vary because of light and darkness. The first combination that is produced by them is constituted by two exhalations, which are the first causes of all the meteorological phenomena among which rain figures. They are also the causes of the minerals and,
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after them, of the composition of the plants, and after those, of that of the living beings; the final composition being that of man. Darkness is the nature of the existence of the whole lower world, light supervening in it. It should be sufficient for you to know that when there is no light, the state of matters remains permanent. (p. 249; p. 354)

At the end of the description he clearly explains the correspondence between the philosophical doctrine and the biblical text: 'The [scriptural] text about the Account of the Beginning goes exactly in this order, leaving out nothing' (ibid.; emphasis mine).35 Maimonides is openly addressing the reader who 'is engaged in speculation', namely the philosopher. The biblical text does not cause any perplexity. Maimonides merely wants to show readers that there the Bible and Aristotelian philosophy agree with each other.

Alongside these exoteric interpretations, Maimonides also offers two types of esoteric explanations for some of the cosmological parts of the story of creation: 'soft' and 'hard'. Maimonides offers a 'soft' esoteric interpretation of 'firmament' and 'the water above the firmament' (Gen. 1:7).36 He openly admits that such an explication is the result of a textual constraint. There is a contradiction between the literal meaning of the text and Aristotelian physics, which may perplex readers who accept Aristotelian philosophy as the truth. If the firmament is the spheres, as readers may understand, the biblical statement that there is water above the firmament contradicts the Aristotelian doctrine that there is nothing upon the spheres.37 The only way to free the 'perplexed' from their perplexity is to interpret the biblical text in a way compatible with Aristotle. Nevertheless, Maimonides considers the philosophical

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35 But see my comment on this statement in Creation, pp. 222-227.
36 It is worth noting that Maimonides does not cite this part of the verse in Hebrew, but only refers to its meaning.
37 This is how Gersonides understands Maimonides. Gersonides understands that 'Maimonides interprets the term raqi' as the coldest part of the air in which the clouds and the rain are generated. He was led to this interpretation by his reluctance to believe that there is water surrounding the heavenly body' (The Wars of the Lord 6, part 2, chap. 7 as translated by S. Feldman, Levi ben Gershon: The Wars of the Lord, vol. 3, Philadelphia 1999, p. 442; For the Hebrew see Milkanot Ha-Shem, Leipzig 1866, p. 425).
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meaning of the text to be esoteric and thinks that the literal meaning of the text conceals it from the multitude in order to protect their faith:

But there is something hidden, as you will see, with regard to the firmament and the thing above it, which is called water. … If on the other hand, the matter is considered according to its inner meaning and to what was truly intended, it is most hidden. For in that case it was necessary for it to be one of the concealed secrets so that the vulgar should not know it. (p. 248; p. 353)

Maimonides does not explain how the vulgar understand the literal meaning of the text. According to an opinion that Abravanel cites from Saadia Gaon’s lost commentary on the Pentateuch, the masses believe that the firmament is something rigid - 'a spherical hard body' - with water beneath it and above it.38

Because the meaning of the verse is esoteric, Maimonides interprets it by an esoteric method. Instead of explaining what it is that the Bible calls 'firmament' and 'the water above the firmament', as he did in his exoteric interpretation of 'earth', he merely drops hints. These hints are addressed to readers who have already studied philosophy. The first hint is that the 'water above the firmament', the 'water beneath the firmament' and the 'firmament' are all created from the element 'water'.39 Maimonides concludes his interpretation of the 'firmament' and the 'water above the firmament' as follows:

Reflect, if you are one of those who reflect,40 to what extent he [R. Aqiba] had made clear and revealed the whole matter in this statement [do not say, Water, Water…], provided that you

38 See Klein-Braslavy, Creation, pp. 169-170.
39 Maimonides explains that the verb va-yavdel (divided) in Gen. 1:7 does not refer merely to a division in place but to a division with regard to the form of the water that was under the firmament and the water that was above the firmament. Both are water. As to the claim that the firmament too was produced from water he relies on the exoteric interpretation of the Sages in Genesis Rabbah 4:2: 'The middle group [of the water] congealed'.
40 In Arabic, Ftabar means philosophical reflection and learning from it; see W. Harvey, 'Ibn Rushd ve-ha Rambam 'al Ḥovat ha-Hitbonenut ha-Philosophit', Tarbiq 58 (1989), pp. 75-83.
consider it well, understand all that has been demonstrated in the *Meteorologica*. (p. 248; p. 353)

Here, as in the interpretation of the astronomical matters in Genesis 1:17, Maimonides relies on a scientific truth, a demonstrated doctrine. This time, it is a doctrine proven in Aristotle's *Meteorology*. Because this scientific doctrine is harmful to the multitude, he does not state it explicitly, as he did for 'in the firmament of the heaven', but only alludes to it. Qualified readers, familiar with Aristotle's *Meteorology*, can themselves identify the substances in Aristotle's physics that are designated by the 'firmament' and the 'water above the firmament'. Because Maimonides does not explain the biblical text, but only hints at its meanings, 'firmament' and the 'water above the firmament' can be understood in several ways, as is manifested by the diverse interpretations offered by the medieval commentators on Maimonides.41

Maimonides does not explain how the literal meaning of the text could harm the masses. I have not found a better explanation than that offered by Asher Crescas (fourteenth century): The true meaning of the biblical text is a 'secret' because if the vulgar knew that rain has natural causes and does not depend on God's will they would not longer believe in divine providence.42

Maimonides offers a more esoteric elucidation, a 'hard' esoteric interpretation, of the opening word of the Creation story: *bereshit* ('in the beginning').43 The explanation of that word (and of the verb *bara*) is a key for the understanding the Torah's doctrine of Creation. It deals with one of the subjects that Maimonides considers to be 'truly the mysteries of the Torah': 'His creation of that which He created' (*Guide* 1:35, p. 54; p. 80).44 Because these 'mysteries' should be conveyed

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41 See Klein-Braslavy, *Creation*, pp. 163-168.
42 Crescas cites biblical verses that ascribe rain to God's action and understands them to mean that rain is caused by God's will. See his commentary on the Guide in: *Moreh Nevukhim* "im Perushei Efodi, Shem Tov ve-Crescas*, Jerusalem 1960, p. 60a.
43 The analysis of Maimonides' interpretation of the word *reshit*, which follows, supplements the one I offered in my book *Creation*, pp. 114-131.
44 For the meaning of this expression, see Klein-Braslavy, *Philosophical Esotericism*, p. 45.
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only by 'chapter headings', explaining them entails a more esoteric method than that used for the physical substances 'firmament' and 'the water above the firmament'.

Maimonides divides bereshit into its components, the noun reshit and the preposition be-, and treats each one separately. The explanation of reshit differs from those found in the lexicographic chapters of the Guide. In the 'lexicon' he generally cites a word or words and then comments on each of its senses in Arabic. In Guide 2:30, however, Maimonides does not explain the word reshit directly. He begins the chapter with some remarks on two related Arabic terms, al-awwal and al-mabda, and distinguishes among their senses. Only then does he mention their Hebrew parallels, identifying awwal with tehllah and mabda with reshit.45

It is his explanation of mabda (principle) that interests us here.46 Maimonides does not define the word, but merely offers some comments that enable readers to understand it more accurately. Reshit belongs to a type of words that have 'a formal meaning'. These are words that indicate a class of objects that share a common property. That is, they are defined by intension rather than by extension. The specific referents of each member of the class can be identified only by the contexts in which they figure and by its semantic axis.

Maimonides' first comment on the meaning of mabda is that 'a principle exists in the thing whose principle it is or simultaneously with it' (p.244; p. 248).47 This clarifies two features of a 'principle': it

45 It is possible that here he is disagreeing with Sa'adia Gaon, who rendered the first verse of Genesis as: Awwal mä khalasa Allāh al-samāwāt wa-l-ard (The first thing God created was the heaven and the earth). See Y. Y. Rivlin, 'Perush R. Sa'adya Gaon la-Torah', in: Sefer ha-Yovel li-Khvod Y. N. L. Epstein, Jerusalem 1950, p. 134. Maimonides justifies the identification of reshit with al-mabada by the etymology of reshit: 'For it derives from head [rosh], which in view of its position is the principle [mabda] of the living being' (p. 245; p. 248).
46 For a discussion of the distinction between al-awwal and al-mabda, see Klein-Braslavy, Creation, pp. 121-123.
47 'Principle' (mabda) is the subject of the sentence, which thus cannot be the definition of that term. Gersonides, who is influenced by Maimonides' interpretation, defines it as follows: 'The term 'beginning' (reshit) means in Hebrew that part of a thing which is prior to all its other parts, no matter what kind of priority' (The Wars of the Lord 6, part 2, chap. 2, p. 420 [Leipzig
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is always a principle of something else and has a certain relation with
the thing whose principle it is.\textsuperscript{48} Maimonides speaks of two possible
relations between a principle and the thing whose principle it is: the
principle may exist \textit{in} the thing or simultaneously \textit{with} it.\textsuperscript{49} Thus
\textit{mabda} = \textit{reshit} denotes a class of objects whose common characteristic
is that they are principles that may have two types of relations with the
thing whose principle they are: they either exist \textit{in} it or exist alongside
it. Maimonides also adds a 'negative' remark: 'even if it [the principle]
does not precede it [the thing] in time' (ibid.). The turgid syntax of the

\textsuperscript{48} This explanation is similar but not identical with those offered by Rashi and
Abraham Ibn Ezra. Rashi thinks that \textit{reshit} is in the construct state (\textit{somekh}) and
always needs a dependent genitive (\textit{nismakh}): 'There is no \textit{reshit} in the Bible
that does not cling to the word the follows it. \ldots Here too you have to say 'in
the beginning God created etc.''. According to Rashi, the word \textit{reshit} in Genesis 1:1
lacks its nismakh and the commentator must complete it. Rashi suggests two
complements: \textit{be-reshit bero} and \textit{be-reshit ha-kol}. Ibn Ezra mentions such an
explanation: 've-yesh omerim ki be-reshit le-\textit{olam samukh}' (Some people say
that \textit{be-reshit} is always in the construct state) and cites the complement those
commentators suggest: \textit{be-reshit ha-\textit{\text `-erev} o ha-laylah o ha-hoshek} (the
beginning of the evening/night/darkness). Ibn Ezra does not agree with them. He
thinks that \textit{be-reshit} in Genesis 1:1 is a construct state, although the word can
exist in the absolute state. Maimonides' interpretation is different. He offers a
lexical interpretation of \textit{be-reshit} and not a syntactical one.

\textsuperscript{49} Maimonides provides two examples of specific members of the class \textit{mabda} =
\textit{reshit}. The first is taken from biology: 'the heart is the principle of the living
being' (p. 244; p. 348). The second is from Aristotelian physics: 'The element
[is] the principle of that of which it is the element' (ibid.). Because he does not
explain the examples, his medieval commentators offered several. See Klein-
Braslavy, Creation, pp. 116-120. According to Guide 1:16, which explains the
word \textit{zur}, another member of the class \textit{mabda} = \textit{reshit} is God, who is 'the
principle (\textit{al mabda}) and the efficient cause of all things other than himself' (p.
28; p. 42).
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sentence permits several interpretations of the possible relationships between the principle and the thing whose principle it is.\textsuperscript{50}

After identifying \textit{reshit} with \textit{mabda}, Maimonides turns to the preposition \textit{be-}. It has several meanings in Hebrew, and the commentators are divided about its meaning in \textit{be-reshit}: is it the instrumental \textit{bet ha-‘ezer}, 'by means of,' or the container \textit{bet ha-keli}, 'in'? If the first, \textit{reshit} is the means by which God created the world.\textsuperscript{51} If the second, God created the world in \textit{reshit}. Maimonides opts for the second, thus adding another hint for identifying the referent of \textit{reshit} in the Creation story: \textit{reshit} is a principle (in the sense he attributed to \textit{mabda}) in which the world was created. According to the introduction to the \textit{Guide}, one of the literary devices used by the Bible to transmit the esoteric teaching of the Account of the Beginning is to communicate it 'in very obscure words' (\textit{umār mubhama ǧiddan}; p.5; p. 9).\textsuperscript{52} The Creation story, which begins with a word that indicates a class of principles but without specifying the particular member of the class referred to, may be an example of this stylistic device.

Maimonides does not fully clear up the obscurity and does not specify the principle in which the world was created and what it is the

\textsuperscript{50} The examples he provides to illustrate these relations can also be interpreted in several ways. For the possible interpretations of the two relations and the examples that illustrate them, see Klein-Braslavy, \textit{Creation}, pp. 115-121.

\textsuperscript{51} Shem Tov, who identifies \textit{RESHIT} with 'wisdom and knowledge', offers such a commentary. It is also found in the introduction to the \textit{Zohar} and in \textit{Midrash ha-Ne`elam} on Genesis. This midrash also offers another explanation of \textit{be-reshit} as a means, and identifies it with the Torah.

\textsuperscript{52} The Alexandrian commentators of the fifth and sixth centuries attributed to Aristotle the use of obscurity as a method of concealing philosophical doctrines from the undeserving. The reason for its use is explained as the seventh of the ten points that students had to know before studying Aristotle's works in the prolegomena to the commentaries on the \textit{Categories}. See: I. Hadot, \textit{Simplicius Commentaire sur les Catégories}, Leiden 1990, pp. 14, 113-123; L. G. Westernik, \textit{Anonymous Prolegomena to Platonic Philosophy}, Amsterdam 1962, pp. xxvi-xxvii; D. Gutas, \textit{Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition: Introduction to Reading Avicenna's Philosophical Works}, Leiden 1988, pp. 225-227. This tradition was transmitted to Arabic philosophy and adopted by Alfarabi, Avicenna, and other Arabic authors. See ibid., pp. 227-230. It is possible that Maimonides was acquainted with this tradition and considered obscurity to be a method of concealing esoteric doctrines that he attributes to the Bible. Maimonides, however, does not understand the method of obfuscation in the same way as Alfarabi and Avicenna did. See ibid., pp. 228-229, 308.
principle of. But he adds a 'negative' comment that suggests an identification of the principle in which the world was created by restricting the group of possible concrete referents of *reshit* in the first verse of Genesis.\(^{53}\) The principle in which the world was created does not exist in time: 'The world has not been created in a temporal beginning as we have explained,\(^{54}\) for time belongs to the created things' (p. 245; p. 349). Readers are supposed to find a principle of Aristotelian philosophy that matches all of Maimonides’ hints.

The method of interpretation Maimonides is using here is what I call 'an interpretative riddle'.\(^{55}\) Maimonides' hints form a riddle the readers must solve. The riddle is: what thing is it that is the principle of some other thing (with the further stipulation that the principle is in that other thing but is not temporal)\(^{56}\) and in which the world was created? Because a principle is a principle of something else, the solution should also identify that something, of which the specific member of the class *reshit* mentioned in the Creation story is the principle. Only readers who are familiar with Aristotelian philosophy can solve the interpretative riddle. They can look there for a principle that exists within that whose principle it is and that suits the context of the story of creation. In addition, this principle is not temporal. Maimonides does not specify which work of Aristotle should be consulted, as he did in his esoteric interpretation of 'firmament' and 'the water above the firmament'.

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\(^{53}\) As noted, the specific referent of a word that indicates a class of objects is determined by the context and the semantic axis of the text. I think that the context of the story of creation implies the elimination of the possibility of a principle that exists simultaneously with that whose principle it is. The principle in which the world was created should exist in the thing whose principle it is.

\(^{54}\) Maimonides is referring to Guide 2:13, where he uses the same expression, 'does not have a temporal beginning' (p. 197; p. 282).

\(^{55}\) See Klein-Braslavy, 'Interpretative Riddles', where I discuss the literary genre of the riddle and compare it to another type of 'interpretative riddle' in Maimonides' *Guide* - an interpretative riddle on some biblical stories, as found in the Midrash. I illustrate this type of 'interpretative riddle' by Maimonides' interpretation of the creation of man and by his interpretation of the *nābāš* (serpent) in the story of the Garden of Eden. It is important to note that the interpretation of *bereshit* is a direct commentary on the biblical text and is not mediated by a midrash. Maimonides himself offers the hints that compose the interpretative riddle.

\(^{56}\) A 'negative' element that restricts the possible answers to the riddle is characteristic of its literary genre.
The medieval commentators Efodi and Crescas suggested an answer based on Aristotle's theory of time. They proposed to identify \textit{reshit} with the 'now', which is not a part of time but rather a point that has no duration and is analogous to a point on a line. Just as the point is the cause of the line, the 'now' is the cause of time. The 'now' is 'in' time in a certain way, because it is its beginning. Its priority is causal, not temporal.\footnote{Nevertheless, this interpretation poses a dual problem: first, because the 'now' has no duration, it is not clear how it is possible to create something 'in' it; second, according to Aristotle the 'now' is the limit between the past and the future; hence there is time before every 'now' and time cannot have a beginning. If Maimonides is alluding here to the 'now' we must admit that he has already anticipated Gersonides' claim that there is a 'now' that is the beginning of the future but is not the end of the past. See \textit{The Wars of the Lord}, 6, part 1, chap. 12, pp. 286-288 (Leipzig ed.), pp. 359-363 (Feldman tr.). See also Narboni's criticism of the interpretation in his commentary on the \textit{Guide}, p. 39 (J. Goldenthal ed.).} Hence the 'now' is the principle; the \textit{reshit}, and the thing whose principle it is, is time.

We have seen that Maimonides' biblical exegesis is grounded on three assumptions. The first is that in his age the masses are capable of understanding the idea of an incorporeal God. Hence it is necessary to show them that certain biblical terms also have an incorporeal meaning that should be applied to God. The second assumption is that the Torah is an educational myth. Hence its external meaning conforms to the mental capacity of the masses, while its inner meaning is suited to the grasp of the intellectual elite and teaches philosophical doctrines. The third assumption is that the Torah contains esoteric teaching that should be withheld from the masses and conveyed to the deserving alone. On the basis of these assumptions Maimonides offers three types of biblical interpretations: exoteric ones meant for part of the masses as well as for 'perplexed' intellectuals. These deal with words that are likely to corporealize God and with some of the divine revelations. There are also exoteric philosophical interpretations meant exclusively for the intellectual elite, as well as esoteric philosophical interpretations meant for both the 'perplexed' and the intellectual elite. These interpretations must be concealed from the masses because they are liable to damage their faith. Maimonides uses two types of esoteric methods, 'soft' and 'hard,' which differ in the type of allusions they
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use. 'Soft' esoteric interpretations tell readers which Aristotelian text can help them identify the objects intended by the Bible. 'Hard' esoteric interpretations, which are more common in the Guide, employ various allusive methods. Here we have seen an application of one of them, the interpretative riddle.