

Esotericism to Exotericism: From Maimonides to Gersonides

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There is little doubt that among the introductions to treatises in Jewish philosophy, the one that has been the object of the most study is Maimonides' introduction to the *Guide of the Perplexed*. The reason for this phenomenon is not only the importance of the treatise; the contents of the introduction are a significant factor as well. In the introduction Maimonides announces that he will reveal certain secrets in his treatise. At the same time he cautions his readers that he will do so in an esoteric manner. In other words, the esoteric will be transformed into the exoteric, but esoterically. He adds that at times he will reveal which passages in Scriptures should be interpreted as parables - that is to say, which passages have an esoteric meaning - but he will not provide the explanation itself, at least not explicitly. To complicate matters further, Maimonides indicates that he will employ different techniques to hide the truth from the average reader, who is a non-perceptive reader, and that these techniques include intentional contradictions in his discussion of various topics. These contradictions as well will not be presented overtly but in a concealed manner. In short, we are confronted with an introduction which informs us from the outset, that the author will make it difficult for the reader to discover his true opinion on a range of subjects. One may add that the rest is history.

From the time Maimonides wrote his treatise until the present day many commentators and researchers have devoted their efforts to the task of decoding the secrets hidden in the *Guide*.¹ Is the secret that

1 All references to the *Guide of the Perplexed* are taken from Shlomo Pines's translation, Chicago 1963. For recent studies on the nature of Maimonides' esotericism see S. Klein-Braslavy, *King Solomon and Philosophical Esotericism in the Thought of Maimonides* [Hebrew], Jerusalem 1996; M Halbertal,

Maimonides conceals his complete acceptance of world-view of the Islamic Aristotelian philosophers, a world view that confines divine activity to the order of nature? Or does he come close to their *Weltanschauung* but preserves a significant gap between his and theirs?² Perhaps Maimonides adopts a skeptical posture in regard to metaphysical questions and treats this stance as the secret that is to remain obscured from the average reader?³ It has even been suggested that his introduction notwithstanding, there are no secrets in the *Guide* and Maimonides in fact wrote a treatise in which he reveals all his positions explicitly.⁴ The very history of the search for Maimonides' secrets has itself become an object of research.⁵ Concurrently, the preoccupation with this topic has found a number of detractors who have criticized this scholarly trend, or at least certain aspects of it.⁶ Yet one may safely predict that

Concealment and Revelation: The Secret and its Boundaries in Medieval Jewish Tradition [Hebrew], Jerusalem 2001, pp. 40-53; D. Schwarz, *Contradiction and Concealment in Medieval Jewish Thought* [Hebrew], Ramat-Gan 2002, pp. 68-143; Y. Loberbaum, 'On Contradictions, Rationality, Dialectics and Esotericism in Maimonides' *Guide of the Perplexed*', *Metaphysics* 55 (2002), pp. 711-750; A. Ravitzky, 'Maimonides: Esotericism and Philosophical Education' [Hebrew], *Daat* 53 (2004), pp. 43-62.

- 2 This is essentially J. Guttman's view; see *Philosophies of Judaism*, D. Silverman trans., New York 1964, pp. 192-197.
- 3 See for example S. Klein-Braslavy, 'The Creation of the World and Maimonides' Interpretation of Genesis 1-V' in: S. Pines and Y. Yovel eds., *Maimonides and Philosophy*, Dordrecht 1986, pp. 65-78.
- 4 Herbert Davidson has argued this position in a lecture, 'On Maimonides' Seventh Type of Contradiction', which was delivered at the 34th AJS conference in Los Angeles, 2002. See now the critique of the esoteric approach in his *Moses Maimonides: The Man and His Works*, Oxford 2005, pp. 387-402. The suggestion that Maimonides may have not incorporated any esoteric positions in his treatise is already discussed in the introduction to Moshe of Solerno's commentary on the *Guide* written in the second half of the 13th century. See ms. Munich 370, f. 9v-10r. On this commentary on the *Guide* see J. Sermoneta, 'Moses ben Solomon of Salerno and Nicholaus of Giovinazo on Maimonides' *The Guide of the Perplexed*' [Hebrew], *Iyyun* 20 (1969), pp. 214-240.
- 5 See A. Ravitzky, 'The Secrets of the Guide of the Perplexed: Between the Thirteenth and the Twentieth Centuries' in: I. Twersky ed., *Studies in Maimonides*, Cambridge, MA 1990, pp. 159-207 [repr. in his *History and Faith: Studies in Jewish Philosophy*, Amsterdam 1996, pp. 246-303].
- 6 See W. Z. Harvey, 'How Leo Strauss Paralyzed the Study of the Guide of the Perplexed in the 20th Century' [Hebrew], *Iyyun* 50 (2001), pp. 387-396. Harvey criticizes the early Straussian view and the influence it exerted on subsequent scholarship that all the contradictions in the *Guide* are contradictions between

as long as the *Guide* remains the object of serious study - that is to say, as long as Jewish, if not human, civilization flourishes - this topic will continue to engage students of Maimonides. In this article I will make a number of observations regarding Maimonides' esotericism: why when seen from a certain perspective the topic is quite trivial, while from a different one it remains exceptionally important. In order to gain further insight into Maimonides' approach I will contrast it to the exoteric approach adopted by the great Provençal Jewish philosopher Gersonides in his philosophical-theological treatise, *Wars of the Lord*, written a century and a half after Maimonides' *Guide*.⁷

Worthy of note is the fact that Maimonides' approach is exceptional when compared to that of both his predecessors and his followers. Even more exceptional is the *explicit* statement on the part of the author that he is writing a book containing an esoteric level.⁸ There are a number of examples of compositions written after the *Guide* which open on a similar note, for example *Ma'ase Nissim* by R. Nissim of Marseilles,⁹ but these proclamations normally were formulated in imitation of that of Maimonides. This type of declaration appears to have served as a stylistic motif rather than a reflection of the author's actual approach. R. Nissim of Marseilles, after his initial statement that he will hide some of his views from the average reader while leaving hints for the astute, remains true to this approach for a limited number of chapters before he abandons it completely. When he reaches the commentary on the Torah, comprising the bulk of his treatise, he devotes the *entire* commentary to providing explicit naturalistic reasons for all the miracles in the Torah and for other matters that suggest a

Jerusalem (Maimonides' exoteric views) and Athens (Maimonides' esoteric views) or between religion and philosophy.

7 This treatise has been translated into English by Seymour Feldman in 3 volumes, Philadelphia 1984-1999. For a study of this treatise see in particular C. Touati, *La pensée philosophique et théologique de Gersonide*, Paris 1973.

8 One has only to contrast Maimonides' treatise with Spinoza's *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* which was read by Leo Strauss as an esoteric work though the author makes no reference to this fact; see his 'How to Study Spinoza's *Theologico-Political Treatise*', *PAAJR* 17 (1948), pp. 69-131 [repr. in his *Persecution and the Art of Writing*, New York 1952, pp. 142-201; *Jewish Philosophy and the Crisis of Modernity*, K. H. Green ed., Albany 1997, pp. 181-233].

9 See my edition of *Ma'ase Nissim*, Jerusalem 2000, pp. 53-57.

supernatural explanation. In his commentary he makes no attempt to hide his radical stance.¹⁰

The question that arises is what exactly does Maimonides seek to hide and why. If the *Guide* does in fact contain secret teachings, it is safe to assume that they are connected to the topic regarded by the Sages as the most esoteric of all: Account of the Chariot (*ma'aseh merkavah*). According to B. Ḥagigah 13a this topic, which consists of the exposition of the 'first chapter of the Book of Ezekiel, is to be taught only to one student at a time, who must possess all the requisite intellectual virtues, and even then only the 'chapter headings' are to be conveyed. In light of the esoteric nature of the subject, Maimonides' approach to it *prior* to writing the *Guide* is perplexing. He offers all readers an explicit summary of the 'chapter headings' of this topic in the opening section of his great legal treatise, *Mishneh Torah*, in the first two chapters of *Laws of the Principles of the Torah*. Though he does not enter into a detailed presentation, he leaves no room for doubt that the particulars of this topic are contained in the books of Aristotle and his followers.¹¹ In a number of passages in his writings he identifies the Account of the Chariot with the divine science, which he treats as a clear allusion to metaphysics or the science dealing with incorporeal existents and first causes.¹² Thus, this topic remains esoteric only to one who lacks the ability or curiosity to turn to the philosophic literature.

10 See my discussion of R. Nissim's treatise in the introduction, pp. 1-52.

11 The explicit nature of Maimonides' presentation of this topic in his legal work is discussed by me in my *Maimonides' Political Thought*, Albany 1999, pp. 200-204, 212-219. See also L. Strauss, 'Notes on Maimonides' Book of Knowledge' in: E. Urbach ed., *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to Gershom Scholem*, Jerusalem 1967, pp. 269-283; S. Pines, 'The Philosophical Purport of Maimonides' Halakhic Works and the Purport of the *Guide of the Perplexed*' in: S. Pines and Y. Yovel eds., *Maimonides and Philosophy*, pp. 1-14; W. Z. Harvey, 'The *Mishneh Torah* as a Key to the Secrets of the *Guide*' in: E. Fleischer et. al. eds., *Me'ah She'arim: Studies in Medieval Spiritual Life in Memory of Isadore Twersky*, Jerusalem 2001, pp. 11-28.

12 See *Commentary on Mishnah Ḥagigah* 2.1; *Guide* Introduction; 2.2. For a description of these sciences see *Treatise on Logic*, 14 (I. Efron ed., New York 1938, p. 63).

One may justly argue that matters are not quite so simple when one turns to Maimonides' presentation of this topic in the *Guide*. His formal presentation of the Account of the Chariot is found in the first seven chapters of the third part, which are among the hardest chapters of the treatise to interpret. The secret thus would appear to remain well hidden. If, for example, we interpret Maimonides as hinting that the *ḥayyot* (beasts) Ezekiel saw is a parable for the spheres, which is the most plausible interpretation,¹³ what then in his vision serves as a parable for the Separate Intellects, which together with God comprise the subject matter of the Account of the Chariot, according to *Laws of the Principles of the Torah*? The spheres, which are corporeal, though their matter is far superior to earthly matter, are treated in the third chapter of *Laws of the Principles of the Torah* as belonging to the less esoteric subject of Account of Creation (*ma'aseh bereshit*). Moreover, what is the significance of the fact that there are only four *ḥayyot* in Ezekiel's prophetic vision, while Maimonides appears to accept the view that there exist more than four primary spheres - that is to say, spheres that contain planets or stars and which revolve around the earth as their center? This view is made explicit in his summary of this topic in *Laws of Principles of the Torah*, where he posits eight primary spheres (3.1-2). It seems that he continues to lean towards this view even in the *Guide*, though he defends the possibility that there are only four such spheres.¹⁴ To this list of problems others can be added. In the final analysis, it is not easy to understand Maimonides' approach to

13 See for example Moses Narboni's commentary to *Guide* 3.1-2 (D. J. Goldenthal ed., Vienna 1852, 46b-47a). The *ofanim* according to this interpretation refer to the four elements.

14 Maimonides sets forth the theory of four spheres containing celestial bodies in *Guide* 2.9-10. He tries to show the possibility that all the planets are above the sun in their relation to the earth, hence they all may be moving in the same sphere. He concedes, however, that this view has been largely discounted by astronomers, and he appears to be defensive in his presentation. The view of four spheres, however, is important for him in explaining certain biblical texts and midrashim, such as the midrash concerning the number of steps in Jacob's ladder. Gad Freudenthal delivered a paper on Maimonides' discussion of the four spheres entitled 'Maimonides' Four Spheres: Sources and Goals' [Hebrew], at the conference 'Maimonides: Between Tradition and Revolution', Jerusalem May 17-19, 2004. This paper will be published in the conference volume. Some of the issues I raise here are discussed by Freudenthal in detail.

this subject in the *Guide*, particularly in light of his clear, though sketchy, exposition of the subject in the *Mishneh Torah*.

Nevertheless, the revealed exceeds the concealed in Maimonides' presentation of this subject in the *Guide*. He does not leave the slightest doubt that the Chariot of Ezekiel is a parable for the structure of the heavens as depicted by scientists and philosophers, the controversy between Aristotle and Ptolemy notwithstanding.¹⁵ Part of the parable in Ezekiel, according to Maimonides, is devoted to the four elements on earth and their link with the world of the celestial spheres, here too in accordance with the scientists' depiction. Moreover, he does not maintain that the issues disputed among the scientists should be decided in accordance with his interpretation of Ezekiel. He opens his interpretation of the Account of the Chariot with the following remarks (p. 416):

There is the fact that in that which has occurred to me with regard to these matters I followed conjecture and supposition; no divine revelation has come to me to teach me that the intention in the matter in question was such and such, nor did I receive what I believe in these matters from a teacher. But the texts of the prophetic books and the dicta of the Sages, together with the speculative premises that I possess, showed me that things are indubitably so and so. Yet it is possible that they are different and that something else is intended.

In other words, Maimonides interprets the secrets of Ezekiel's Chariot in accordance with the speculative premises he accepts from the philosophers in the area of astronomy, and concedes that the true interpretation may be different. He could be hinting that he is not completely comfortable with the fact that Ezekiel speaks only of four *hayyot*, which Maimonides interprets as referring to the spheres. He is not prepared to dismiss the prevalent view of eight dominant spheres containing celestial bodies in order to uphold the truth of the prophetic view. It is significant that in an earlier passage he discounts the view

15 Maimonides deals with this controversy in *Guide* 2.24; for a discussion of this chapter, see the bibliography cited by M. Schwarz in the notes to his Hebrew translation of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, Tel Aviv 2002, p. 336.

of the Sages in favor of those held by the philosophers concerning matters of astronomy. The Sages maintain that the spheres are fixed and the planets within them move, whereas Aristotle, correctly, holds the opposite.¹⁶

In light of the above, the secret of the Chariot in Maimonides' writings becomes trivial. The determination of how to understand the Chariot is in the final analysis a scientific-philosophic one, not primarily based on biblical exegesis. Even if Maimonides is convinced that Ezekiel knew all the secrets of the order of existence without error, and it is not entirely clear that he indeed holds this view,¹⁷ there is no reliable surviving tradition that conveys these secrets according to him. The only way for a person to attain them is by way of science and philosophy. Where there appears to be a conflict between the philosophers and the prophets on scientific issues, such as the number of primary spheres in the heavens, is not automatically decided in accordance with the prophets. The decoding of all the details of the parable of Ezekiel remains an intellectual challenge of the highest order, but it does not seem to add anything to our knowledge of the order of existence, which is the ultimate goal of humanity. In other words, what is most important according to Maimonides is knowledge of what exists and not knowledge of scriptural exegesis.

What is true of the Account of the Chariot is true also of the Account of Creation. Maimonides presents an esoteric commentary on the Account of Creation in *Guide* 2.30,¹⁸ after having presented exoteric chapter headings to this subject in chapters three and four of *Laws of the Principles of the Torah*. One of the more difficult problems that arises from Maimonides' commentary is the precise identity of the firmament (*raqi'a*), created on the second day. In this context

16 *Guide* 2.8.

17 The sounds of the heavens heard by Ezekiel suggest that he held a faulty astronomic view according to Maimonides' discussion in *Guide* 2.8. For a discussion of this point see my *Prophecy: The History of an Idea in Medieval Jewish Philosophy*, Dordrecht 2001, p. 291; See also See C. Touati, 'La probl me de l'inerrance prophetique dans la th ologie juive du moyen  ge', *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 174 (1968), pp. 169-97.

18 For the most in-depth discussion of this chapter see S. Klein-Braslavy, *Maimonides' Interpretation of the Story of Creation* [Hebrew], Jerusalem 1987.

Maimonides cites the famous story in B. Hagigah 14b of the four Sages who entered *pardes* and R. Aqivah's warning to his fellow travelers:

When you arrive at the stones of pure marble do not say: 'water, water', for it is written: *He who speaks untruth shall not stand before my eyes* (Ps. 101:7)

The problem may be simple; its solution, however, is not: What precisely is the place of the stones of pure marble? There are a number of possibilities that share a common trait.¹⁹ According to Maimonides' descriptions of the firmament in the chapter, and the reference he makes to Aristotle's *Meteorology* in this context,²⁰ he leaves little room for doubt that it refers to a region in the earth's atmosphere, as these regions were described by Aristotle and the medieval scientists. R. Aqivah warns his colleagues by way of parable that when they learn about the atmosphere, which is the primary subject of Aristotle's *Meteorology*, they should not confuse the different regions and the phenomena which occur in each. If this is the case according to Maimonides, what difference does it make if one is unable to identify the precise region to which R. Aqivah refers, as long as one has complete knowledge of all the various regions of the atmosphere. Here too the determination of the various regions and what occurs in each of them is scientific and not exegetical. This is the knowledge that is truly important.

I do not wish to ignore all the other weighty problems that arise from Maimonides' presentation. Particularly puzzling is the question why Maimonides takes the story of R. Aqivah, apparently dealing with the Account of the Chariot on its highest level as indicated by the context in which the Talmud brings it, and interprets it as a story that does not deal with the Separate Intellects, not even with the heavenly spheres, but with the earth's atmosphere, which belongs to the Account

19 *ibid.*, pp. 160-174.

20 See *Guide* 2.30, p. 353. It should be noted that Y. Kafih, alone among the translators of the *Guide*, does not interpret Maimonides as referring here to Aristotle's work. See his edition and Hebrew translation of the *Guide*, Jerusalem 1972, p. 384 n. 53.

of Creation. This point may well have profound implications for the problem of the limits of human knowledge in Maimonides' thought.²¹ One should note that most often theological literature stresses the limits of human reason in order to defend the authority of traditional knowledge anchored in revelation. Yet in his discussions in the *Guide of the Account of Creation* - that is to say, the structure of the order of material existence - as well as in his discussions of the Account of the Chariot, Maimonides does not introduce any traditional knowledge we are to rely upon as a substitute to that acquired by human reason, leaving aside the issue whether the world has a temporal beginning or not. The only knowledge available to us in these areas is the knowledge of the philosophers and scientists. Maimonides appropriates their deliberations when he comes to interpret the scriptural accounts of these subjects. In summary, Maimonides regards the Account of the Chariot and the Account of Creation as esoteric subjects and deals with them in the *Guide* in an esoteric manner, but Maimonides' understanding of these secrets does not add to what can be learned from the study of the scientific and philosophic literature.

There are additional subjects that Maimonides views as esoteric but are not primarily scientific in character. In *Guide* 1.35 (pp. 80-81), he brings a list of these subjects, while dealing with the problem issue what the masses should be taught and what should be concealed from them. Maimonides writes:

As for the discussion concerning attributes and the way they should be negated with regard to Him; and as for the meaning of the attributes that may be ascribed to Him, as well as the discussion concerning His creation of that which He created, the character of His governance of the world, the 'how' of His providence with respect to what is other than He, the notion of His will, His apprehension, and His knowledge of all that He knows; and likewise as for the notion of prophecy and the 'how' of its various degrees, and the notion of His names, though they

21 On this issue see in particular S. Pines, 'The Limitations of Human Knowledge according to Al-Farabi, Ibn Bajja, and Maimonides' in: I. Twersky ed., *Studies in Medieval Jewish History and Literature*, Cambridge, MA 1979, pp. 82-109.

are many, being indicative of one and the same thing - it should be considered that all these are obscure matters. In fact, they are truly the mysteries of the Torah and the secrets constantly mentioned in the books of the prophets and in the dicta of the Sages, may their memory be blessed. These are the matters that ought not to be spoken of except in chapter headings, as we have mentioned, and only with an individual such as has been described.

Maimonides' treatment of many of these subjects contains remarks that seem to allude to a secret doctrine. Those acquainted with the medieval commentaries or the modern research on the *Guide* will discern to what extent this list provides the basis for the search for Maimonides' esoteric views. Many are the studies devoted to a discussion of what is his true view regarding the creation of the world, prophecy, God's knowledge of particulars and divine providence.²² These subjects, which Maimonides includes among the secrets of the Torah, are vital to the proper understanding of reality, and not only to the correct interpretation of Scripture. One may argue that Maimonides does not think that the determination of the truth in these topics is to be found primarily in the writings of the philosophers.

Yet, even regarding these subjects one may question to what degree the correct understanding of Maimonides' esoteric position, assuming he has one, is necessary for the apprehension of existence as he sees it, and as a result, the attainment of human perfection. Let us turn for a moment to an oft cited example of a subject on which many have argued that Maimonides hints at an esoteric position, prophecy.²³ In *Guide* 2.32 Maimonides presents three opinions concerning prophecy: its attainment is wholly dependent upon the will of God, which he identifies as the opinion of the masses; prophecy is a completely

22 It should be noted that not all the subjects Maimonides mentions in this list appear to contain an esoteric level in his subsequent discussion, for example divine attributes and the names of God. See, however, A. Reines, 'Maimonides' True Belief Concerning God', in: S. Pines and Y. Yovel eds., *Maimonides and Philosophy*, pp. 24-35.

23 For a detailed discussion of this point see my *Prophecy* (above, n. 17), pp. 222-230.

naturalistic phenomenon whose attainment involves fixed and necessary criteria, which is the opinion of the philosophers; and finally, the opinion Maimonides presents as the true one, namely that the attainment of prophecy requires all the criteria posited by the philosophers, but God can intervene and prevent the worthy individual from receiving it. God's activity in this case is similar to His activity in performing miracles in general as Maimonides notes in the chapter. We find here one opinion Maimonides presents as his own and two which he rejects, one vociferously - the opinion of the masses - and the other in a moderate manner, for he sees his own opinion and that of the philosophers as being fundamentally in agreement except for one point. It follows that if Maimonides has an esoteric position on this issue, it can only be one of the opinions he ostensibly rejects: the opinion of the masses or the opinion of the philosophers. I have not encountered anyone who seriously argues that Maimonides' esoteric opinion is that of the masses, which indeed would be an absurd interpretation on every level. On the other hand there are more than a few medieval and modern scholars who have convincingly argued that Maimonides' esoteric position coincides with the philosophers' view. However, even if this is the case, one may still question what difference would it make for the proper understanding of prophecy and the effort to achieve intellectual perfection, according to Maimonides' approach. Whether we interpret him as holding his own explicit position on the subject or we conclude that he secretly accepts the opinion of the philosophers, his definition of prophecy remains the same. This is the one that he offers in *Guide* 2.36: Prophecy is an emanation from God to the Active Intellect and from it to the rational and imaginative faculties of the individual. The only difference between Maimonides' exoteric position and the opinion of the philosophers involves divine will, and not an understanding of the order of existence. One might add that the same is true regarding the problem of Creation. According to Maimonides' descriptions in the *Guide*, belief in the creation of the world involves the same order of existence and the manner of God's governance of the world as maintained by the philosophers who believe that the world is without beginning.²⁴

24 *Guide* 2.6, p. 265; 2.11, p. 276.

In this case too, the difference between the positions is in understanding the divine will and God's ability to perform miracles.

I do not wish to completely negate the importance of the correct understanding of the subject of divine will. Nonetheless, it is not clear to what extent this understanding is necessary for the realization of perfection in his view. According to Maimonides, the perfection of the soul is the perfection of the intellect, as he indicates in *Guide* 3.27 (p. 511): 'His ultimate perfection is to become rational in actu, I mean to have an intellect in actu; this would consist in his knowing everything concerning all the beings that is within the capacity of man to know in accordance with his ultimate perfection'. In several passages Maimonides ties this perfection with knowledge of the natural sciences and the divine science. One should interpret him as referring to knowledge of the order of existence - that is to say, the essences of all that exist, the connections between them, and the accidents characterizing each genus and species. This is the knowledge that belongs to the theoretical sciences.²⁵ It includes not only the correct conclusions regarding these matters but also the proofs, demonstrative when possible and dialectical when not. This is a situation in which what a person thinks in his mind corresponds to existence as it really is on the level abstracted from matter. In this situation the thinking mind, the thought and the object of thought are one.²⁶ This knowledge is termed by Maimonides knowledge of the 'intelligibles' (*ma'āqulāt; muskalot*). When conclusions are based on dialectical proof there remains the possibility for error, which is not the case when they are based on demonstrative proof. The goal is to rise from the level of knowledge of material entities as abstracted from their matter, to knowledge of the incorporeal existents. Whether or not this goal is in principle open to human attainment was a matter of controversy in the Middle Ages,²⁷ and it remains a matter of controversy today in the

25 For a discussion of Maimonides' approach to human perfection see my *Maimonides' Political Thought* (above, n. 11), pp. 125-158, 189-193.

26 Maimonides brings this Aristotelian principle in reference to God's knowledge, see *Guide* 1.68; cf. *Laws of the Principles of the Torah* 2.10. For a discussion of intellect in medieval Aristotelian thought see H. Davidson, *Alfarabi, Avicenna and Averroes on Intellect*, Oxford 1992.

27 See for example Gersonides' discussion of this issue in *Wars of the Lord* 1.7-12.

interpretation of Maimonides' position on this issue.²⁸ This does not, however, affect the essence of my argument: The knowledge that constitutes human perfection for Maimonides, is not knowledge of passing events, such as historical ones, including the occurrence of each of the miracles or even the unique event of the temporal creation of the world, assuming that he in fact accepted the traditional position on this issue. For example, knowledge that a certain rod turned into a serpent, assuming this event really occurred, is not knowledge of the 'intelligibles' and it does not belong to the theoretical sciences, which is knowledge of the order and not the exceptions to it. I do not understand the essence of a serpent, or of a piece of wood and its accidents any better, by knowing that there was once a rod that turned into a serpent. By the same token, I do not know the order of the world any better if I know that it was created and has a beginning.

One may counter that knowledge of God as an agent of miracles belongs to theoretical knowledge, for it relates to an important truth concerning divine activity. By means of this knowledge I know God better. Yet even if we accede to this claim, I question whether this knowledge is crucial for human intellectual perfection in the light of Maimonides' theory of divine attributes or the manner in which he describes God's attributes of action, which he completely ties with the order of the world.²⁹

Let us return to the issue of esotericism in the *Guide*, assuming that Maimonides expresses esoteric opinions, and summarize what they add to the perfection of the reader who understands Maimonides correctly. It appears that the answer is not much, if anything at all. To understand the phenomenon of prophecy, for example, is to apprehend the definition of prophecy brought by Maimonides, which is the exact same definition belonging to the philosophers. Even if his exoteric view - that God at times prevents the reception of prophecy - is the

28 See Pines, 'Limitations of Knowledge' (above, note 21). See also my discussion of this issue in *Maimonides' Political Thought*, pp. 141-150.

29 See in particular *Guide* 1.54. Maimonides brings as examples of God's attributes of action the bringing into existence of living beings with their natural faculties and natural catastrophes. Maimonides adds wars but in this case too he deals with a volitional activity of human beings that is related to their nature; see *Guide* 3.11-12.

one he in fact holds, this opinion adds nothing to understanding what prophecy is, and does not belong to knowledge of the 'intelligibles'. If Maimonides did indeed hold an esoteric view on the subject, namely, the one maintained by the philosophers, it is clear that the opinion that God at times intervenes by withholding prophecy adds nothing to an understanding of this phenomenon, for in fact it is a false view. Therefore it makes no difference for our understanding of Maimonides' conception of prophecy whether we interpret him in accordance with his exoteric view on the subject or ascribe to him an esoteric one. This too is the case regarding Creation. I do not know the order of existence any better when I accept that the world is created or if I conceive of it as without beginning. The only difference between these views pertains to my knowledge of the nature of God's will. Yet as I have argued, I do not think that the question of whether God's volitional activity expresses itself independent of the natural order is a subject upon which the intellectual perfection of human beings stands or falls in Maimonides' thought.³⁰ In conclusion, the understanding of the secrets of the *Guide*, assuming the *Guide* does contain an esoteric level, adds nothing to my achieving perfection. The interpretation of Maimonides following his exoteric view on these subjects, assuming this is the wrong interpretation, does not detract from the attainment of perfection, and if this is the correct interpretation, it adds little to its attainment. What is crucial is the apprehension of the theoretical sciences.

Why then has there been over the centuries such a preoccupation with the secrets of the *Guide*. Is all this based on a conceptual mistake? Have Maimonides' readers been so enthralled with the search for secrets, with the methodology of esoteric writing, that they have not paid attention to the lack of significance of this issue, and have forgotten what is truly important, namely knowledge of the sciences themselves. The answer is negative. If we look to the modern reader we find one whose conceptions have changed radically from those current in Maimonides' times. People studying the *Principles of the Laws of the Torah* or the *Guide* do not generally turn to study the sciences

30 One may argue that divine providence, which Maimonides makes consequent upon one's intellectual attainment, is also dependent upon knowledge of the order of existence and not on supernatural exceptions to the order.

immediately afterwards, let alone the works of Aristotle, having become convinced that the fate of their souls is dependent upon this learning. What possessed primary value for Maimonides is at best secondary for the modern reader. The significance of Maimonides' secrets, assuming he holds any secret doctrines, was and remains in the area of the relation between religion and reason: To what extent can or should one understand religion in light of science and philosophy? What is the respective task of each of these disciplines in our lives?³¹ For us the answer to these questions remains essential to our existence, rather than the content of the sciences that one should know. The Aristotelian understanding of existence has long been replaced by other conceptual schemes. Those who continue to believe in the immortality of the soul no longer hold the view that what remains of it consists solely of a collection of 'intelligibles' or that only the one who has mastered the highest theoretical sciences can attain this state. Even for the medieval scholars who shared with Maimonides an Aristotelian world view, the concern with secrets was not in order to increase one's theoretical knowledge but in order to legitimize this view from a religious standpoint by showing that it stands at the foundation of Judaism.³²

There have been a number of attempts in our own time to interpret Maimonides' secrets along different lines, such as epistemological ones. One interpretation even depicts Maimonides as hiding his skepticism.³³ It appears to me that this is more reflective of the contemporary *geist* than of Maimonides' intent. This approach negates the view that Maimonides conceals his agreement with the philosophers on the weighty questions with which he deals. It posits instead that the secret Maimonides wishes to hide is the fact that he did not reach any definite conclusion on these issues; he is simply exploring possible alternatives. The problem with this approach is that Maimonides gives *explicit*

31 This is a problem with which modern philosophers and Maimonidean scholars as different as Leo Strauss and Yeshayahu Leibowitz have wrestled.

32 This is true already in the philosophic activity of R. Samuel Ibn Tibbon. See A. Ravitzky, 'Samuel Ibn Tibbon and the Esoteric Character of the *Guide of the Perplexed*, *AJS Review* 6 (1981), pp. 87-123 [repr. in his *History and Faith*, pp. 205-245].

33 See above, note 1.

expression to his skepticism concerning the views of the philosophers on a range of subjects belonging to the 'secrets of the Torah'. He certainly does not hide his stance that we can only produce dialectical arguments for deciding most of these issues, hence our conclusions must be regarded as tentative at best. This point is most clearly exemplified by his discussion of Creation (*Guide* 2.13-19). If one interprets Maimonides' skepticism as more fundamental and extending to the *possibility of knowing* anything metaphysical, and this is the view obtaining on the esoteric level of his writings, I would argue that this conclusion contradicts the essence of his educational and speculative philosophy. Why would he continue to delve into these subjects, even after writing the *Guide*, and encourage the wise to reach the stage in which they master the divine science, that is, metaphysics to the extent of human capacity?³⁴ According to the conclusion that Maimonides embraces philosophical skepticism, this activity appears to contribute nothing to one's perfection while at the same time poses dangers to one's commitment to tradition.

A related approach to Maimonides' esotericism is to interpret him as maintaining that language is by essence incapable of conveying knowledge of the most profound subjects.³⁵ The truth in these matters comes to an individual in 'flashes' and can be conveyed only in a similar manner, because discursive descriptions are essentially inadequate to express it. Maimonides presents this view in the introduction to the *Guide* (pp. 7-8) when dealing with prophetic illumination; its ramifications of this view for Maimonides' philosophy of language are profound. He may well be interpreted as positing a level of thought that is beyond language, just as God presumably does not think in words, and the grasping of incorporeal existents involves this type of thought.³⁶ Yet in this case too I would argue that the

34 See in particular *Guide* 3.51.

35 See Y. Loberbaum, 'On Contradictions, Rationality, Dialectics and Esotericism in Maimonides' (above, n. 1), pp. 742-748; M. Halbertal, *Concealment and Revelation* (above, n. 1), pp. 45-46.

36 See my *Prophecy* (above, n. 17), pp. 622-625. For a study of Maimonides' philosophy of language and its implications for his philosophy see J. Stern, 'Maimonides on Language and the Science of Language' in: R. S. Cohen and H. Levine eds., *Maimonides and the Sciences*, Dordrecht 2000, pp. 173-226.

methodology of introducing deliberate contradictions and scattered hints does not involve this type of esotericism. Maimonides hides his true views on issues where discursive descriptions are in fact the appropriate means for conveying knowledge. He is not attempting to impart the knowledge of the essences themselves, but only the road to attain this knowledge, the issues surrounding it and truths relating to it.³⁷

The focal problem in the interpretation of Maimonides' philosophy remains for us the same which confronted the medieval scholars: Can one remain committed to Jewish law and lore and still accept the world view of Aristotle that denies the personal willful activity of the Deity? Can one be a loyal member of the religious community yet see in the stories of the Torah the reflection of philosophical and scientific truths in imaginative form? Because of the importance of this topic for the present we do not tire in returning again and again to the arguments that were already offered in the Middle Ages; we develop them, bolster them with additional arguments, and continue this ongoing controversy. Without wishing to deny that many novel points can still be made regarding the particulars of Maimonides' esoteric approach, I concede that from a broader perspective we may have exhausted the subject of his esotericism. I understand the inclination of some researchers to change the focus of Maimonides' esotericism or to ignore it altogether in order to deal in a more philosophical manner with his *explicit* arguments. Religious concerns rather than philosophical ones sustain the focus on Maimonides' politically (and pedagogically) motivated esotericism.

It is interesting to contrast Maimonides' approach to that of his great philosophical successor, Gersonides. The medieval thinkers of Provence, in the 13th and 14th centuries, display an increasing predilection to reveal their views explicitly even on religiously sensitive subjects. Social and cultural factors play an important role in molding their

37 Let me stress that I am not discounting the possibility that the parable form may be both a way of transmitting such knowledge as well as concealing certain truths from the masses. The emanation to the prophet's imagination may have enabled this individual to grasp certain matters that the intellect alone may have been incapable of grasping. See my *Prophecy*, pp. 256-257. This does not appear to be the case, however, with the parables Maimonides brings in the *Guide*, which serve to illustrate the points he elucidates.

attitude. The widespread dissemination of science and philosophy in the Christian world, and the fight for hearts and minds regarding the correct understanding of Judaism against competing conceptions in the Jewish world, lead to a far more overt stance in the attempt to understand traditional texts in a manner harmonious with the philosophical world view. This trend is established by the father of Provençal Jewish philosophy, R. Samuel Ibn Tibbon,³⁸ and culminates in the philosophic discussion of Gersonides in his *magnum opus*, *The Wars of the Lord*. While Maimonides writes a book in whose introduction he states that parts of it will remain esoteric, Gersonides declares in the introduction to his treatise that he will extend human reason to those areas considered by many to be closed to it.³⁹ He goes on to openly reveal his opinions and sees no danger in doing so.⁴⁰ Maimonides seeks to show the relation between philosophy and religion in those subjects on which apparent conflict exists between the two approaches. Gersonides seeks to arrive at the theoretical truths belonging to the subjects he believes religion and philosophy have in common and which contribute to human perfection. Maimonides deals primarily with exegesis, Gersonides primarily with philosophic proof. For all the difficulty in understanding Gersonides' views on a number of subjects, he leaves no doubt in his treatise that he does not accept the notion of the personal volitional activity of God, at least after the creation of the world. All phenomena - whether prophecy, individual providence or miracles - are to be understood in light of the impersonal operation of the natural order.⁴¹ Knowledge of the intelligibles is knowledge of the order of existents and not of singular events. In other words, what many scholars maintain regard as the esoteric position of Maimonides, is to a large extent the exoteric opinion of Gersonides.

Gersonides' treatise never enjoyed nearly the same popularity as

38 See Ravitzky, 'Samuel Ibn Tibbon' (above, n. 32).

39 See in particular Gersonides' defense of the boldness of his approach in *Wars*, Feldman trans., vol 1, pp. 93-98.

40 This is true to a large extent even in his biblical commentaries, though there he somewhat tempers his radical naturalism in the presentation of his views. See my *Prophecy*, pp. 399-401.

41 See my discussion in *Prophecy*, pp. 350-399.

Esotericism to Exotericism

Maimonides' *Guide*. Maimonides' exalted position in the rabbinic world certainly is the dominant reason for this. Yet one may hypothesize that the literary form of each of these compositions also plays a role. Maimonides writes a treatise for the elite student trained in the sciences and philosophy, yet one all others are also capable of reading. Gersonides writes a treatise containing truths he is prepared to reveal to everyone, but only one who is trained in the sciences and philosophy is capable of reading. Maimonides' treatise lends itself to diverging and contradictory interpretations as to the nature of the relation between religion and philosophy; this enables each reader to grapple with the problem according to his own ideological stance. Gersonides' treatise does not allow the same range of interpretations. Moreover, in attempting to understand Judaism in accordance with his tightly argued philosophic conclusions, Gersonides essentially shows how great a gap remains between Judaism and philosophy. The exegetical form and the esoteric writing style characterizing Maimonides' *Guide* appeal to the imagination, while Gersonides' pedantic discussions appeal only to discursive reason. One is tempted to conclude that while Gersonides' treatise is the product of the emanation to the rational faculty alone, typifying the philosopher, Maimonides' exposition is the product of the emanation to both the rational faculty and the imagination, which designates the prophet who frames his teachings to appeal to everyone, each in accordance with his understanding.

